

The GREAT FAMINE IN IRELAND (1845 - 1849)

From: "The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845–1849" by Cecil Blanche Woodham - Smith (Historian).



The Memorial to "FAMINE" in Dublin's Custom House Quays, Docklands, Ireland.

■ The **GREAT FAMINE**, also known as the **GREAT HUNGER** and the **IRISH POTATO FAMINE**, was a period of starvation and disease in Ireland lasting from 1845 to 1852 that constituted a historical social crisis and subsequently had a major impact on Irish society and history as a whole.

The most severely affected areas were in the Western and Southern parts of Ireland—where the Irish language was dominant—and hence the period was contemporaneously known in Irish as *an Drochshaol*, which literally translates to "*the bad life*" and loosely translates to "*the hard times*".

The worst year of the famine was 1847, which became known as "Black '47".

The population of IRELAND on the eve of the famine was about 8.5 Million, but by 1901 it was just 4.4 Million, a loss of 50% of the population of the "Emerald Isle".

During the **GREAT HUNGER**, roughly 1-Million people died and another 1-Million fled the Country, causing the Ireland's population to fall by 20–25% (in some Towns, populations fell as much as 67%) between 1841 and 1871. Between 1845 and 1855, at least 2.1 Million people left Ireland, primarily on packet ships but also on steamboats and barques—one of the greatest Exoduses from a single island in history.

The proximate cause of the famine was the infection of potato crops by BLIGHT (*Phytophthora infestans*) throughout Europe during the 1840s. BLIGHT INFECTION caused 100,000 deaths outside Ireland and influenced much of the unrest that culminated in European Revolutions of 1848. Longer-term reasons for the massive impact of this particular famine included the dominant system of "Absentee Landlordism" and single-crop dependence in Ireland at that time.



BLIGHT (*Phytophthora infestans*)

Initial limited but constructive Government actions to alleviate famine distress were ended by a new Whig Administration in London, which pursued a laissez-faire economic doctrine, but also because some in power believed in *divine providence* or that the Irish lacked *moral character*, with aid only resuming to some degree later.

Large amounts of food were exported from Ireland during the famine and the refusal of London to bar such exports, as had been done on previous occasions, was an immediate and continuing source of controversy, contributing to anti-British sentiment and the CAMPAIGN FOR INDEPENDENCE FOR IRELAND.

Additionally, the famine indirectly resulted in tens of thousands of households being evicted, exacerbated by a provision forbidding access to WORKHOUSE AID while in possession of more than one-quarter acre of land.

The famine was a defining moment in the history of Ireland, which was part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland from 1801 to 1922. The famine and its effects permanently changed the island's demographic, political, and cultural landscape, producing an estimated 2 million refugees and spurring a Century-long population decline. For both the native Irish and those in the resulting diaspora, the famine entered folk memory. The strained relations between many Irish people and the then ruling British Government worsened further because of the famine, heightening ethnic and sectarian tensions and boosting nationalism and republicanism both in Ireland and among Irish emigrants around the world.

English documentary maker John Percival said that the famine "became part of the long story of betrayal and exploitation which led to the growing movement in Ireland for independence." Scholar Kirby Miller makes the same point. Debate exists regarding nomenclature for the event, whether to use the term "Famine", "Potato Famine" or "Great Hunger", the last of which some believe most accurately captures the complicated history of the period.

The potato blight returned to Europe in 1879 but, by this time, the Land War (one of the largest agrarian movements to take place in 19th-Century Europe) had begun in Ireland. The movement, organized by the Land League, continued the political campaign for the Three Fs which was issued in 1850 by the Tenant Right League during the Great Famine. When the potato blight returned to Ireland in the 1879 famine, the League boycotted "notorious landlords" and its members physically blocked the evictions of farmers; the consequent reduction in homelessness and house demolition resulted in a drastic reduction in the number of deaths.

■ CAUSES AND CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

[See also: Chronology of the Great Famine.](#)

IRELAND was brought into the UNITED KINGDOM in January 1801 following the passage of the ACTS OF UNION. Executive power lay in the hands of the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland and Chief Secretary for Ireland, who were appointed by the British Government. Ireland sent 105 members of Parliament to the House of Commons of the United Kingdom, and Irish representative peers elected 28 of their own number to sit for life in the House of Lords. Between 1832 and 1859, 70% of Irish representatives were landowners or the sons of landowners.

In the 40 years that followed the Union, successive British Governments grappled with the problems of governing a Country which had, as Prime Minister BENJAMIN DISRAELI stated in 1844, "a starving population, an absentee aristocracy, an alien established Protestant Church, and in addition, the weakest executive in the world".

One historian calculated that, between 1801 and 1845, there had been 114 Commissions and 61 Special Committees inquiring into the State of Ireland, and that "without exception their findings prophesied disaster; Ireland was on the verge of starvation, her population rapidly increasing, three-quarters of her labourers unemployed, housing conditions appalling and the standard of living unbelievably low".

Lectures printed in 1847 by John Hughes, Bishop of New York, are a contemporary exploration into the antecedent causes, particularly the political climate, in which the Irish famine occurred.

■ LANDLORDS AND TENANTS

The "middleman system" for managing landed property was introduced in the 18th Century. Rent collection was left in the hands of the landlords' agents, or middlemen. This assured the landlord of a regular income and relieved them of direct responsibility while leaving tenants open to exploitation by the middlemen. The ability of middlemen was measured by the rent income they could contrive to extract from tenants. Middlemen leased large tracts of land from the landlords on long leases with fixed rents and sublet to tenants, keeping any money raised in excess to the rent paid to the landlord. This system, coupled with minimal oversight of the middlemen, incentivised harsh exploitation of tenants. Middlemen would split a holding into smaller and smaller parcels so as to increase the amount of rent they could obtain.

Tenants could be evicted for reasons such as non-payment of rents (which were high), or a landlord's decision to raise sheep instead of grain crops. Cottiers paid their rent by working for the landlord while the spalpeens (itinerant labourers) paid for short-term leases through temporary day work.

A majority of Catholics, who constituted 80% of the Irish population, lived in conditions of poverty and insecurity. At the top of the social hierarchy was the Ascendancy class, composed of English and Anglo-Irish families who owned most of the land and held more or less unchecked power over their tenants. Some of their estates were vast; for example, the Earl of Lucan owned more than 60,000 acres (240 km²). Many of these landowners lived in England and functioned as absentee landlords. The rent revenue—collected from impoverished tenants who were paid minimal wages to raise crops and livestock for export—was mostly sent to England.

In 1800, the 1st Earl of Clare observed of landlords that "confiscation is their common title". According to the historian Cecil Blanche Woodham-Smith, landlords regarded the land as a source of income, from which as much as possible was to be extracted. With the peasantry "brooding over their discontent in sullen indignation" (in the words of the Earl of Clare), the landlords largely viewed the Countryside as a hostile place in which to live. Some landlords visited their property only once or twice in a lifetime, if ever. The rents from Ireland were generally spent elsewhere; an estimated £6,000,000 was remitted out of Ireland in 1842. (That is equal to £150,000,000 today.)

In 1843, the British Government recognized that the land management system in Ireland was the foundational cause of disaffection in the Country. The Prime Minister established a **Royal Commission**, chaired by the **Earl of Devon** (Devon Commission), to enquire into the laws regarding the occupation of land. Irish politician **Daniel O'Connell** described this Commission as "**perfectly one-sided**", being composed of **landlords** with no **tenant** representation.

In February 1845, **EARL DEVON** reported:

It would be impossible adequately to describe the privations which they [the Irish labourer and his family] 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.

The Commissioners concluded they could not "forbear expressing our strong sense of the patient endurance which the labouring classes have exhibited under sufferings greater, we believe, than the people of any other Country in Europe have to sustain". The Commission stated that bad relations between landlord and tenant were principally responsible for this suffering. Landlords were described in evidence before the Commission as "land sharks", "bloodsuckers", and "the most oppressive species of tyrant that ever lent assistance to the destruction of a Country".

As any improvement made on a holding by a tenant became the property of the landlord when the lease expired or was terminated, the incentive to make improvements was limited. Most tenants had no security of tenure on the land; as tenants "at will", they could be turned out whenever the landlord chose. The only exception to this arrangement was in Ulster where, under a practice known as "tenant right", a tenant was compensated for any improvement they made to their holding.

According to Woodham-Smith, the Commission stated that "the superior prosperity and tranquillity of Ulster, compared with the rest of Ireland, were due to **TENANT RIGHT**".

Landlords in Ireland often used their powers without compunction, and Tenants lived in dread of them. Woodham-Smith writes that, in these circumstances, "industry and enterprise were extinguished and a Peasantry created which was one of the most destitute in Europe".

- The Irish Lumper is a varietal WHITE POTATO of historic interest. It has been identified as the variety of potato whose widespread cultivation throughout Ireland, prior to the 1840s, is implicated in the Irish Great Famine in which an estimated 1 Million people died.



■ TENANTS AND SUBDIVISIONS

See also: Irish farm subdivision

Immense population growth, from about 2-Million in 1700 to 8-Million by the time of the **GREAT FAMINE**, led to increased division of holdings and a consequent **reduction** in their average size. By 1845, 24% of all Irish tenant farms were of 0.4–2 hectares (1–5 acres) in size, while 40% were of 2–6 hectares (5–15 acres). **Holdings were so small that no crop other than potatoes would suffice to feed a family.**

Shortly before the famine, the British Government reported that poverty was so widespread that one-third of all Irish small holdings could not support the tenant families after rent was paid; the families survived only by earnings as seasonal migrant labour in England and Scotland. Following the famine, reforms were implemented making it illegal to further divide land holdings.

The 1841 Census showed a population of just over 8-Million. Two-thirds of the people depended on agriculture for their survival but rarely received a working wage. They had to work for their landlords in return for a small patch of land to farm. This forced Ireland's Peasantry to practice continuous monoculture, as the potato was the only crop that could meet nutritional needs.

■ POTATO DEPENDENCY

The POTATO was introduced in Ireland as a garden crop of the Gentry. By the late 17th Century, it had become widespread as a supplementary food; their main diet was still based on butter, milk, and grain products.

The Irish economy grew between 1760 and 1815 due to infrastructure expansion and the NAPOLEONIC WARS (1805–1815), which had increased the demand for food in Britain. Tillage increased to such an extent that there was only a small amount of land available to small farmers to feed themselves. The POTATO was adopted as a primary food source because of its quick growth in a comparatively small space. By 1800, the POTATO had become a staple food for one in three Irish people, especially in Winter. It eventually became a staple year-round for farmers.

A disproportionate share of the potatoes grown in Ireland were the IRISH LUMPER, creating a lack of genetic variability among potato plants, which increased vulnerability to disease.

Potatoes were essential to the expansion of the COTTIER SYSTEM; they supported an extremely cheap workforce, but at the cost of lower living standards. For the labourer, "a potato wage" shaped the expanding agrarian economy. The potato was also used extensively as a fodder crop for livestock immediately prior to the famine. Approximately 33% of production, amounting to 4,500,000 tons, was typically used in this way.

