**The Potato Famine and Irish Immigration to America**

**Between 1845 and 1855 more than 1.5 million adults and children left Ireland to seek refuge in America. Most were desperately poor, and many were suffering from starvation and disease. They left because disease had devastated Ireland’s potato crops, leaving millions without food. The Potato Famine killed more than 1 million people in five years and generated great bitterness and anger at the British for providing too little help to their Irish subjects. The immigrants who reached America settled in Boston, New York, and other cities where they lived in difficult conditions. But most managed to survive, and their descendants have become a vibrant part of American culture.**

Even before the famine, Ireland was a country of extreme poverty. A Frenchman named Gustave de Beaumont traveled the country in the 1830s and wrote about his travels. He compared the conditions of the Irish to those of “the Indian in his forest and the Negro in chains. . . . In all countries, . . . paupers may be discovered, but an entire nation of paupers is what was never seen until it was shown in Ireland.”

In most of Ireland, housing conditions were terrible. A census report in 1841 found that nearly half the families in rural areas lived in windowless mud cabins, most with no furniture other than a stool. Pigs slept with their owners and heaps of manure lay by the doors. Boys and girls married young, with no money and almost no possessions. They would build a mud hut, and move in with no more than a pot and a stool. When asked why they married so young, the Bishop of Raphoe (a town in Ireland) replied: “They cannot be worse off than they are and . . . they may help each other.”

A major cause of Irish poverty was that more and more people were competing for land. Ireland was not industrialized. The few industries that had been established were failing. The fisheries were undeveloped, and some fishermen could not even buy enough salt to preserve their catch. And there was no agricultural industry. Most of the large and productive farms were owned by English Protestant gentry who collected rents and lived abroad. Many owners visited their property only once or twice in their lifetime. Their property was managed by middlemen, who split up the farms into smaller and smaller sections to increase the rents. The farms became too small to require hired labor. By 1835, three quarters of Irish laborers had no regular employment of any kind. With no employment available, the only way that a laborer could live and support a family was to get a patch of land and grow potatoes.

Potatoes were unique in many ways. Large numbers of them could be grown on small plots of land. An acre and a half could provide a family of six with enough food for a year. Potatoes were nutritious and easy to cook, and they could be fed to pigs and cattle and fowl. And families did not need a plough to grow potatoes. All they needed was a spade, and they could grow potatoes in wet ground and on mountain sides where no other kinds of plants could be cultivated.

More than half of the Irish people depended on the potato as the main part of their diet, and almost 40 percent had a diet consisting almost entirely of potatoes, with some milk or fish as the only other source of nourishment. Potatoes could not be stored for more than a year. If the potato crop failed, there was nothing to replace it. In the years before 1845, many committees and commissions had issued reports on the state of Ireland, and all predicted disaster.

**The Blight Strikes**

In the summer of 1845, the potato crop appeared to be flourishing. But when the main crop was harvested in October, there were signs of disease. Within a few days after they were dug up, the potatoes began to rot. Scientific commissions were set up to investigate the problem and recommend ways to prevent the decay. Farmers were told to try drying the potatoes in ovens or to treat them with lime and salt or with chlorine gas. But nothing worked. No matter what they tried, the potatoes became diseased: “six months provisions a mass of rottenness.”

In November, a scientific commission reported that “one half of the actual potato crop of Ireland is either destroyed or remains in a state unfit for the food of man.” By early spring of 1846, panic began to spread as food supplies disappeared. People ate anything they could find, including the leaves and bark of trees and even grass. Lord Montaeagle reported to the House of Lords in March, people were eating food “from which so putrid and offensive an effluvia issued that in consuming it they were obliged to leave the doors and windows of their cabins open,” and illnesses, including “fever from eating diseased potatoes,” were beginning to spread.

The blight did not go away. In 1846, the whole potato crop was wiped out. In 1847, a shortage of seeds led to fewer crops, as only about a quarter of the land was planted compared to the year before. The crop flourished, but not enough food was produced, and the famine continued. By this time, the mass emigration abroad had begun. The flight to America and Canada continued in 1848 when the blight struck again. In 1849, the famine was officially at an end, but suffering continued throughout Ireland.

**The Famine Takes Its Toll**

More than 1 million people died between 1846 and 1851 as a result of the Potato Famine. Many of these died from starvation. Many more died from diseases that preyed on people weakened by loss of food. By 1847, the scourges of “famine fever,” dysentery, and diarrhea began to wreak havoc. People streamed into towns, begging for food and crowding the workhouses and soup kitchens. The beggars and vagrants who took to the roads were infected with lice, which transmit both typhus and “relapsing fever.” Once fever took hold, people became more susceptible to other infections including dysentery.

