ATLAS OF THE IRISH REVOLUTION
Resources for Schools

UCC | University College Cork, Ireland | Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh
College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences

Unit 1:
The Great Irish Famine

A Short History

UNIT 1:
THE GREAT IRISH FAMINE

The Great Famine witnessed up to one million excess deaths, while two and a half million people emigrated from Ireland between 1845 and 1855. By 1861 the population of Ireland had been reduced from nearly nine to six million. Close to 300,000 family holdings were eliminated, the cottier class with less than one acre virtually disappeared and many Irish towns were socially and economically devastated.

The Famine may also be called an age of clearances as 100,000 farm families were evicted by landlords, their holdings absorbed into larger farms and demesnes. There was a consequent great increase in farms over fifty acres by 1851, as cattle and sheep once again came to dominate the emptied landscapes.

IRELAND ON THE EVE OF THE FAMINE

In the pre-Famine period, Ireland underwent a massive population explosion. Between 1770 and 1841 the population rose from two million to over eight million people. This was due largely to early marriages, a high birth rate and a shift to widespread tillage production, bolstered by the European Wars of 1792-1815, when Irish farmers and landowners secured high prices for provisions.
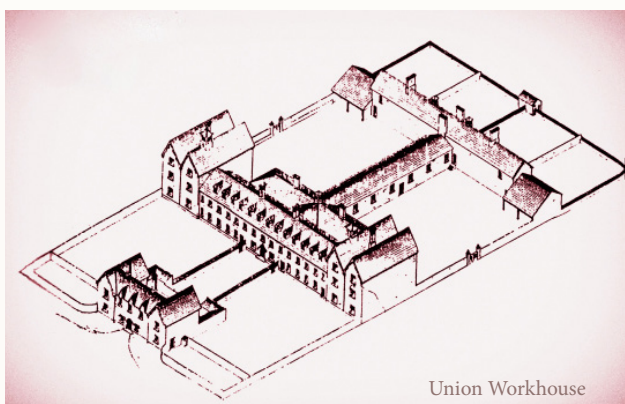
Union Workhouse

In addition, cottage industries, primarily based on cotton and wool, provided extra income for Irish families.

> " *THEY LIVE ON POTATOES, MILK AND BUTTER. SCARCE ANY BUT WHAT KEEPS A COW OR TWO. THEY ARE NOT ALLOWED TO KEEP PIGS IN GENERAL, BUT MANY WILL KEEP A TOLERABLE QUANTITY OF POULTRY. THE MEN DIG TURF AND PLANT POTATOES, AND WORK FOR THEIR LANDLORD AND THE WOMEN PAY THE RENT BY SPINNING.* "
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> *– Arthur Young , "A Tour in Ireland", 1780, p. 216–*

This changed dramatically after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, when the Irish economy went into decline. With much of the land of Ireland rented to middlemen on long and favourable leases, tenants and sub-tenants had been allowed to sub-divide the land with disastrous consequences. Holdings were too small for viable farming. With almost half of the population dependent on the potato, poverty was endemic by the early 1840s and efforts to promote agricultural improvement had mostly failed.

In an attempt to deal with the escalating levels of poverty, the Irish Poor Law Act of 1838 divided the country into 130 Unions, each of which was obliged to construct a workhouse for the relief of the poor in that Union. Poor law unions were defined without much reference to county boundaries. Each was named by the town on which it was centred and which was the location of a workhouse. In order to discourage entry, the conditions of the workhouses were terrible and an individual had to be destitute to be admitted. Designed by the architect George Wilkinson, over 150 workhouses had been built in Ireland by 1851.

LANDED ESTATES IN IRELAND

From the Tudor conquest of the sixteenth century to the early twentieth century, the vast majority of people in Ireland were connected to a landed estate. Estimates varied in size from the smallest at 500 acres to large magnates such as Trinity College which, by the mid-nineteenth century owned close to 190,000 acres.