One definition of COTTIER in Ireland (circa 1700–1850) was a person who rented a simple cabin and between 1.0 acre and 1.5 acres of land upon which to grow potatoes, oats, and possibly flax. The ground was held on a year-to-year basis and rent was often paid in labour. Usually, the land available to the Cottier class was land that the Owners considered unprofitable for any other use.

The COTTIER existed at subsistence level because of high rents and the competition for land and labour. The more prosperous Cottier worked for his Landlord and received cash after rent and other expenses were deducted. There was no incentive to improve a land holding, as any such improvement usually prompted a rent increase.

During the early decades of the 19th. Century, the situation for Cottiers worsened considerably as the population continued to expand. This way of life was brought abruptly to a close by the effects of the POTATO BLIGHT, which resulted in death by starvation and disease of many Peasants, with consequent depopulation, of the Great Famine of 1845–49.

After the Famine, the COTTIER CLASS almost completely disappeared.

■ POTATO BLIGHT IN IRELAND

Prior to the arrival of *Phytophthora infestans*, commonly known as "BLIGHT", only two main potato plant diseases had been discovered. One was called "dry rot" or "taint", and the other was a virus known popularly as "curl". *Phytophthora infestans* is an *oomycete* (a variety of parasitic, non-photosynthetic organisms closely related to brown algae, and not a fungus).

In 1851, the Census of Ireland Commissioners recorded 24 failures of the Potato Crop going back to 1728, of varying severity. General crop failures, through disease or frost, were recorded in 1739, 1740, 1770, 1800, and 1807. In 1821 and 1822, the potato crop failed in Munster and Connaught. In 1830 and 1831, the Counties of Mayo, Donegal, and Galway suffered likewise. In 1832, 1833, 1834, and 1836, dry rot and curl caused serious losses, and in 1835 the Potato Crop failed in Ulster. Widespread failures throughout Ireland occurred in 1836, 1837, 1839, 1841, and 1844.

According to Woodham-Smith, "the unreliability of the Potato was an accepted fact in Ireland".

Experts are still unsure of how and when BLIGHT arrived in Europe; it almost certainly was not present prior to 1842, and probably arrived in 1844. The origin of the pathogen has been traced to the TOLUCA VALLEY in Mexico, whence it spread within North America and then to Europe.

The 1845–1846 blight was caused by the HERB-1 STRAIN of the blight.

In 1844, Irish newspapers carried reports concerning a disease that had attacked the potato crops in America for two years. In 1843 and 1844, blight largely destroyed the potato crops in the Eastern United States. Ships from Baltimore, Philadelphia, or New York City could have carried diseased potatoes from these areas to European ports. American plant pathologist WILLIAM C. PADDOCK posited that the blight was transported via potatoes being carried to feed passengers on Clipper Ships sailing from America to Ireland. Once introduced in Ireland and Europe, blight spread rapidly.

By mid-August 1845, it had reached much of Northern and Central Europe; Belgium, The Netherlands, Northern France, and Southern England had all already been affected.

On 16 August 1845, *The Gardeners' Chronicle and Horticultural Gazette* reported "a blight of unusual character" on the Isle of Wight in Hampshire, Southern England.

A week later, on 23 August, the Chronicle again reported that "A fearful malady has broken out among the Potato Crop... In BELGIUM the fields are said to be completely desolated. There is hardly a sound sample in COVENT GARDEN MARKET, LONDON... As for cure for this distemper, there is none."

These reports were extensively covered in Irish newspapers. On 11 September, the *Freeman's Journal* reported on "the appearance of what is called 'CHOLERA' in potatoes in Ireland, especially in the north". On 13 September, *The Gardeners' Chronicle* announced: "We stop the Press with very great regret to announce that the POTATO MURRAIN has unequivocally declared itself in Ireland."

A 'MURRAIN' is a great pestilence, a disease so widespread that it becomes a Plague.

Nevertheless, the British government remained optimistic over the next few weeks, as it received conflicting reports. Only when the crop was harvested in October did the scale of destruction become apparent. British Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel wrote to Sir James Graham in mid-October that he found the reports "very alarming", but allayed his fears by claiming that there was "always a tendency to exaggeration in Irish news".

Crop loss in 1845 has been estimated at one-third to one-half of cultivated acreage.

The Mansion House Committee in Dublin, to which hundreds of letters were directed from all over Ireland, claimed on 19 November 1845 to have ascertained beyond the shadow of a doubt that "considerably more than one-third of the entire of the potato crop ... has been already destroyed".

In 1846, 75% of the harvest was lost to blight. By December, 330,000 destitute people were employed in Public Works. According to Cormac Ó Gráda, the first attack of POTATO BLIGHT caused considerable hardship in rural Ireland from the Autumn of 1846, when the first deaths from starvation were recorded. Seed potatoes were scarce in 1847. Few had been sown, so, despite average yields, hunger continued. 1848 yields were only 66% of normal. **Since over three million Irish people were totally dependent on potatoes for food, hunger and famine were widespread.**

■ REACTION IN IRELAND

The CORPORATION OF DUBLIN sent a memorial to the QUEEN, "praying her" to call Parliament together early (Parliament was at this time prorogued), and to recommend the requisition of some public money for public works, especially railways in Ireland. The Town Council of BELFAST met and made similar suggestions, but neither body asked for charity, according to John Mitchel, one of the leading Repealers.

In early November 1845, a deputation from the citizens of Dublin, including the **Duke of Leinster**, **Lord Cloncurry**, **Daniel O'Connell** and the **Lord Mayor**, went to the **Lord Lieutenant of Ireland**, **Lord Heytesbury** to discuss the issue. They offered suggestions such as opening the ports to foreign corn, stopping distillation from grain, prohibiting the export of foodstuffs, and providing employment through public works. **Lord Heytesbury** urged them not to be alarmed, that they **"were premature"**, that scientists were enquiring into all those matters, and that the **Inspectors of Constabulary** and **Stipendiary Magistrates** were charged with making constant reports from their districts, and there was no **"immediate pressure on the market"**.

■ On 8 December 1845, **DANIEL O'CONNELL**, head of the **REPEAL ASSOCIATION**, proposed several remedies to the pending disaster. One of the first things he suggested was the introduction of **Tenant-Right** as practised in **ULSTER**, Northern Ireland giving the landlord a fair rent for his land, but giving the tenant compensation for any money he might have laid out on the land in permanent improvements. O'Connell noted actions taken by the Belgian Legislature during the same season, as they had also been hit by **BLIGHT**: shutting their Ports against the export of provisions and opening them to imports. **He suggested that, if Ireland had a domestic Parliament, the Ports would be thrown open and the abundant crops raised in Ireland would be kept for the people of Ireland, as the Dublin Parliament had done during the food shortages of the 1780s. O'Connell maintained that only an Irish Parliament would provide both food and employment for the people. He said that repeal of the Act of Union was a necessity and Ireland's only hope.**

■ **JOHN MITCHEL** later wrote one of the first widely circulated tracts on the famine, *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*, published in 1861. **It proposed that British actions during the famine and their treatment of the Irish were a deliberate effort at genocide.** It contained a sentence that has since become famous: **"The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the Famine."** **Mitchel was charged with sedition because of his writings, but this charge was dropped.** He was convicted by a **packed jury** under the newly enacted **Treason Felony Act** and sentenced to **14 years transportation to Bermuda**.

According to **Charles Gavan Duffy**, *The Nation* insisted that the proper remedy, retaining in the Country the food raised by her people until the people were fed, was one which the rest of Europe had adopted, and one which even the Parliaments of **the Pale** (i.e., before the Union with Great Britain in 1801) had adopted in periods of distress.

Contemporaneously, as found in letters from the period and in particular later oral memory, the name for the event is, in Irish: **An Drochshaol**, though with the earlier spelling standard of the era, which was **Gaelic script**, it is found written as in *Droc-Šaogal*. In the modern era, this name, while loosely translated as **"The Hard-Time"**, is always denoted with a Capital Letter to express its specific historic meaning.

The period of the **POTATO BLIGHT** in Ireland from 1845 to 1851 was full of political confrontation. A more radical **YOUNG IRELAND** group seceded from the **Repeal** movement in July 1846, and attempted an **Armed Rebellion in 1848**. **It was unsuccessful.**

In 1847, **William Smith O'Brien**, leader of the **YOUNG IRELAND PARTY**, became one of the founding members of the **Irish Confederation** to campaign for a **REPEAL OF THE ACT OF UNION**, and called for the export of grain to be stopped and the Ports closed. The following year, he helped organize the short-lived **Young Irelander Rebellion of 1848** in **County Tipperary**.



The IRISH POTATO FAMINE was the most catastrophic event in Ireland's turbulent history. It is also regarded as being one of the worst Famines in history (deaths as a proportion to population).

The use of the word 'FAMINE' in this context is controversial, for Ireland at the time was part of the richest Empire in the World (the British Empire).

There was sufficient food in the Country throughout the 'Famine' years, yet over a Million people died from STARVATION and DISEASE, and Millions more were forced to flee.

■ GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Government responses to previous food shortages

When Ireland experienced food shortages in 1782–1783, Ports were closed to exporting food, with the intention of keeping locally grown food in Ireland to feed the hungry. Irish food prices promptly dropped. Some Merchants lobbied against the export ban, but the Government in the 1780s overrode their protests.

■ TORY GOVERNMENT

Historian F. S. L. LYONS characterized the initial response of the British Government to the early, less severe phase of the famine as "prompt and relatively successful". Confronted by widespread crop failure in November 1845, the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, purchased £100,000 worth of maize and cornmeal secretly from America with BARING BROTHERS initially acting as his Agents. The Government hoped that they would not "stifle Private Enterprise" and that their actions would not act as a disincentive to local relief efforts.

Due to poor weather conditions, the first shipment did not arrive in Ireland until the beginning of February 1846. The initial shipments were of unground dried kernels, but the few Irish mills in operation were not equipped for milling maize and a long and complicated milling process had to be adopted before the meal could be distributed. In addition, before the cornmeal could be consumed, it had to be "very much" cooked again, or eating it could result in severe bowel complaints. Due to its yellow colour, and initial unpopularity, it became known as "Peel's brimstone".

In October 1845, British Prime Minister Peel moved to repeal the CORN LAWS—TARIFFS on grain which kept the price of bread high—but the issue split his party and he had insufficient support from his own colleagues to push the measure through.

He resigned the Premiership in December, but the opposition was unable to form a government and he was re-appointed.

In March 1846, Peel set up a Programme of PUBLIC WORKS in Ireland, but the famine situation worsened during 1846, and the repeal of the CORN LAWS in that year did little to help the starving Irish; the measure split the Conservative Party, leading to the fall of Peel's Ministry.

On 25 June 1846, the Second Reading of the Government's IRISH COERCION BILL was defeated by 73 votes in the House of Commons by a combination of Whigs, Radicals, Irish Repealers, and protectionist Conservatives.