Little, if any, medical care was available for the sick. Many of those who tried to help died too. In one province, 48 medical men died of fever, and many clergymen died as well.

**Nowhere to Turn**

Many Irish believe that the British government should have done more to help Ireland during the famine. Ireland had become part of Great Britain in 1801, and the British Parliament, sitting in London, knew about the horrors being suffered. But while the potato crop failed and most Irish were starving, many wealthy landlords who owned large farms had large crops of oats and grain that they were exporting to England. Meanwhile, the poor in Ireland could not afford to buy food and were starving. Many believe that large numbers of lives would have been saved if the British had banned those exports and kept the crops in Ireland.

But stopping food exports was not acceptable to the Whig Party, which had taken control of  the British Parliament in 1846. The Whigs believed in “laissez faire” economics. (Laissez-faire is a French word meaning “let do” or “let it alone.”) Laissez-faire economists believe that the state shouldn’t get in the way of transactions between private parties. Instead, the government should interfere as little as possible in the economy. Because of their belief in laissez-faire economics, members of the Whig government  refused to stop landlords from exporting oats and grain while the poor  were starving. The Whig Party also shut down food depots that had been set up and stocked with Indian corn.

The British government did take some steps to help the poor. Before the famine, in 1838, the government had passed a Poor Law Act. It established 130 workhouses for the poor around the country, funded by taxes collected from local landlords and farmers.

Conditions in the workhouses were grim. Families lived in crowded and miserable conditions, and men were forced to work 10 hours a day cutting stone. Many people avoided workhouses if they could because moving in meant almost certain illness and likely death.

The government also established a public-works program. The program was supposed to be run by local committees that would employ laborers to build railroads and other public-works projects. The British government advanced money for the projects, but the local committee members had to sign a contract promising to repay the British government in two years (plus interest).

The projects were too few to support the hundreds of thousands of desperate families that needed help. Most of the workers—including women and children who were put to work building stone roads—were malnourished and weakened by fever, and many fainted or dropped dead as they worked.

In early 1847, about 700,000 Irish worked on projects, but did not earn enough money to eat. Between March and June of 1847, the government shut down the public-works projects. In their place, Parliament passed the Soup Kitchen Act in January 1847. The Soup Kitchen Act was intended to provide free food  in soup kitchens sponsored by local relief committees and by charity.

Free food was desperately needed. In July 1847, almost 3 million people were lining up to get a “vile soup” or a “stirabout” porridge consisting of Indian corn meal and rice. For most of the poor, this was the only food they had each day, and many were still dying of starvation. By September 1947, the local relief committees that operated the soup kitchens were almost bankrupt, and the government shut down the soup kitchens after only six months. With no more soup kitchens to feed starving people, little hope was left.

**Leaving for America**

Driven by panic and desperation, a flood of emigrants left Ireland in 1847. Many left dressed in rags with not enough food to last the 40-day journey across the Atlantic and not enough money to buy food sold on board. Some went to Great Britain and to Australia, but most intended to go to America. Because fares on the Canadian ships were cheaper, many emigrants went by way of Canada and walked across the border into Maine and then south through New England.

The emigrants traveled on Canadian “timber” ships, which carried lumber from Canada to Europe and would otherwise have returned empty. The shipowners were happy to carry human ballast, but their ships were not equipped for passenger travel. The conditions on the timber ships were horrible. One philanthropist, named Stephen de Vere, traveled as a steerage passenger in the spring of 1847 and described the suffering he saw:

Hundreds of poor people, men, women and children of all ages, from the driveling idiot of ninety to the babe just born, huddled together without air, wallowing in filth and breathing a fetid atmosphere, sick in body, dispirited in heart . . . dying without voice of spiritual consolation, and buried in the deep without the rites of the church.

The Canadian ships became known as “coffin ships” because so many emigrants died during passage or after they reached land and were put into quarantine. One expert has calculated that almost 30 percent of the 100,000 immigrants to Canada in 1847 died on the ships or during quarantine, and another 10,000 died on their way to the United States. Others who could afford the fare traveled directly to New York on American ships where conditions were much better. Some were already suffering from fever and were kept in quarantine on Staten Island. But the vast majority of immigrants who came between 1845 and 1855 did survive the journey.

