

The Irish Potato Famine

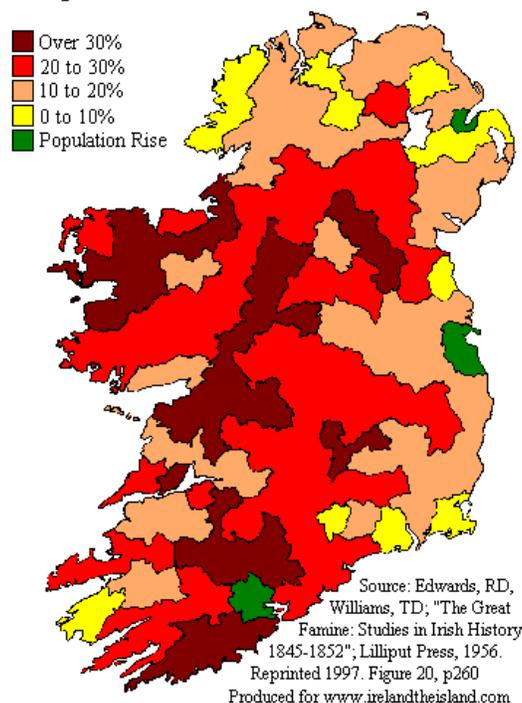
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During the summer of 1845, a "blight of unusual character" devastated Ireland's potato crop, the basic staple in the Irish diet. A few days after potatoes were dug from the ground, they began to turn into a slimy, decaying, blackish "mass of rotteness." Expert panels convened to investigate the blight's cause suggested that it was the result of "static electricity" or the smoke that billowed from railroad locomotives or the "mortiferous vapours" rising from underground volcanoes. In fact, the cause was a fungus that had traveled from Mexico to Ireland.

"Famine fever"--cholera, dysentery, scurvy, typhus, and infestations of lice--soon spread through the Irish countryside. Observers reported seeing children crying with pain and looking "like skeletons, their features sharpened with hunger and their limbs wasted, so that there was little left but bones." Masses of bodies were buried without coffins, a few inches below the soil.

Over the next ten years, more than 750,000 Irish died and another 2 million left their homeland for Great Britain, Canada, and the United States. Within five years, the Irish population was reduced by a quarter.

Population Fall in Ireland 1841-1851



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The Irish potato famine was not simply a natural disaster. It was a product of social causes. Under British rule, Irish Catholics were prohibited from entering the professions or even purchasing land. Instead, many rented small plots of land from absentee British Protestant landlords. Half of all landholdings were less than 5 acres in 1845.

Irish peasants subsisted on a diet consisting largely of potatoes, since a farmer could grow triple the amount of potatoes as grain on the same plot of land. A single acre of potatoes could support a family for a year. About half of Ireland's population depended on potatoes for subsistence.



The inadequacy of relief efforts by the British Government worsened the horrors of the potato famine. Initially, England believed that the free market would end the famine. In 1846, in a victory for advocates of free trade, Britain repealed the Corn Laws, which protected domestic grain producers from foreign competition. The repeal of the Corn Laws failed to end the crisis since the Irish lacked sufficient money to purchase foreign grain.

In the spring of 1847, Britain adopted other measures to cope with the famine, setting up soup kitchens and programs of emergency work relief. But many of these programs ended when a banking crisis hit Britain. In the end, Britain relied largely on a system of work houses, which had originally been established in 1838, to cope with the famine. But these grim institutions had never been intended to deal with a crisis of such sweeping scope. Some 2.6 million Irish entered overcrowded workhouses, where more than 200,000 people died.

The Irish Potato Famine left as its legacy deep and lasting feelings of bitterness and distrust toward the British. Far from being a natural disaster, many Irish were convinced that the famine was a direct outgrowth of British colonial policies. In support of this contention, they noted that during the famine's worst years, many Anglo-Irish estates continued to export grain and livestock to England.



Potato with blight