■ ROBERT PEEL was forced to resign as Prime Minister on 29 June, 1846 and the Whig leader, LORD JOHN RUSSELL, became Prime Minister.

■ WHIG GOVERNMENT

The measures undertaken by PEEL'S successor, RUSSELL, proved inadequate as the crisis deepened. The new Whig Administration, influenced by the doctrine of *laissez-faire*, believed that the Market would provide the food needed.

They refused to interfere with the movement of food to England, and then halted the previous Government's Food and Relief Works, leaving many hundreds of thousands of people without access to work, money, or food. Russell's Ministry introduced a new Programme of Public Works that by the end of December 1846 employed some 500,000 but proved impossible to administer.

CHARLES TREVELYAN, who was in charge of the Administration of Government Relief, limited the Government's Food Aid Programme, claiming that food would be readily imported into Ireland once people had more money to spend after wages were being paid on new Public-Works Projects.

In a private correspondence, Trevelyan explained how the famine could bring benefit to the English; As he wrote to EDWARD TURNER BOYD TWISLETON, Poor Law Commissioner:

"We must not complain of what we really want to obtain. If small farmers go, and their landlords are reduced to sell portions of their estates to persons who will invest capital we shall at last arrive at something like a satisfactory settlement of the Country".

In January 1847, the Government abandoned its policy of noninterference, realizing that it had failed, and turned to a mixture of "indoor" and "outdoor" Direct Relief; the former administered in Workhouses through the Irish Poor Laws, the latter through Soup Kitchens. The costs of the Poor Law fell primarily on the local landlords, some of whom in turn attempted to reduce their liability by evicting their tenants or providing some Relief through the conversionist practice of Souperism.

SOUPERISM was a phenomenon of the IRISH GREAT FAMINE. Protestant Bible Societies set up schools in which starving children were fed, on the condition of receiving Protestant religious instruction at the same time.

On 1 March 1847, the BANK OF ENGLAND announced plans to raise a loan of £14 million to relieve the Irish Crisis, and also for Unfunded Tax Cuts. This led to the PANIC OF 1847, in which Gold was withdrawn from circulation, so reducing the amount of Bank Notes that the Bank could legally circulate. By 17 April 1847 the Bullion Reserve of the Bank of England had diminished from £15 million in January to some £9 million, and it was announced that the cost of Famine Relief would be transferred to local taxes in Ireland.

The FINANCIAL CRISIS temporarily improved, but the intended Relief for Ireland did not materialize.

In June 1847, the **Poor Relief (Ireland) Act 1847 (10 & 11 Vict. c. 31)** was passed which embodied the principle, popular in Britain, that **"Irish property must support Irish poverty."** The landed Proprietors in Ireland were held in Britain to have created the conditions that led to the Famine. However, it was asserted that, since the Acts of Union 1800, the British Parliament was partly to blame.

This point was raised in *The Illustrated London News* on 13 February 1847: "There was no law it would not pass at their request, and no abuse it would not defend for them." On 24 March, *The Times* reported that Britain had permitted in Ireland "a mass of poverty, disaffection, and degradation without a parallel in the world. It allowed proprietors to suck the very life-blood of that wretched race".

The "Gregory Clause" of the Poor Law, named after William H. Gregory, MP, prohibited anyone who held at least 1/4 acre (0.1 ha) from receiving Relief. In practice, this meant that the many farmers who had to sell all their produce to pay rent and taxes, would have to deliver up all their land to the landlord to qualify for Public Outdoor Relief. Of this Law, Mitchel wrote that "it is the able-bodied idler only who is to be fed—if he attempted to till but one rood of ground, he dies".

This simple method of ejection was called "passing paupers through the workhouse"—a man went in, a pauper came out. **These factors combined to drive thousands of people off the land: 90,000 in 1849, and 104,000 in 1850.**

The **ENCUMBERED ESTATES (IRELAND) ACT 1849 (12 & 13 Vict. c. 77)** allowed landlord estates to be auctioned off upon the petition of creditors. Estates with debts were then auctioned off at low prices. Wealthy British speculators purchased the lands and "took a harsh view" of the tenant farmers who continued renting. The rents were raised, and tenants evicted to create large cattle grazing pastures.

In the 5-Years from 1849 to 1854, some 50,000 families were evicted from their farms.

■ MILITARY RESPONSE

The ROYAL NAVY SQUADRON stationed in Cork under the command of REAR-ADMIRAL HUGH PIGOT undertook significant Relief Operations from 1846 to 1847, transporting Government Relief into the Port of Cork and other Ports along the Irish coast, being ordered on 2 January 1846 to assist distressed regions. On 27 December 1846, CHARLES TREVELYAN ordered every available steamship to Ireland to assist in Relief, and on 14 January 1847, REAR-ADMIRAL PIGOT received orders to also distribute Supplies from the British Relief Association and treat them identically to Government Aid. In addition, some Naval Officers under Rear-Admiral Pigot oversaw the logistics of Relief Operations further inland from Cork.

In February 1847, CHARLES TREVELYAN ordered Royal Navy Surgeons dispatched to provide medical care for those suffering from illnesses that accompanied starvation, distribute medicines that were in short supply, and assist in proper, sanitary burials for the deceased.

These efforts, although significant, were insufficient at preventing mass mortality from famine and disease.

■ FOOD EXPORTS

Irish grain trade in units of 1,000 quarters

Year	Exports	Imports	Surplus	Maize imports
1842	2,538	280	2,258	20
1843	3,206	74	3,132	3
1844	2,801	150	2,651	5
1845	3,252	147	3,105	34
1846	1,826	987	839	614
1847	970	4,519	-3,549	3,287
1848	1,953	2,186	-233	1,546
1849	1,437	2,908	-1,471	1,897
1850	1,329	2,357	-1,028	1,159
1851	1,325	3,158	-1,833	1,745

The historian Cecil Blanche Woodham-Smith wrote in *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845–1849* that no issue has provoked so much anger and embittered relations between England and Ireland "as the indisputable fact that huge quantities of food were exported from Ireland to England throughout the period when the people of Ireland were dying of starvation".

While, in addition to the MAIZE IMPORTS, four times as much WHEAT was imported into Ireland at the height of the famine as exported. Woodham-Smith added that provision via the POOR LAW UNION WORKHOUSES by the *Poor Relief (Ireland) Act 1838* (1 & 2 Vict. c. 56) had to be paid by RATES levied on the LOCAL PROPERTY OWNERS, and in areas where the famine was worst, the Tenants could not pay their rents to enable Landlords to fund the rates and therefore the Workhouses. Only by selling food, some of which would inevitably be exported, could a "virtuous circle" be created whereby the Rents and Rates would be paid, and the Workhouses funded. Relief through the WORKHOUSE SYSTEM was simply overwhelmed by the enormous scale and duration of the famine.

Nicolas McEvoy, Parish Priest of Kells, County Meath, near Dublin, wrote in October 1845:

"On my most minute personal inspection of the potato crop in this most fertile potato-growing locale is founded my inexpressibly painful conviction that one family in twenty of the people will not have a single potato left on Christmas day next. Many are the fields I have examined and testimony the most solemn can I tender, that in the great bulk of those fields all the potatoes sizeable enough to be sent to table are irreparably damaged, while for the remaining comparatively sounder fields very little hopes are entertained in consequence of the daily rapid development of the deplorable disease.

With starvation at our doors, grimly staring us, vessels laden with our sole hopes of existence, our provisions, are hourly wafted from our every port. From one milling establishment I have last night seen not less than fifty dray loads of meal moving on to Drogheda, thence to go to feed the foreigner, leaving starvation and death the sure and certain fate of the toil and sweat that raised this food.

For their respective inhabitants England, Holland, Scotland, Germany, are taking early the necessary precautions—getting provisions from every possible part of the globe; and I ask are Irishmen alone unworthy the sympathies of a paternal gentry or a paternal Government?

Let Irishmen themselves take heed before the provisions are gone. Let those, too, who have sheep, and oxen, and haggards. Self-preservation is the first law of nature. The right of the starving to try and sustain existence is a right far and away paramount to every right that property confers.

Infinitely more precious in the eyes of reason in the adorable eye of the Omnipotent Creator, is the life of the last and least of human beings than the whole united property of the entire universe. The appalling character of the crisis renders delicacy but criminal and imperatively calls for the timely and explicit notice of principles that will not fail to prove terrible arms in the hands of a neglected, abandoned starving people."

In the 5 May 2020, issue of the *Dublin Review of Books*, Editor Maurice Earls wrote:

Dr. McEvoy, in his grim forebodings and apocalyptic fear, was closer to the truth than the sanguine rationalists quoted in the newspapers, but McEvoy, like many others, overestimated the likelihood of mass rebellion, and even this great clerical friend of the poor could hardly have contemplated the depth of social, economic and cultural destruction which would persist and deepen over the following Century and beyond. It was Politics that turned a disease of potatoes and tomatoes into Famine, and it was politics which ensured its disastrous aftereffects would disfigure numerous future generations.

According to historian James Donnelly, "the picture of Irish people starving as food was exported was the most powerful image in the Nationalist construct of the Famine". Grain imports increased after the spring of 1847 and much of the debate "has been conducted within narrow parameters," focusing "almost exclusively on National Estimates with little attempt to disaggregate the data by region or by product."

■ CHARITY

See also: [Souperism](#)

Total Charitable Donations for Famine Relief might have been about £1.5 million of which £856,500 came from outside Ireland. Donations within Ireland are harder to trace; £380,000 of donations were officially registered but once some allowance is made for less formal donations the Irish total probably exceeds that of Britain (£525,000). People of Irish descent also contributed to funds raised outside of Ireland and those donations would be included in the region where the donation was made.

English Protestants donated more to Irish famine relief than any other source outside of Ireland.

Donations by region excluding Ireland

Region	Contribution
Britain	£525,000
US	£170,000
Indian Ocean	£50,000
France	£26,000
Canada	£22,000
West Indies	£17,000
Italy	£13,000
Australia	£9,000

The Netherlands, Belgium and Denmark	£5,000
Germany and Switzerland	£4,500
South Africa	£4,000
Latin America	£3,500
Russia	£2,500
The Ottoman Empire	£2,000
Other British Dependencies	£2,000
Spain and Portugal	£1,000
Total	£856,500

Large sums of money were donated by Charities; the first foreign campaign in December 1845 included the Boston Repeal Association and the Catholic Church. Calcutta is credited with making the first larger donations in 1846, summing up to around £14,000. The money raised included contributions by Irish soldiers serving there and Irish people employed by the East India Company. Russian Tsar Alexander II sent funds and Queen Victoria donated £2,000. According to legend, Sultan Abdülmecid I of the Ottoman Empire originally offered to send £10,000 but was asked either by British diplomats or his own Ministers to reduce it to £1,000 to avoid donating more than the Queen. U.S. President James K. Polk donated \$50 and in 1847 Congressman Abraham Lincoln donated \$10, or £5.

