

## The Irish Potato Famine, 1847

The potato was not native to Ireland. It is believed that Sir Walter Raleigh brought the tuber to the island from the New World around 1570. No one could foresee that its arrival was the first ingredient in a recipe that would simmer for 275 years and produce a disaster: the deaths of thousands, the devastation of the Irish economy and the Irish Diaspora that scattered the Irish people around the globe.

At first, the potato seemed heaven-sent. It thrived in the damp Irish climate, was easy to grow and produced a high yield per acre. In the period from 1780 to 1845 it helped double the Irish population from 4 to 8 million. However, with this population explosion came an increased demand for land. The only solution was to divide the available parcels into ever smaller plots for each succeeding generation. Soon, the diminished size of these plots dictated the planting of potatoes as it was the only crop that could produce a sufficient yield of food on such limited acreage. By 1840, fully 1/3 of Ireland's population was totally dependent on the potato for its nourishment. It was a dependency that teetered on the brink of starvation and created a time bomb that needed only the slightest spark to explode.



An Irish newspaper announces  
the arrival of the blight  
September 13, 1845

The spark that lit the fuse was the arrival in September 1845 of the potato blight. Brought ashore from the cargo holds of ships, the blight quickly made its way to the potato fields where it spread havoc. One third of the crop was lost that year. This escalated to a loss of 3/4 of the crop in each of the two succeeding years. The small farmers suffered immediately. Starvation combined with an increased susceptibility to diseases such as typhus, dysentery and cholera devastated the population. The reaction of the British government was inadequate. By 1848, the worst was over but the devastation lingered on for a number of years. It is estimated that between 500,000 and 1.5 million people died as a result of the famine while over one million fled the country. By 1911, Ireland's population had dropped to four million.

"I saw the dying, the living, and the dead, lying indiscriminately upon the same floor."

## *Laissez-Faire*

In deciding their course of action during the Famine, British government officials and administrators rigidly adhered to the popular theory of the day, known as laissez-faire (meaning let it be), which advocated a hands-off policy in the belief that all problems would eventually be solved on their own through 'natural means.'

Great efforts were thus made to sidestep social problems and avoid any interference with private enterprise or the rights of property owners. Throughout the entire Famine period, the British government would never provide massive food aid to Ireland under the assumption that English landowners and private businesses would have been unfairly harmed by resulting food price fluctuations.

In adhering to laissez-faire, the British government also did not interfere with the English-controlled export business in Irish-grown grains. Throughout the Famine years, large quantities of native-grown wheat, barley, oats and oatmeal sailed out of places such as Limerick and Waterford for England, even though local Irish were dying of starvation. Irish farmers, desperate for cash, routinely sold the grain to the British in order to pay the rent on their farms and thus avoid eviction.

In the first year of the Famine, deaths from starvation were kept down due to the imports of Indian corn and survival of about half the original potato crop. Poor Irish survived the first year by selling off their livestock and pawning their meager possessions whenever necessary to buy food. Some borrowed money at high interest from petty money-lenders, known as gombeen men. They also fell behind on their rents.

The potato crop in Ireland had never failed for two consecutive years. Everyone was counting on the next harvest to be blight-free. But the blight was here to stay and three of the following four years would be potato crop disasters, with catastrophic consequences for Ireland.

<http://www.historyplace.com/worldhistory/famine/begins.htm>