**No Irish Need Apply**

Almost all of the Irish who immigrated to America were poor peasants from rural counties. Most were illiterate, and many spoke only Irish and could not understand English. And although they had lived off the land in their home country, the immigrants did not have the skills needed for large-scale farming in the American West. Instead, they settled in Boston, New York, and other cities on the East Coast. The men took whatever jobs they could find—loading ships at the docks, sweeping streets, cleaning stables. The women took jobs as servants to the rich or working in textile factories. Most stayed in slum tenements near the ports where they arrived and lived in basements and attics with no water, sanitation, or daylight. Many children took to begging, and men often spent what little money they had on alcohol.

The Irish immigrants were not well-liked and often treated badly. The large number of new arrivals strained the cities’ resources. (The 37,000 Irish immigrants who arrived in Boston in 1847 increased the city’s population by more than 30 percent.) Many unskilled workers feared being put out of work by Irish immigrants willing to work for less than the going rate.

The Irish also faced religious prejudice as almost all of them were Catholic. With the large number of Irish immigrants flooding into the cities, Catholicism came close to being the largest single Christian denomination in the country. Many Protestants feared that the Irish were under the power of the Pope and could never be truly patriotic Americans. The press described Irish immigrants as “aliens” who were mindlessly loyal to their Catholic leaders. As anti-Irish and anti-Catholic sentiment grew, newspaper advertisements for jobs and housing routinely ended with the statement: “No Irish need apply.”

Because of discrimination, the Irish-Catholic immigrants tended to stay together in small communities—or “ghettos.” They sought refuge in religion and began to donate to their local parishes to build schools and churches. But by 1860, with the advent of the Civil War, America’s attention shifted to the issue of slavery, and discrimination against the Irish began to decline. The “Know-Nothing Party,” which was founded in the 1850s to prevent Irish immigration, split up and lost all of its support. Large numbers of Irish Catholics who had enlisted in the Union Army and fought bravely at the battles of Antietam and Gettysburg came back from the war and found that things were beginning to change.

**From the Ghetto to the White House**

As America became more industrialized after the Civil War, Irish laborers found new, and better-paid, work. Many worked building railroads and in factories and mines. They helped organize trade unions and led strikes for shorter hours and better pay. And many became involved in local political machines and began to play a role in city and state politics. The political machines, like Tammany Hall in New York, were associated with the Democratic Party and ran many of the big cities. In return for their political support, the Tammany Hall bosses helped immigrants through the naturalization process and even provided necessities like food and coal in time of emergency. The Irish Catholics ran Tammany Hall for years and helped many poor immigrant groups, including Poles, Italians, and Jews, as well as their own.

The Irish rose out of the ghetto not only because of politics, but also because of education. As the families of Irish immigrants became more prosperous, they were able to send their children to Catholic parochial schools run by the local parishes. After graduation from high school, many went on to college and then into careers in medicine, law, and business. By 1900, only 15 percent of Irish-American men were still unskilled workers. By the 1920s, the Irish had spread into all spheres of American life. And in 1960, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the great-grandson of a famine immigrant, was elected president of the United States.

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Abraham Lincoln once said: “I happen temporarily to occupy this big White House. I am living witness that any one of your children may look to come here as my father’s child has.” The election of John Fitzgerald Kennedy as president in 1960 showed that the Irish Catholics had been assimilated into American culture and had left the misery of the Potato Famine behind them. Waves of other immigrants, fleeing poverty and persecution, have followed in their footsteps and slowly found acceptance, and success, in America.

**For Discussion**

1. Before the famine, what was life like in Ireland?
2. What caused the famine? What factors made it worse?
3. In 1997, then-British Prime Minister Tony Blair issued the first apology by the British government for the famine: “Those who governed in London at the time failed their people.” Do you think the British government was at fault? Explain.
4. What problems did the Irish face in America? What factors helped them overcome these problems? Which do you think was the most important factor? Why?
5. How similar do you think is the plight of today’s immigrants to the U.S. to that of the Irish immigrants? Explain.

**A C T I V I T Y**

**Immigration**

In this activity, students will role play an Irish family and decide whether or not to immigrate to the United States. Form small groups. Each group should:

1. Imagine you are an Irish family during the Potato Famine deciding whether to immigrate to America.

2. Using information from the article, discuss the conditions in Ireland, the dangers of the voyage, and the conditions of Irish immigrants in America.

3. Weighing the conditions and dangers, decide whether or not you would immigrate to America.

4. Be prepared to report your decision and reasons for it.