International Fundraising activities received donations from locations as diverse as Venezuela, Australia, South Africa, Mexico, Russia and Italy. In New Brunswick, which was at the time a British Colony, the House of Assembly voted to donate \$1,500 to the British Relief Association.

Pope Pius IX also made a personal contribution of 1,000 Scudi (approximately £213) for Famine Relief in Ireland and authorized collections in Rome. Most significantly, on 25 March 1847, Pius IX issued the encyclical *Praedecessores nostros*, which called the whole Catholic world to contribute moneywise and spiritually to Irish relief. Major figures behind international Catholic fundraising for Ireland were the Rector of the Pontifical Irish College, Paul Cullen, and the President of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Jules Gossin.

In addition to the religious, non-religious organizations came to the assistance of famine victims. The British Relief Association was the largest of these groups. Founded on 1 January 1847 by Lionel de Rothschild, Abel Smith, and other prominent Bankers and Aristocrats, the Association raised money throughout England, America, and Australia; their funding drive was benefited by a "Queen's Letter", a letter from Queen Victoria appealing for money to relieve the distress in Ireland. With this initial letter, the Association raised £171,533. A second, somewhat less successful "Queen's Letter" was issued in late 1847.

In total, the Association raised approximately £390,000 for Irish relief.

PRIVATE INITIATIVES such as the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends (Quakers) attempted to fill the gap caused by the end of Government Relief, and eventually, the Government reinstated the Relief Works, although bureaucracy slowed the release of food supplies. Thousands of dollars were raised in the United States, including \$170 (\$5,218 in 2019 value) collected from a group of Native American **Choctaws** in 1847. Judy Allen, Editor of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma's newspaper *Biskinik*, wrote that "It had been just 16 years since the Choctaw people had experienced the Trail of Tears, and they had faced starvation ... It was an amazing gesture." **To mark the 150th anniversary, eight Irish people retraced the Trail of Tears.**

Contributions by the United States during the famine were highlighted by Senator HENRY CLAY who said;

"No imagination can conceive—no tongue express—no brush paint—the horrors of the scenes which are daily exhibited in Ireland."

He called upon Americans to remind them that the practice of charity was the greatest act of humanity they could do. In total, 118 vessels sailed from the US to Ireland with relief goods valued at \$545,145. Specific states which provided aid include SOUTH CAROLINA and PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA. Pennsylvania was the second most important State for Famine Relief in the US and the second-largest Shipping Port for Aid to Ireland. The State hosted the **PHILADELPHIA IRISH FAMINE RELIEF COMMITTEE.**

Catholics, Methodists, Quakers, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Moravian and Jewish groups put aside their differences in the name of humanity to help the Irish. South Carolina rallied around the efforts to help those experiencing the famine. They raised donations of money, food and clothing to help the victims of the famine—Irish immigrants made up 39% of the white population in the Southern Cities. Historian Harvey Strum claims that "The States ignored all their racial, religious, and political differences to support the cause for relief."

■ **EVICTION**

Landlords were responsible for paying the Rates of every Tenant whose yearly rent was £4 or less. Landlords whose land was crowded with poorer tenants were now faced with large bills. Many began clearing the poor Tenants from their small plots and letting the land in larger plots for over £4 which then reduced their debts. In 1846, there had been some clearances, but the great mass of evictions came in 1847.

According to JAMES S. DONNELLY Jr., it is impossible to be sure how many people were evicted during the years of the famine and its immediate aftermath. It was only in 1849 that the police began to keep a count, and they recorded a total of almost **250,000 persons** as officially evicted between 1849 and 1854.

DONNELLY considered this to be an underestimate, and if the figures were to include the number pressured into "voluntary" surrenders during the whole period (1846–1854), the figure would almost certainly exceed half a million persons. While Helen Litton says there were also thousands of "voluntary" surrenders, she notes also that there was "precious little voluntary about them". In some cases, tenants were persuaded to accept a small sum of money to leave their homes, "cheated into believing the workhouse would take them in".

West Clare was one of the worst areas for evictions, where landlords turned thousands of families out and demolished their derisory cabins. Captain Kennedy in April 1848 estimated that 1,000 houses, with an average of six people to each, had been levelled since November. **The Mahon family of Strokestown House evicted 3,000 people in 1847 and were still able to dine on lobster soup.**

After Clare, the worst area for evictions was COUNTY MAYO, accounting for 10% of all evictions between 1849 and 1854. George Bingham, 3rd Earl of Lucan, who owned over 60,000 acres (240 km²), was among the worst evicting landlords. He was quoted as saying that "he would not breed paupers to pay priests". Having turned out in the Parish of Ballinrobe over 2,000 tenants alone, he then used the cleared land as grazing farms. In 1848, the Marquis of Sligo owed £1,650 to Westport Union; he was also an evicting landlord, though he claimed to be selective, saying that he was only getting rid of the idle and dishonest. Altogether, he cleared about 25% of his tenants.

In 1846 the future Prime Minister of the United Kingdom John Russell, 1st Earl Russell reported that in one year more than 50,000 Irish families had been "turned out of their wretched dwellings without pity and without refuge...we have made it the most degraded and most miserable Country in the world... all the world is crying SHAME upon us."

In 1847, Bishop of Meath, Thomas Nulty, described his personal recollection of the evictions in a pastoral letter to his Clergy:

"Seven hundred human beings were driven from their homes in one day and set adrift on the world, to gratify the caprice of one who, before God and man, probably deserved less consideration than the last and least of them ... The horrid scenes I then witnessed, I must remember all my life long. The wailing of women—the screams, the terror, the consternation of children—the speechless agony of honest industrious men—wring tears of grief from all who saw them. I saw Officers and men of a large Police Force, who were obliged to attend on the occasion, cry like children at beholding the cruel sufferings of the very people whom they would be obliged to butcher had they offered the least resistance. The landed proprietors in a circle all around—and for many miles in every direction—warned their tenantry, with threats of their direct vengeance, against the humanity of extending to any of them the hospitality of a single night's shelter ... and in little more than three years, nearly a fourth of them lay quietly in their graves."

The population in Drumbaragh, a Townland in County Meath, plummeted 67% between 1841 and 1851; in neighbouring Springville, it fell 54%. There were 50-houses in Springville in 1841 and only 11 were left in 1871.

According to Litton, evictions might have taken place earlier but for fear of the Secret Societies. However, they were now greatly weakened by the Famine. Revenge still occasionally took place, with 7-landlords being shot, six fatally, during the autumn and winter of 1847. Ten other occupiers of land, though without Tenants, were also murdered, she says.

One such landlord reprisal occurred in West Roscommon. The "notorious" Major Denis Mahon enforced thousands of his tenants into eviction before the end of 1847, with an estimated 60 per cent decline in population in some Parishes. He was shot dead in that year. In East Roscommon, "where conditions were more benign", the estimated decline in population was under 10%.

LORD CLARENDON, alarmed at the number of landlords being shot and that this might mean rebellion, asked for special powers. Lord John Russell was not sympathetic to this appeal. Lord Clarendon believed that the landlords themselves were mostly responsible for the tragedy in the first place, saying that "It is quite true that landlords in England would not like to be shot like hares and partridges ... but neither does any landlord in England turn out fifty persons at once and burn their houses over their heads, giving them no provision for the future."

The "CRIME and OUTRAGE ACT" was passed in December 1847 as a compromise, and additional troops were sent to Ireland.

The "Gregory clause", described by Donnelly as a "vicious amendment to the Irish Poor Law", had been a successful Tory amendment to the Whig Poor-Relief Bill which became Law in early June 1847, where its potential as an estate-clearing device was widely recognized in Parliament, although not in advance. At first, the poor law commissioners and inspectors viewed the clause as a valuable instrument for a more cost-effective administration of public relief, but the drawbacks soon became apparent, even from an administrative perspective. They would soon view them as little more than murderous from a humanitarian perspective. According to Donnelly, it became obvious that the quarter-acre clause was "indirectly a death-dealing instrument".

■ EMIGRATION

Main articles: [Irish diaspora](#) and [Typhus epidemic of 1847](#)

At least a Million people are thought to have emigrated as a result of the Famine. There were about 1 Million long-distance emigrants between 1846 and 1851, mainly to North America. The total given in the 1851 Census is 967,908. Short-distance emigrants, mainly to Britain, numbered 200,000 or more.

While the Famine was responsible for a significant increase in emigration from Ireland, of anywhere from 45% to nearly 85% depending on the year and the County, it was not the sole cause. The beginning of mass emigration from Ireland can be traced to the mid-18th Century, when some 250,000 people left Ireland over a period of 50-years to settle in the New World.

Irish economist Cormac Ó Gráda estimates that between 1 million and 1.5 million people emigrated during the 30 years between 1815 (when Napoleon was defeated in Waterloo) and 1845 (when the Great Famine began). However, during the worst of the famine, emigration reached around 250,000 in one year alone, with Western Ireland seeing the most emigrants.

Families did not migrate *en masse*, but younger members of families did, so much so that emigration almost became a rite of passage, as evidenced by the data that show that, unlike similar emigrations throughout world history, women emigrated just as often, just as early, and in the same numbers as men. The emigrants would send remittances (reaching a total of £1,404,000 by 1851) back to family in Ireland, which, in turn, allowed another member of their family to leave.

Emigration during the famine years of 1845–1850 was primarily to England, Scotland, South Wales, North America, and Australia. Many of those fleeing to the Americas used the McCorkell Line. One City that experienced a particularly strong influx of Irish immigrants was Liverpool, with at least one-quarter of the City's population being Irish-born by 1851. This would heavily influence the City's identity and culture in the coming years, earning it the nickname of "Ireland's second capital". Liverpool became the only place outside of Ireland to elect an Irish Nationalist to Parliament when it elected T. P. O'Connor in 1885, and continuously re-elected him unopposed until his death in 1929. As of 2020, it is estimated that 75% of people from the City of Liverpool have Irish ancestry.

Of more than 100,000 Irish that sailed to Canada in 1847, an estimated 20% died from disease and malnutrition, including over 5,000 at Grosse Isle, Quebec, an island in the Saint Lawrence River used to quarantine ships near Quebec City. Overcrowded, poorly maintained, and badly provisioned vessels known as coffin ships sailed from small, unregulated harbours in the West of Ireland in contravention of British safety requirements, and mortality rates were high.

The 1851 Census reported that more than half the inhabitants of Toronto, Ontario, Canada were Irish, and, in 1847 alone, 38,000 Irish flooded the City with fewer than 20,000 citizens. Other Canadian Cities such as Quebec City, Montreal, Ottawa, Kingston, Hamilton, and Saint John also received large numbers. By 1871, 55% of Saint John residents were Irish natives or children of Irish-born parents.

Unlike the United States, Canada could not close its ports to Irish ships because it was part of the British Empire, and emigrants could obtain cheap passage in returning empty lumber holds.

In America, most Irish became City-dwellers; with little money, many had to settle in the Cities where the migrant ships docked. By 1850, the Irish made up 25% of the population in Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, and Baltimore.