Most landlords rented land to large farmers, who in turn sublet, and by the end of the eighteenth century much of the land of Ireland was in the hands of middlemen who had been granted long and favourable leases. To manage the affairs of an estate, a land agent was employed to carry out the day-to-day business, a system that suited many, including those landlords who resided elsewhere.

The landed estate was at the heart of the rural economy in Ireland and the period 1720-1840 represented the golden age of the landlord families. Surrounded by an extensive demesne the 'Big House' was an important source of local employment. On the eve of the great Famine many of these great houses were extensively mortgaged. The Famine would exacerbate the owner's financial difficulties and more than 25 per cent of the land of Ireland changed hands in the early 1850s following the passing of the Encumbered Estates Act in 1849.

POTATO BLIGHT

In early September 1845 the first signs of *Phytophthora infestans*, or the potato blight as it was more commonly known, were noted in Ireland. The blight is a fungal infection, which thrives in damp, mild weather conditions turning the potato flower and stalk black and causing the tuber to putrefy.

The potato blight originated in the Andes region of South America and reached Europe via America by 1843. Holland, Belgium, parts of Scandinavia and Scotland all endured similar failures of the crop throughout the mid-1840s before the blight reached Ireland.

By the mid-nineteenth century more than three million people in Ireland were entirely dependent on the potato as their staple food. It could be grown with great success on poor and inferior soil but was prone to failure. Ireland was accustomed to famine as there had been localised occurrences throughout the early 1800s.

The British Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, did not believe the first reports about the failure of the Irish potato crop. By 15 October 1845 the Royal Irish Constabulary reported to the British administration that potatoes were indeed rotting and by the end of the year it was obvious that the blight was spreading around Ireland.

RELIEF MEASURES

In November 1845 Daniel O'Connell appealed to the Lord Lieutenant to suspend the export of grain from Ireland, and that the ports be opened to the free import of rice and Indian corn from British colonies. The Irish ports were subject to the special provisions of the Corn Laws, which were designed to fix the price of local grain at the highest possible level and to keep out other, cheaper grain until the entire British crop had been sold at that artificially pegged price. O'Connell also suggested that paid labour be provided on public works for those whose potato crop had failed.

The Tories and the Whigs in the British House of Commons were unsympathetic and considered an Irish catastrophe inevitable - the result of Irish 'indolence'. Some saw the Famine a visitation upon the Irish themselves, a corrective to their over-breeding, and their over-dependence on the potato. The Victorian policy of laissez-faire ensured a 'free market' and encouraged people to stand on their own two feet, without government interference. Prime Minister Robert Peel considered the repeal of the Corn Laws, but his colleagues in parliament argued that if foreign grain was admitted freely into Britain and Ireland, the price would collapse, and millions of workers would suffer.

SIR ROBERT PEEL

In November 1845 Peel arranged the purchase of £100,000 worth of Indian corn (yellow maize) from America, in the hope of preventing some of the distress in Ireland. As there was no existing British trade in maize, the Corn Laws did not affect it. His intentions were good, but Indian corn was very difficult to mill, and hunger drove some people to eat it raw, which caused health problems. Unpopular at first, the demand for 'Peel's Brimstone' increased as the famine worsened.

Peel then created a Relief Commission, the first solution proposed to deal with the famine. The Commission was to organise and distribute aid to Ireland. Assistant Secretary to the Treasury, Charles Trevelyan was put in charge of Irish Famine Relief, but was unhappy with the idea of giving famine aid and unsympathetic to its Irish victims whom he considered 'idle' and 'feckless'.

PUBLIC WORKS

As a means of relieving local poverty, the Relief Commissioners began to discuss ideas for relief works. In this way men, women and children could earn money to buy food. The public works schemes included breaking stones, laying roadways and carrying out other heavy manual labour. Employment on the schemes, particularly in the positions of 'ganger' and 'foreman' was highly sought after.

