# The Great Famine



## By
## Willie Martin

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# From
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**T**HE GREAT FAMINE, ALSO KNOWN AS THE POTATO FAMINE, The Great Hunger and An Gota Mor, reduced the population of Ireland by three million people, or 36%, during the middle of the 19th century. Most of these people immigrated, but it is estimated that one million or more died of starvation and disease. While the famine was initiated by a potato blight, its actual causes are rooted much deeper in the economic system in place at the time and the attitude of the English to the people of Ireland.

## Causes

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

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

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

# The Famine

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

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

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

These ships were crammed beyond normal limits with already starving and diseased people; and many more died during the voyages.

The situation was further aggravated when the English government demanded payment of taxes to further subsidize relief efforts. What little money that did actually trickle out of Ireland was used for ridiculous purposes.

Corn was bought from America and shipped to Ireland, but for every ship that came, four or more left with food for England. In 1847, the famine was causing the death of people at such a large rate, that many were buried in long, communal trenches.

Public opinion to the disaster was beginning to have an affect, however. The English government advanced a loan of ten million pounds in an effort to alleviate the situation.

Men were put to work at half wages in purely inconsequential labours. The reason for this was specific, as the law forbade the use of this money in any manner that could give advantage to an Irishman in business over any Englishman. Therefore these men built roads to nowhere and docks where there was no city or port.

They could not plant food with this money earned, as this would be a violation of the law. Troops were also sent in, but not to protect the peace, they were to collect taxes and rents owed to Landowners and the Government. In many cases, these troops confiscated the relief food and seed being sent in to Ireland.

Many Irish were arrested and transported to the colonies under the Coercion Act for not having a home, while many more were arrested under the Vagrancy Act for not having a visible means of support.

In 1848, the situation remained very bad, even though the blight had ended. The potato crop for various reasons had not been planted. Either people were not allowed to plant, or they simply were not there to do it.

By 1849 and 1850, the famine was largely at an end. But this was not due to relief efforts, it was simply because one third of the population of Ireland had died or been shipped away to foreign lands.

## After Effects

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

This famine and the resultant deaths were due to a natural disaster worsened by English policies, policies which were tailored to the needs

of English businesses and the general well-being of the English public at the expense of the Irish. Similar effects were being felt at the same time in Scotland where the Highland Clearances were under way.

The weight of evidence leads to one conclusion: that English policies towards Ireland and Scotland during this time were instrumental in the death and dislocation of thousands of the poorest people who inhabited those lands.

### By B. W, April 2000

**Suggested Reading:**

*The Story of the Irish Race,* by Seumas MacManus,

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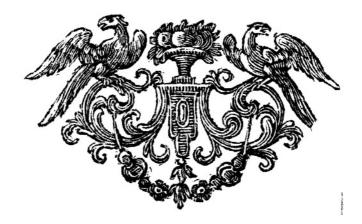# Contact us for details of audio tapes and articles by:-

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