The Great Famine marked the beginning of the depopulation of Ireland in the 19th Century. The population had increased by 13–14% in the first three decades of the 19th Century; between 1831 and 1841, the population grew by 5%. Application of Thomas Robert Malthus's idea of population expanding geometrically while resources increase arithmetically was popular during the famines of 1817 and 1822. By the 1830s, they were seen as overly simplistic, and Ireland's problems were seen "less as an excess of population than as a lack of capital investment". The population of Ireland was increasing no faster than that of England, which suffered no equivalent catastrophe. By 1854, between 1.5 and 2 Million Irish left their Country due to evictions, starvation, and harsh living conditions.

■ DEATH TOLL

It is not known exactly how many people died during the period of the Famine, although it is believed that more died from disease than from starvation. State registration of births, marriages, or deaths had not yet begun, and records kept by the Catholic Church are incomplete. One possible estimate has been reached by comparing the expected population with the eventual numbers in the 1850s.

A Census taken in 1841 recorded a population of 8,175,124. A Census immediately after the famine in 1851 counted 6,552,385, a drop of over 1.5 million in 10 years.

The Census Commissioners estimated that, at the normal rate of population increase, the population in 1851 should have grown to just over 9 million if the Famine had not occurred.

On the in-development [Great Irish Famine Online](#) resource, produced by the Geography department of University College Cork, the population of Ireland section states, that together with the Census figures being called "low", before the famine it states that "it is now generally believed" that over 8.75 million people populated the island of Ireland prior to it striking.

In 1851, the Census Commissioners collected information on the number who died in each family since 1841, and the cause, season, and year of death. They recorded 21,770 total deaths from starvation in the previous decade and 400,720 deaths from diseases. Listed diseases were fever, diphtheria, dysentery, cholera, smallpox, and influenza, with the first two being the main killers (222,021 and 93,232). The Commissioners acknowledged that their figures were incomplete and that the true number of deaths was probably higher:

The greater the amount of destitution of mortality, the less will be the amount of recorded deaths derived through any household form—for not only were whole families swept away by disease, but whole Villages were effaced from off the land.

Later historians agree that the 1851 death tables "were flawed and probably under-estimated the level of mortality". The combination of institutional data and figures provided by individuals gives "an incomplete and biased count" of fatalities during the famine. Cormac Ó Gráda, referencing the work of W. A. MacArthur, writes that Specialists have long known that the Irish death tables were inaccurate, and undercounted the number of deaths.

S. H. Cousens's estimate of 800,000 deaths relied heavily on retrospective information contained in the 1851 Census and elsewhere, and is now regarded as too low. Modern historian J. J. Lee says "at least 800,000", and R. F. Foster estimates that "at least 775,000 died, mostly through disease, including cholera in the latter stages of the holocaust". He further notes that "a recent sophisticated computation estimates excess deaths from 1846 to 1851 as between 1,000,000 and 1,500,000 ... after a careful critique of this, other statisticians arrive at a figure of 1,000,000".

Joel Mokyr's estimates at an aggregated County level range from 1.1 million to 1.5 million deaths between 1846 and 1851. Mokyr produced two sets of data which contained an upper-bound and lower-bound estimate, which showed not much difference in regional patterns. The true figure is likely to lie between the two extremes of half and one and a half million, and the most widely accepted estimate is one million.

■ DECLINE IN POPULATION 1841–1851 (%)

Leinster	Munster	Ulster	Connacht	Ireland
15.3	22.5	15.7	28.8	20

Detailed statistics of the population of Ireland since 1841 are available at [Irish population analysis](#).

Another area of uncertainty lies in the descriptions of disease given by tenants as to the cause of their relatives' deaths. Though the 1851 Census has been rightly criticized as underestimating the true extent of mortality, it does provide a framework for the medical history of the Great Famine. The diseases that badly affected the population fell into two categories: Famine-Induced Diseases and Diseases of Nutritional Deficiency. Of the Nutritional Deficiency Diseases, the most commonly experienced were STARVATION and MARASMUS, as well as a condition at the time called DROPSY. Dropsy ([oedema](#)) was a popular name given for the symptoms of several diseases, one of which, KWASHIORKOR, is associated with STARVATION.

However, the greatest mortality was not from Nutritional Deficiency Diseases, but from Famine-Induced Ailments. The malnourished are very vulnerable to infections; therefore, these were more severe when they occurred. Measles, diphtheria, diarrhoea, tuberculosis, most respiratory infections, whooping cough, many intestinal parasites, and cholera were all strongly conditioned by nutritional status. Potentially lethal diseases, such as SMALLPOX and

INFLUENZA, were so virulent that their spread was independent of nutrition. The best example of this phenomenon was FEVER, which exacted the greatest death toll. In the popular mind, as well as medical opinion, fever and famine were closely related. Social dislocation—the congregation of the hungry at soup kitchens, food depots, and overcrowded workhouses—created conditions that were ideal for spreading infectious diseases such as typhus, typhoid, and relapsing fever.

DIARRHOEAL diseases were the result of poor hygiene, bad sanitation, and dietary changes. The concluding attack on a population incapacitated by famine was delivered by ASIATIC CHOLERA, which had visited Ireland briefly in the 1830s. In the following decade, it spread uncontrollably across Asia, through Europe, and into Britain, finally reaching Ireland in 1849. Some scholars estimate that the population of Ireland was reduced by 20–25%.

■ AFTER THE FAMINE

[Main article: Legacy of the Great Irish Famine](#)

Ireland's mean age of marriage in 1830 was 23.8 for women and 27.5 for men, where they had once been 21 for women and 25 for men, and those who never married numbered about 10% of the population; in 1840, they had respectively risen to 24.4 and 27.7. In the decades after the Famine, the age of marriage had risen to 28–29 for women and 33 for men, and as many as a third of Irishmen and a quarter of Irishwomen never married, due to low wages and chronic economic problems that discouraged early and universal marriage.

One consequence of the increase in the number of orphaned children was that some young women turned to prostitution to provide for themselves. Some of the women who became Wrens of the Curragh were famine orphans.

The POTATO BLIGHT would return to Ireland in 1879, though by then the rural cottier tenant farmers and labourers of Ireland had begun the "Land War", described as one of the largest agrarian movements to take place in 19th-Century Europe.

By the time the Potato Blight returned in 1879, The Land League, which was led by Michael Davitt, who was born during the Great Famine and whose family had been evicted when Davitt was only 4 years old, encouraged the mass boycott of "notorious landlords" with some members also physically blocking evictions. The policy, however, would soon be suppressed. Despite close to 1000 interned under the 1881 Coercion Act for suspected membership. With the reduction in the rate of homelessness and the increased physical and political networks eroding the landlordism system, the severity of the following shorter famine would be limited.

According to the linguist Erick Falc'her-Poyroux, surprisingly, for a Country renowned for its rich musical heritage, only a small number of folk songs can be traced back to the demographic and cultural catastrophe brought about by the Great Famine, and he infers from this that the

subject was generally avoided for decades among poorer people as it brought back too many sorrowful memories.

Also, large areas of the Country became uninhabited and the folk song collectors of the 18th. and 19th. Centuries did not collect the songs they heard in the Irish language, as the language of the peasantry was often regarded as dead, or "not delicate enough for educated ears". Of the songs that have survived probably the best known is Skibbereen. Emigration has been an important source of inspiration for songs of the Irish during the 20th Century.

■ ANALYSIS OF THE GOVERNMENT'S ROLE

Contemporary Analysis

Contemporary opinion was sharply critical of the Russell Government's response to and management of the crisis. From the start, there were accusations that the government failed to grasp the magnitude of the disaster. Sir James Graham, who had served as Home Secretary in Sir Robert Peel's late Government, wrote to Peel that, in his opinion, "the real extent and magnitude of the Irish difficulty are underestimated by the Government, and cannot be met by measures within the strict rule of economical science".

This criticism was not confined to outside critics. The Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland, Lord Clarendon, wrote a letter to Russell on 26 April 1849, urging that the Government propose additional relief measures: "I don't think there is another legislature in Europe that would disregard such suffering as now exists in the west of Ireland, or coldly persist in a policy of extermination." Also in 1849, the Chief Poor Law Commissioner, Edward Twisleton, resigned in protest over the Rate-in-Aid Act, which provided additional funds for the Poor Law through a 6d in the pound levy on all rateable properties in Ireland. Twisleton testified that "comparatively trifling sums were required for Britain to spare itself the deep disgrace of permitting its miserable fellow-subjects to die of starvation".

According to Peter Gray in his book *The Irish Famine*, the Government spent £7 million for Relief in Ireland between 1845 and 1850, "representing less than half of one per cent of the British gross national product over five years. Contemporaries noted the sharp contrast with the £20 million compensation given to West Indian slave-owners in the 1830s."

Other critics maintained that, even after the Government recognized the scope of the crisis, it failed to take sufficient steps to address it. JOHN MITCHEL, one of the leaders of the Young Ireland Movement, wrote in 1860:

"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. 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."

Still, other critics saw reflected in the Government's response its attitude to the so-called "**Irish Question**". Nassau Senior, an economics professor at Oxford University, wrote that the Famine "would not kill more than one million people, and that would scarcely be enough to do any good". In 1848, DENIS SHINE LAWLOR suggested that Russell was a student of the Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser, who had calculated "how far English Colonization and English policy might be most effectively carried out by Irish starvation".

CHARLES TREVELYAN, the Civil Servant with most direct responsibility for the Government's handling of the famine, described it in 1848 as "a direct stroke of an all-wise and all-merciful Providence", which laid bare "the deep and inveterate root of social evil"; he affirmed that the Famine was "the sharp but effectual remedy by which the cure is likely to be effected. God grant that the generation to which this opportunity has been offered may rightly perform its part..."

■ HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

CHRISTINE KINEALY has written that "the major tragedy of the Irish Famine of 1845–1852 marked a watershed in modern Irish history. Its occurrence, however, was neither inevitable nor unavoidable". The underlying factors which combined to cause the famine were aggravated by an inadequate government response. Kinealy notes that the "**Government had to do something to help alleviate the suffering**" but that "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".

JOEL MOKYR writes that, "There is no doubt that Britain could have saved Ireland," and compares the £9.5 million the Government spent on famine relief in Ireland to the £63.9 million it would spend a few years later on the "utterly futile" Crimean War. MOKYR argues that, despite its formal integration into the United Kingdom, Ireland was effectively a Foreign Country to the British, who were therefore unwilling to spend resources that could have saved hundreds of thousands of lives.

Some also pointed to the structure of the British Empire as a contributing factor. James Anthony Froude wrote that "**England governed Ireland for what she deemed her own interest, making her calculations on the gross balance of her trade ledgers, and leaving moral obligations aside, as if right and wrong had been blotted out of the statute book of the Universe.**"

DENNIS CLARK, an Irish-American historian and critic of empire, claimed the famine was "**the culmination of generations of neglect, misrule and repression. It was an epic of English Colonial cruelty and inadequacy. For the landless cabin dwellers, it meant emigration or extinction...**"

■ POSITION OF THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT

The British Government has not expressly apologized for its role in the famine. But in 1997, at a commemoration event in County Cork, the actor Gabriel Byrne read out a message by Prime Minister Tony Blair that acknowledged the inadequacy of the Government response. It asserted that **"those who governed in London at the time failed their people through standing by while a crop failure turned into a massive human tragedy"**.