The Treasury funded some of the relief work schemes through the local county administrations, while the Board of Works ran other relief schemes. Established in 1831, the Board of Works looked after roads, bridges, harbours and fisheries.

In August 1846 all hope of a short-lived famine disappeared. The new crop was infected with blight and the total yield of potatoes was enough to feed the population for just one month. Afraid the Irish were becoming too dependent on government aid, Lord John Russel's new Whig government decided to close down the relief committees. Trevalyen ordered the closure of the public works but the Board of Works refused.

Soup kitchens were set up in 1846. These were organised by government agencies as well as private organisations and religious groups such as the Quakers. By the end of 1846, newspapers were beginning to publish horrific accounts of hunger and death. Travellers came to Ireland to bring charity and brought away vivid descriptions of conditions that seemed impossible in a civilised country in the western world.

Magazines such as the Illustrated London News sent over artists who brought back realistic drawings of hunger, misery and deprivation. The starving people dug in the ground for ferns and dandelions. They then boiled, roasted or crushed them with meal to make bread. Children searched the woods for nuts and berries. They ate the fruit of trees - holly, beech, crab-apple and laurel. They also ate the leaves and barks of trees.

BLACK '47

The winter of 1846-7 was intensely cold and the people did not have the energy to cut turf. Relief works were often suspended when it became too cold to work. The Board of Works began to run out of money and Trevelyan began the Outdoor Relief system to distribute food.

Because the poor wore only filthy, lice-infested rags conditions were perfect for the spread of disease. Typhus and relapsing fever were the most common

diseases afflicting the weakened population. Both were transmitted by the body louse and spread as starving masses congregated in urban centres searching for food. The overcrowding on the public works also helped to spread these diseases. Thousands were buried in unmarked lonely graves. There was no legal register for deaths and relief committees found it impossible to estimate the numbers.

The Blight returned to the potato crop again in 1848. The Poor Law Unions ran out of funds and the Quakers were unable to re-establish soup kitchens as their resources had run out. The government allowed the policy of grain export to continue, provoking riots in Irish ports where ships were being loaded with food. As disease and hunger ravaged the country, the workhouses were overrun with desperate people trying to escape the horrors outside. By the end of the year cholera had appeared and soon reached epidemic proportions.

EVICTIONS

During the early stages of the Famine, landlords often granted abatements of rent - forgave arrears or allowed reduced payments. However, by the end of 1847, when Public Work Schemes and other aid was withdrawn, the cost of famine relief was passed to the Irish landlords. Forced to pay the poor law rate for those whose holdings were valued at under £4, and to collect rent from a starving populace, landlords began to evict tenants from their small plots of land and re-let the properties in bigger plots to people with more money.

It is estimated that over 100,000 families (approximately half a million people) were evicted throughout Ireland during the Famine years. In most cases their houses were demolished to prevent re-habitation. Some were forced into workhouses, some managed to emigrate but many others died.

EMIGRATION

Some landlords assisted their tenants with fares for emigration. One-quarter of a million people left Ireland in 1847 and 200,000 or more every year for the next five years. In 1851 three quarters of a million Irish emigrants were living in Britain – mainly in the growing industrial cities – and particularly in Liverpool (22 per cent of that city's population), Glasgow (15 per cent) and Manchester (13 per cent). As many as 108,000 Irish lived in London. On the other side of the Atlantic, New York in 1900 was second only to Dublin in the number of Irish residents. By the 1890s the proportion of Irish-born people living abroad moved close to 40 per cent. Well over five million emigrated to Canada, the US and Australia between 1845 and 1901.

RECOVERY

The potato harvest of 1849 brought a dramatic improvement. By 1850 the worst of the Famine was over and the potato crop began to recover, though there were minor cases of blight over the years and many localised famines. By the time the Famine ended Ireland had lost over two million people out of a population of over eight million. It is thought about one-and-a-half million people died of fever, starvation and cold during the years 1845-52.