The message was well received in Ireland, where it was understood as the long-sought-after British apology. Archive documents released in 2021 showed that the message was not in fact written or approved by Blair, who could not be reached by aides at the time. It was therefore approved by Blair's Principal Private Secretary John Holmes on his own initiative.

■ GENOCIDE QUESTION

See also: [Genocides in history \(before World War I\) § Great Irish Famine](#)

The vast majority of historians reject the claim that the British Government's response to the famine constituted a genocide. Their position is partially based on the fact that, with regard to famine related deaths, there was a lack of intent to commit genocide. For a mass-death atrocity to be defined as a genocide, it must include the intentional destruction of a people. **Contemporary commentators blamed the mass death on the actions of the British Government, rather than the blight.**

In 1996, the U.S. State of New Jersey included the famine in the "Holocaust and Genocide Curriculum" of its Secondary Schools. In the 1990s, Irish-American lobbying groups campaigned vigorously to include the study of the Irish Famine in school curriculums, alongside studies of the Holocaust, Slavery and other similar atrocities. The New Jersey curriculum was pushed by such lobbying groups and was drafted by the librarian James Mullin. Following criticism, the New Jersey Holocaust Commission requested statements from two academics that the Irish famine was genocide, which was eventually provided by law professors Charles E. Rice and Francis Boyle, who had not been previously known for studying Irish history. **They concluded that the British Government deliberately pursued a race- and ethnicity-based policy aimed at destroying the Irish people and that the policy of mass starvation amounted to genocide per retrospective application of Article 2 of the HAGUE CONVENTION of 1948.**

Historian Donald Akenson, who has written 24-books on Ireland, stated that **"When you see the word *Holocaust* used with regard to the Great Famine, you know that you are encountering famine-porn. It is inevitably part of a presentation that is historically unbalanced and, like other kinds of pornography, is distinguished by a covert (and sometimes overt) appeal to misanthropy and almost always an incitement to hatred."**

Irish historian Cormac Ó Gráda rejected the claim that the British Government's response to the famine was a genocide and he also stated that "no academic historian continues to take the claim of 'genocide' seriously". He argued that "genocide includes 'murderous intent', and it must be said that not even the most bigoted and racist commentators of the day sought the extermination of the Irish", and he also stated that most people in Whitehall "hoped for better times for Ireland". Additionally, he stated that the claim of genocide overlooks "the enormous challenge facing relief agencies, both central and local, public and private".

Ó Gráda thinks that a case of neglect is easier to sustain than a case of genocide.

John Leazer, Professor of History at Carthage College, Wisconsin, wrote that the binary framing of the debate about the British Government's, and particularly Trevelyan's, actions as being good or bad is "unsatisfactory" and that the entire debate surrounding the question of genocide serves to oversimplify and obfuscate complex factors behind the actions of the Government as a whole and individuals within it.

Nat Hill, Director of Research at Genocide Watch, has stated that "While the Potato Famine may not fit perfectly into the legal and political definitions of 'genocide', it should be given equal consideration in history as an egregious crime against humanity".

■ MEMORIALS

IRELAND'S NATIONAL FAMINE MEMORIAL is situated in Murrisk Millennium Peace Park, a 5-acre Park overlooking the Atlantic Ocean in the village of Murrisk, County Mayo at the foot of Croagh Patrick Mountain. Designed by Irish artist John Behan, the Memorial consists of a bronze sculpture of a coffin ship with skeletons interwoven through the rigging symbolizing the many emigrants that did not survive the journey across the ocean to Britain, America and elsewhere. It was unveiled on 20 July 1997 by then-President Mary Robinson.

The Famine Commemoration Committee who led the project chose the site in Murrisk as they felt it was "entirely fitting that the national Famine Memorial be located in the West, which suffered most during the Famine with one in four of the population of Connaught dying in those terrible years."

The National Famine Commemoration Day is observed in Ireland, usually on a Sunday in May.

It is also memorialized in many locations throughout Ireland, especially in those regions of Ireland which suffered the greatest losses, and it is also memorialized overseas, particularly in cities with large populations which are descended from Irish immigrants, such as New York City. Among the memorials in the US is the IRISH HUNGER MEMORIAL near a section of the Manhattan waterfront.



Memorial to the victims of the Irish Potato Famine "The Great Famine" in the grounds of St Lukes Church, Liverpool, England.

It recalls that from 1849 to 1852 1,241,410 Irish immigrants arrived in the City and that from Liverpool they dispersed to locations around the World. Many died despite the help they received within the City, some 7,000 in the City perished within one year. The Memorial was funded by Public subscription, with many small donations from local Communities, contributions from the British and Irish Governments, each of the Merseyside local councils, Dublin and Dun Laoghaire Councils and many others. The sculpture was created by Eamonn O'Docherty.

The **LIVERPOOL GREAT HUNGER COMMEMORATION COMMITTEE** also erected 10-plaques around the City, including one on the gates to Clarence Dock. Unveiled in 2000, the plaque inscription reads in Irish and English: **"Through these gates passed most of the 1,300,000 Irish migrants who fled from the Great Famine and 'took the ship' to Liverpool in the years 1845–52"**.

The Maritime Museum, Albert Dock, Liverpool has an exhibition regarding the Irish Migration, showing models of ships, documentation and other facts on Liverpool's history.



Kindred Spirits, a large stainless steel sculpture of 9-Eagle feathers by artist Alex Pentek was erected in 2017 in the Irish Town of [Middleton, County Cork](#), to thank the Choctaw people for its financial assistance during the famine.

An annual Great Famine Walk from [Doolough](#) to [Louisburgh, County Mayo](#) was inaugurated in 1988 and has been led by such notable personalities as Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa and representatives of the Choctaw nation of Oklahoma. The walk, organized by Afri, takes place on the first or second Saturday of May and links the memory of the famine with contemporary human rights issues.

Chronology of the Great Famine

[From Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia](#)

The chronology of the GREAT FAMINE (Irish: *An Gorta Mór* or *An Drochshaol*, literally 'The Bad Life') documents a period of Irish history between 29 November 1845 and 1852 during which time the population of Ireland was reduced by 20 to 25 percent.

The proximate cause was famine resulting from a Potato Disease commonly known as "LATE BLIGHT". Although BLIGHT ravaged potato crops throughout Europe during the 1840s, the impact and human cost in Ireland – where a third of the population was entirely dependent on the POTATO for food, but which also produced an abundance of other food – was exacerbated by a host of political, social and economic factors which remain the subject of historical debate.

Chronology

1843

POTATO BLIGHT was reported around the ports of New York, and Philadelphia.

1844

The BELGIAN GOVERNMENT, in an attempt to solve a problem with CURL and DRY ROT, imported seed potatoes from the United States, and had them planted at Cureghem, Anderlecht in the west of Flanders. The crop was reported as diseased. In, June 1844, Belgian Botanist and Mycologist, JOHN BAPTISTE HENRI JOSEPH DESMAZIÈRES, spotted the BLIGHT in Frances's, adjacent department NORD, with crop losses around LILLE reported as significant. This was the first recorded evidence that the blight, which had ravaged the potato crop in North America in 1843, had crossed the Atlantic.

1845

August 1845

At the beginning of August, a POTATO DISEASE was reported, across the Channel, close to the port of FOLKESTONE, Kent, southern England. CHARLES DARWIN, then resident at Down House, wrote to his former mentor, at Cambridge University, JOHN STEVENS HENSLOW on the appearance.

September 1845

On 13 September 1845, POTATO BLIGHT was first reported in Ireland. The crops at Dublin were suddenly perishing. It was reported in the *Gardeners' Chronicle*, asking "where will Ireland be in the event of a universal potato rot?"

The BRITISH GOVERNMENT were nevertheless optimistic through the next few weeks.

October 1845

- As soon as digging of POTATO CROPS began, devastating reports started coming in.

Sir ROBERT PEEL found the accounts 'very alarming' and writing to Sir James Graham, the Home Secretary on 13 October 1845 reminded him that there was always a tendency in Irish news to exaggerate. Sir James Graham, the Home Secretary wrote, in Constabulary Reports from 15 reported great failures, that the truth about the Potato Crop could not be fully ascertained until digging was completed.

- The PRIME MINISTER ROBERT PEEL was prompted to act, and on 15 October he decided to summon an Emergency Meeting of his Cabinet for 31 October. The remedy he decided was to repeal the CORN LAWS. Peel then decided to set up a SCIENTIFIC COMMISSION to go to Ireland and investigate the Potato Blight and report on conditions.
- The emergency Cabinet Meeting met on 31 October 1845 until 1 November 1845. The first day consisted of reading Reports and Memoranda from Ireland on the Potato Crop failure. PEEL proposed that a Relief Commission be established in Ireland, and a sum of money be advanced to the Lord-Lieutenant. Differences arose when Peel pointed out that these measures required an advance of Public Money. The purchase of food for destitute districts would open the question of CORN LAWS. Was it possible, it was asked, to vote public money for the sustenance of a people on account of "actual or apprehended scarcity" and still maintain restrictions on the free import of grain; Peel declared it was not. On this issue then the Cabinet split, the overwhelming majority voting against Peel.
- Unable to reach a decision, the Cabinet adjourned till 6 November, 1845.

The principle of the CORN LAWS had been to keep the price of home-grown grain up. Duties on imported grain assured English farmers a minimum and profitable price. The burden of a higher price for bread was carried by the LABOURING CLASSES, in particular Factory Workers and Operatives.

It was claimed that, if the Corn Laws were repealed, all those connected with the land would be ruined and the established Social Organisation of the Country would be destroyed.

According to Historian CECIL BLANCHE WOODHAM-SMITH, the rising wrath of Tories and Landlords ensured "all interest in Ireland was submerged." She writes that the Tory Mayor of Liverpool refused to call a meeting for the relief of Irish distress. She continues that the Mansion House Committee in Dublin was accused of 'deluding the public with a false alarm', and the blight itself 'was represented as the invention of agitators on the other side of the water'. The entanglement of the Irish famine with the repeal of the Corn Laws, she says, was a key misfortune for Ireland. The potato failure was eclipsed by the domestic issue of Corn Law repeal. The Irish famine, she writes, "slipped into the background."

November 1845

- On 10 November Peel ordered the **secret purchase** of £100,000 worth of Indian corn and meal from America for distribution in Ireland.
- On 15 November the SCIENTIFIC COMMISSIONERS reported that “**half the Potato Crop had been destroyed**”.
- On 19 November the MANSION HOUSE COMMITTEE in Dublin claimed to have “**ascertained beyond the shadow of doubt that considerably more than one-third of the entire Potato Crop has been already destroyed.**”
- On 20 November the RELIEF COMMISSION first met.
- Unable to persuade his Cabinet to repeal the Corn Laws, on 5 December PRIME MINISTER ROBERT PEEL tendered his resignation to Queen Victoria but was reinstated days later when LORD JOHN RUSSELL was unable to form a government.

1846

The first deaths from hunger took place in early 1846. In March ROBERT PEEL set up a Programme of Public Works in Ireland but was forced to resign as Prime Minister on 29 June. The new WHIG ADMINISTRATION under Lord John Russell, influenced by their **laissez-faire** belief that the market would provide the food needed then halted government food and relief works, leaving many hundreds of thousands of people without any work, money or food. Grain continued to be exported from the country.

Private initiatives such as **The Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends (Quakers)** attempted to fill the gap caused by the end of Government Relief and eventually the Government reinstated the Relief Works, although bureaucracy slowed the release of food supplies. The blight almost totally destroyed the 1846 crop and the Famine worsened considerably. By December a third of a million destitute people were employed in public works.

1847

There were average crop yields in the 1847 harvest, but due to lack of seed potatoes to plant, the crop was low. Crowds began to throng the public works during the last months of 1846 and the start of 1847, which promoted exactly the social conditions for the spread of 'famine fever.' In late January and February, legislation called the **TEMPORARY RELIEF ACT** went through the British Parliament; it became popularly known as the **Soup Kitchen Act** and occasionally as **Burgoyne's Act**.

This system of Relief was designed to deliver cheap food directly and gratuitously to the destitute masses, but would be terminated in September 1847.

The British Government also announced an additional change in the system of Relief. After August 1847, the permanent **Poor Law** was to be extended and was to become responsible for providing Relief and as a result, all relief would be financed by the **local Poor Law rates**. This put impossible loads on local Poor Rates, particularly in the rural west and south. With the mass emigration of the famine era, the horrors of the '**Coffin Ships**' and the **Year 1847** have ever since been associated in the popular mind, according to **James S. Donnelly Jnr.**

JAMES S. DONNELLY Jr. is Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he specialized in 19th.-Century Irish history. He is a leading figure in the field of Irish studies in North America.

In December 1847 **THE CRIME AND OUTRAGE BILL (IRELAND) 1847** was enacted due to growing Irish nationalist agitation that was causing the British Government concern about a possible violent rebellion against British rule in Ireland.

The Bill gave the **LORD LIEUTENANT OF IRELAND** the power to organize the island into districts and bring **Police Forces** into them at the districts' expense. It limited who could own guns, and required all of the men in the district between the ages of 16 and 60 to assist in apprehending suspected murderers when landlords were killed, or else be guilty of a misdemeanour themselves.

1848

The **POTATO BLIGHT** returned in 1848 and outbreaks of **CHOLERA** were reported. **EVICTIONS** became common among the 1.5 Million households of Agricultural Labourers and Tenant Farmers who could not pay their rent.

Famine victims on Outdoor Relief peaked in July at almost 840,000 people. On 29 July 1848 an Uprising against the Government was led by **WILLIAM SMITH O'BRIEN**. After a skirmish at "Widow McCormack's house" in the Village of Ballingarry, County Tipperary the leaders of the rebellion fled to America or were sentenced to transportation.

1849

The **POTATO CROP** failed again in 1849 and famine was again accompanied by **CHOLERA** outbreaks. This deadly **CHOLERA EPIDEMIC** killed one of Ireland's greatest poets: **JAMES CLARENCE MANGAN**.

James Clarence Mangan (born May 1, 1803, Dublin—died June 20, 1849, Dublin) was a prolific and uneven writer of almost every kind of verse whose best work, inspired by love of Ireland, ranks high in Irish poetry.

1850

The FAMINE ended.

1851

By 1851 Census figures showed that the population of Ireland had fallen to 6,575,000 – a loss of 1,600,000 in 10-years. CORMAC Ó GRÁDA and JOEL MOKYR have described the 1851 Census as a “famous but flawed source”.

They contend that the combination of institutional and individuals figures gives "an incomplete and biased count" of fatalities during the famine. The FAMINE left in its wake up to a Million dead and another Million emigrated.

The FAMINE caused a sense of lasting bitterness by the IRISH PEOPLE towards the BRITISH GOVERNMENT, whom many blamed – then and now – for the starvation of so many people.

■ The fall-out of the FAMINE continued for DECADES afterwards.

Faced with an Irish Party that held the balance of power, the Westminster government's Irish policies can be seen as attempts to appease Nationalism and protect the Union through regional transfers. But attempts to 'Kill Home Rule with Kindness' ultimately failed with the passing of the 1914 HOME RULE BILL.

Devolved Government was originally intended for the whole of Ireland but delays due to the First World War, the 1916 Easter Rising and the rise of Sinn Féin in the 1918 UK general election resulted in the partitioning of the island into two jurisdictions: the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland. The 26 Counties that would later form the REPUBLIC OF IRELAND became independent of Westminster, while the six Counties of Northern Ireland remained part of the UK, but with a devolved Government.

The FAMINE was not a temporary shock. It permanently altered Ireland's demographic profile. In addition to the loss of lives between 1841 and 1851, the population continued to decline throughout the 19th. and early 20th. Centuries, falling from 6.6 million to 4.4 million between the 1851 and 1911 Population Censuses.

In terms of its ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES, the most radical change was rural Ireland's movement away from a POTATO-BASED ECONOMY with small landholdings, towards larger farming units specializing in CASH CROPS and DAIRYING.

More broadly, while IRISH LABOUR continued to fuel the INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION elsewhere in the world, Ireland itself largely failed to industrialize outside small pockets of Ulster.

1847 NORTH AMERICAN TYPHUS EPIDEMIC

EPIDEMIC TYPHUS is transmitted to human beings by the body louse *Pediculus humanus corporis*. The disease is still considered a major threat by public-health authorities, despite the efficacy of antibiotics, because poor sanitary conditions are conducive to louse proliferation. Until recently, *Rickettsia prowazekii*, the causal agent, was thought to be confined to human beings and their body lice. Since 1975, *R. prowazekii* infection in human beings has been related to contact with the flying squirrel *Glaucomys volans* in the USA. Moreover, **Brill-Zinsser disease**, a relapsed form of Epidemic Typhus that appears as sporadic cases many years after the initial infection, is unrelated to louse infestation. Stress or a waning immune system are likely to reactivate this earlier persistent infection, which could be the source of new epidemics when conditions facilitate louse infestation. Finally, *R. prowazekii* is a potential category B bioterrorism agent, because it is stable in dried louse faeces and can be transmitted through aerosols. An increased understanding of the pathogenesis of Epidemic Typhus may be useful for protection against this bacterial threat.



EPIDEMIC TYPHUS is caused by infection with *Rickettsia prowazekii* and is transmitted by the human body louse.



EPIDEMIC TYPHUS is caused by infection with *Rickettsia prowazekii* and is transmitted by the human body louse. Clinical features include, after an incubation period of 1-2 weeks, fever, headache and malaise. Furthermore, an eruption consisting of pink, red, or purpuric, discrete or confluent macules starting on the lateral trunk and spreading to involve most of the body including the face while sparing the palms and soles. Skin ulceration may occur. Conjunctivae may be involved. The eruption may become red and purpuric and can become confluent.

Death can occur from myocardial or central nervous system involvement.

The TYPHUS EPIDEMIC of 1847 was an outbreak of EPIDEMIC TYPHUS caused by a massive Irish emigration in 1847, during the Great Famine, aboard crowded and disease-ridden "coffin ships".

COMMON SYMPTOMS include HIGH FEVER, HEADACHE, CHILLS, TIREDNESS and MUSCLE ACHES. About half of people who are infected develop a flat red rash that begins on the back, chest and stomach and then spreads to the rest of the body except for the face, palms and soles.

CANADA

In Canada, more than 20,000 people died in the TYPHUS EPIDEMIC from 1847 to 1848, with many quarantined in fever sheds in [Grosse Isle](#), [Montreal](#), [Kingston](#), [Toronto](#) and [Saint John](#).

GROSSE ISLE

Grosse Isle, Quebec is an island in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence, home to a Quarantine Station set up in 1832 to contain a CHOLERA epidemic, and home to thousands of Irish emigrants from 1832 to 1848.

On 17 May 1847, the first vessel, the *Syria*, arrived with 430 fever cases. This was followed by eight more ships a few days later. Dr. Douglas wrote that he had 'not a bed to lay the invalids on... I never contemplated the possibility of every vessel arriving with fever as they do now'. One week later seventeen more vessels had appeared at Grosse Isle. By this time, 695 people were already in hospital. Only two days afterwards the number of vessels reached thirty, with 10,000 immigrants now waiting to be processed. By 29 May, a total of 36 vessels had arrived. The end of May saw 40-ships forming a line two miles (3 km) long down the St. Lawrence River. According to Dr. Douglas, each one was affected by fever and dysentery. 1,100 invalids were accommodated in sheds and tents, or laid out in rows in the Church.

DR. GEORGE DOUGLAS, Grosse Isle's Chief Medical Officer, recorded that by midsummer of 1847 the Quarantine Regulations in force were 'physically impossible' to carry out, making it necessary for the emigrants to stay on board their ships for many days. Douglas believed that washing and airing out the ships would be enough to stop the contagion spreading between infected passengers.

With the arrival of thousands of emigrants, the island was quickly overwhelmed. Tents were set up to house the influx of people, but many new arrivals were left lying on the ground without shelter. Robert Whyte records seeing 'hundreds ... literally flung on the beach, left amid the mud and stones to crawl on the dry land as they could'. The Anglican Bishop of Montreal, Bishop Mountain, recalled seeing people lying opposite the Church screaming for water, while others lay inside the tents without bedding.

One child he saw was covered in vermin; another who had 'been walking with some others, sat down for a moment, and died'.

Because of the lack of space on Grosse Isle, Dr. Douglas required healthy passengers to stay on ship for fifteen days once the sick had been removed, by way of quarantine. Infection flourished on board the ships. One ship, the *Agnes*, reached Grosse Isle with 427 passengers of whom only 150 survived the quarantine period.

Robert Whyte, pseudonymous author of the *1847 Famine Ship Diary: The Journey of a Coffin Ship*, described how on arrival at Grosse Isle the Irish emigrant passengers on the *Ajax* dressed in their best clothes and helped the crew to clean the ship, expecting to be sent either to hospital or on to Quebec after their long voyage. In fact, the doctor inspected them only briefly and did not return for several days.

By midsummer 1847, 2,500 invalids were quarantined on Grosse Isle, and the line of waiting ships stretched several miles. At the end of July, Dr. Douglas abandoned the quarantine regulations because they were 'impossible' to enforce and doctors were examining their charges very perfunctorily, allowing them to walk past and examining the tongues of any who looked feverish. In this way, many people with latent fever were allowed to pass as healthy, only to succumb to their sickness once they had left Grosse Isle.

On 29 July 1847, Robert Whyte recorded the neglect of his fellow passengers, who 'within reach of help' 'were to be left enveloped in reeking pestilence, the sick without medicine, medical skill, nourishment, or so much as a drop of pure water'. However, conditions on other Irish emigrant ships were still worse. Two Canadian priests who visited the *Ajax* described the holds of other vessels where they had been 'up to their ankles in filth. The wretched emigrants crowded together like cattle and corpses remained long unburied'.

Robert Whyte contrasted this with the condition of German immigrants arriving at Grosse Isle. These were all free of sickness, 'comfortably and neatly clad, clean and happy'. *The Times* also commented on the 'healthy, robust and cheerful' Germans.

FEVER SHEDS were filthy and crowded, with patients lying in double tiers of bunks which allowed dirt from the top bunk to fall onto the lower. According to the Senate Committee's report, two or three invalids would be placed together in one berth, irrespective of age or sex. There was no bread: meals consisted of tea, gruel or broth served three times a day.

As drinking water was carted, there was never enough for the fever patients. One Catholic priest, Father Moylan, reported giving water to invalids in a tent who had not been able to drink for 18 hours. The sheds were not originally intended to house fever patients and had no ventilation; new sheds were built without privies.

The Senate Committee stated that because of the lack of personnel and space, the invalids lay in their own excrement for days and there were insufficient staff to take away those who died during the night.

As well as a shortage of accommodation, there was a serious lack of medical personnel to care for the sick. Dr. Douglas attempted to enlist nurses from among the healthy female passengers with the promise of high wages, but fear of disease meant none accepted. Nurses were expected to sleep alongside the sick and share their food; they had no privacy, often caught the fever themselves and were not helped when they fell ill. Prisoners from the local jail were released to carry out the nursing, but many stole from the dead and the dying.

All of the Medical Officers involved became ill at some stage, with four doctors dying of typhus. Under the Passenger Act of 1842, ships were not obliged to carry a doctor, and only two doctors arrived as passengers. One of these was a Dr. Benson from Dublin, a man with experience working in fever hospitals in Ireland. He arrived on 21 May, volunteered to help the sick, contracted typhus himself and was dead within six days.

More than forty Irish and French Canadian priests and Anglican clergymen were active on Grosse Isle, many becoming ill themselves. The Chief Pastor, Bishop Power, contracted fever and died after delivering the last sacraments to a dying woman in September.

The exact numbers of those who died at sea is unknown, although Whyte himself estimated it at 5,293. During the crossing itself, bodies were thrown into the sea, but once the ships had reached Grosse Isle they were kept in the hold until a burial on land became possible. The dead were dragged out of the holds with hooks and 'stacked like cordwood' on the shore. On 29 July 1847 Whyte described 'a continuous line of boats, each carrying its freight of dead to the burial ground. Some had several corpses so tied up in canvas that the stiff, sharp outline of death was easily traceable'.

Even those passengers who escaped typhus and other diseases were weakened by the journey. The Senate Committee of the United States on Sickness and Mortality in Emigrant Ships described the newly disembarked emigrants as 'cadaverous' and 'feeble'. Most had been misled by Passage-Brokers into believing that they would be provided with food on the ship.

MONTREAL

In Montreal, between 3,500 and 6,000 Irish immigrants died of typhus or "ship fever" in Fever Sheds in a quarantine area known as WINDMILL POINTE in 1847 and 1848. The immigrants had been transferred from quarantine in Grosse Isle, Quebec. Due to a lack of suitable preparations, typhus soon reached epidemic proportions in Montreal. Three (3) Fever Sheds were initially constructed, 150 feet (46 metres) long by 45 feet (15 metres) wide.

As thousands more sick immigrants landed, more sheds had to be erected.

The number of sheds would grow to 22, with troops cordoning off the area so the sick could not escape. Grey Nuns cared for the sick, carrying women and children in their arms from ships to the ambulances. According to Montreal journalist and historian Edgar Andrew Collard, 30 of 40 Nuns who went to help became ill, with 7- dying. Other nuns took over, but once the surviving Grey Nuns had convalesced, they returned. Priests also helped, many falling ill after hearing the last confessions of the dying.

When a mob threatened to throw the Fever Sheds into the river, Montreal Mayor John Easton Mills quelled the riot and provided care, giving patients water and changing bedding. He died in November, serving less than a year in office. The Roman Catholic Bishop of Montreal urged French Québécois to help their fellow Catholics. Many travelled to Montreal from the countryside to adopt children, in some cases passing their land on to them.

Workers constructing the Victoria Bridge across the St. Lawrence River discovered a mass grave in Windmill Pointe with victims of the epidemic. The men, many of whom were of Irish descent, were unsettled by the discovery and created a Memorial, known as The Black Rock to ensure the gravesite would not be forgotten.



The BLACK ROCK Memorial

Erected on 1 December 1859, the inscription on the stone reads:

"To Preserve from Desecration the Remains of 6,000 Immigrants Who died of Ship Fever A.D. 1847-48 This Stone is erected by the Workmen of Messrs. Peto, Brassey and Betts Employed in the Construction of the Victoria Bridge A.D. 1859"

TORONTO

In Toronto, during the summer of 1847, 863 Irish immigrants died of TYPHUS at fever sheds built by the Toronto Board of Health at the northwest corner of King and John Street. There were at least 12 sheds, 22 metres long by 7.5 metres wide. The epidemic also killed the first Bishop of Toronto, Michael Power, while providing care and ministering to Irish immigrants fleeing the Great Famine.

SAINT JOHN, NEW BRUNSWICK

Partridge Island, New Brunswick, just outside the main harbour of Saint John, was chosen as the location for a Pest House and Quarantine Station as far back as 1785. In 1847, with a large influx of Irish migrants, the TYPHUS EPIDEMIC quickly filled the fever shed with sick and dying. By the 1847 Typhus season, 2,115 people had died in New Brunswick, with 1,196 dying at Partridge Island and in Saint John.



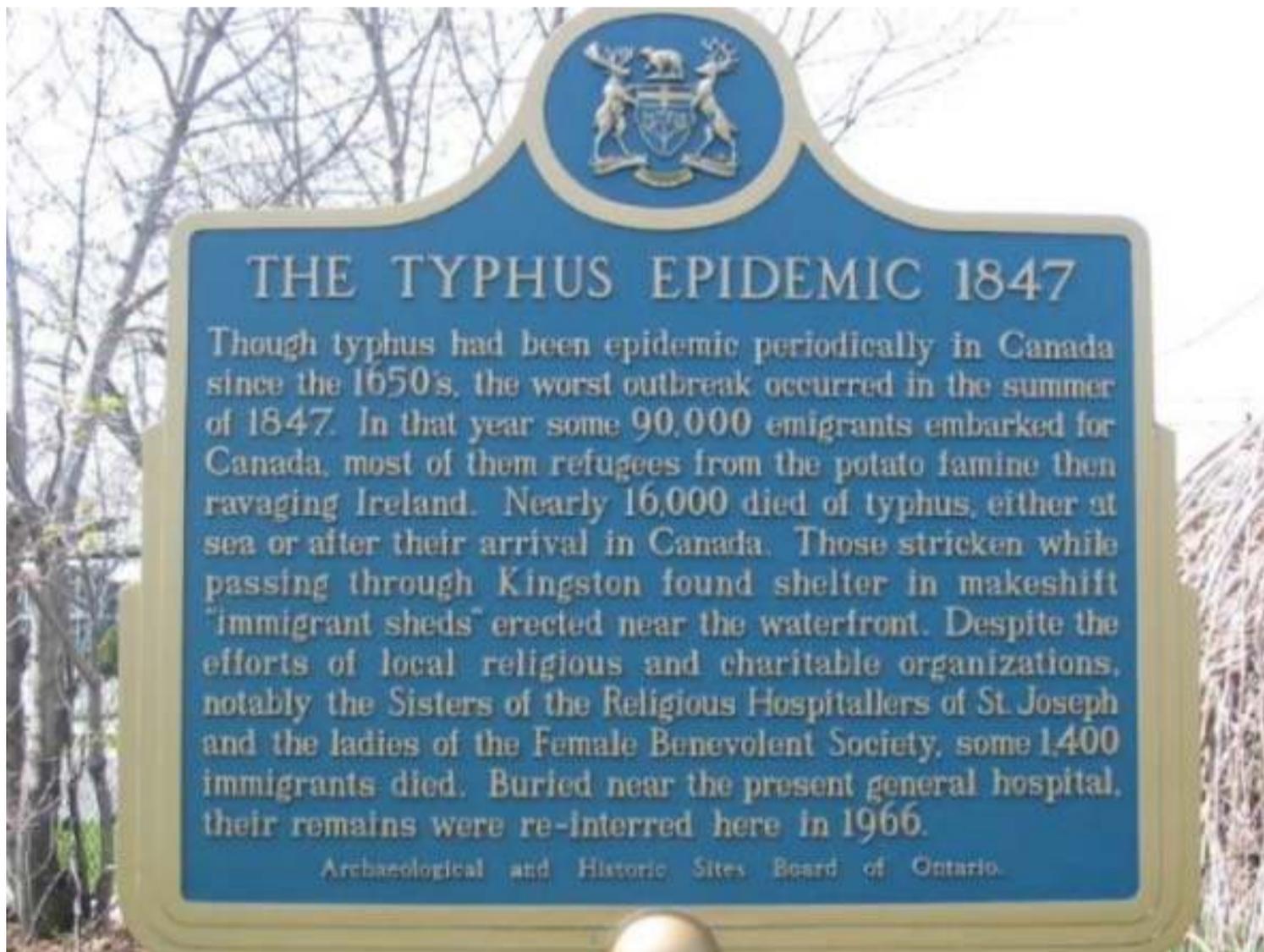
Bishop Mary Irwin-Gibson of the Anglican Diocese of Montreal and Fergus Keyes, President of The Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation

BYTOWN (OTTAWA)

The TYPHUS outbreak hit Bytown with the arrival of over 3,000 Irish immigrants. The fever first appeared in June 1847, with the sick initially cared for by the GREY NUNS. However, as the numbers of sick swelled, fever sheds had to be erected. Approximately 200 died in quarantine.

KINGSTON

Those stricken while passing through Kingston, Ontario found shelter in makeshift "immigrant sheds" erected near the waterfront. Despite the efforts of local religious and charitable organizations, notably the SISTERS OF THE RELIGIOUS HOSPITALLERS OF ST. JOSEPH and the FEMALE BENEVOLENT SOCIETY, some 1,400 immigrants died. They were buried near the present-day Kingston General Hospital, with their remains re-interred to St. Mary's Cemetery in 1966.



UNITED STATES

NEW YORK CITY

An influx of IRISH IMMIGRANTS to New York resulted in a TYPHUS OUTBREAK in 1847, with 80% of the cases reported to have been contracted during the Atlantic crossing, and 20% of the cases resulting from secondary spread in the City. 147 cases were treated at the New York Hospital over a 7-week period. The mortality rate was 11%.