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The Irish Famine

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A million people are said to have died of hunger in Ireland in the late 1840s, on the doorstep of the world's richest nation. Ideology helped the ruling class avoid grappling with the problem of mass starvation. Jim Donnelly describes how.

The Irish catastrophe

The Great Famine in Ireland began as a natural catastrophe of extraordinary magnitude, but its effects were severely worsened by the actions and inactions of the Whig government, headed by Lord John Russell in the crucial years from 1846 to 1852.

The Irish famine was proportionally more destructive of human life than...the famines of modern times.

Altogether, about a million people in Ireland are reliably estimated to have died of starvation and epidemic disease between 1846 and 1851, and some two million emigrated in a period of a little more than a decade (1845-55). Comparison with other modern and contemporary famines establishes beyond any doubt that the Irish famine of the late 1840s, which killed nearly one-eighth of the entire population, was proportionally much more destructive of human life than the vast majority of famines in modern times.

In most famines in the contemporary world, only a small fraction of the population of a given country or region is exposed to the dangers of death from starvation or infectious diseases, and then typically for only one or two seasons. But in the Irish famine of the late 1840s, successive blasts of potato blight - or to give it its proper name, the fungus *Phytophthora infestans* - robbed more than one-third of the population of their usual means of subsistence for four or five years in a row.

An artificial famine?

This was not an artificial famine as the traditional Irish nationalist interpretation has long maintained - not at any rate at the start. The original gross deficiency of food was real. In 1846 and successive years blight destroyed the crop that had previously provided approximately 60 per cent of the nation's food needs. The food gap created by the loss of the potato in the late 1840s was so enormous that it could not have been filled, even if all the Irish grain exported in those years had been retained in the country. In fact, far more grain entered Ireland from abroad in the late 1840s than was exported-probably almost three times as much grain and meal came in as went out.

Why didn't the British government do much more to mitigate the effects of the ...food gap?

Thus there was an artificial famine in Ireland for a good portion of the late 1840s as grain imports steeply increased. There existed - after 1847, at least - an absolute sufficiency of food



Bridget O'Donnell - evicted from her cottage with her children ©

that could have prevented mass starvation, if it had been properly distributed so as to reach the smallholders and labourers of the west and the south of Ireland.

Why, then, was an artificial famine permitted to occur after 1847, and why didn't the British government do much more to mitigate the effects of the enormous initial food gap of 1846-47? In many contemporary famines a variety of adverse conditions make it difficult or impossible to deliver adequate supplies of food to those in greatest need. Such conditions include warfare and brigandage, remoteness from centres of wealth and relief, poor communications, and weak or corrupt administrative structures. Ireland, however, was not generally afflicted with such adversities.

Ideological resistance

Though it had a rich history of agrarian violence, the country was at peace. In addition, its system of communications (roads and canals) had vastly improved in the previous half-century, the Victorian state had a substantial and growing bureaucracy (it generated an army of 12,000 officials in Ireland for a short time in 1847), and Ireland lay at the doorstep of what was then the world's wealthiest nation. Why, then, was it not better able to deal with the problems caused by the failure of its potato crop?



Soup kitchen vat, Connemara, Galway ©

Prevailing ideologies...militated against heavy and sustained relief.

In answering this question, it is instructive to contrast the role of ideology in the general response to famines today with the part played by ideology in response to the Great Famine in Ireland. Today, wealthier countries and international organisations provide disaster assistance (though, alas, often not nearly enough) as a matter of humanitarian conviction and perceived self-interest. But in Britain in the late 1840s, prevailing ideologies among the political élite and the middle classes strongly militated against heavy and sustained relief.

Political inertia

Before examining this issue of ideology in the 1840s and 1850s, however, we should review what the British government might have done to mitigate the natural catastrophe arising from repeated ravages of potato blight..



A child digs for potatoes with her bare hands ©

First, the government might have prohibited the export of grain from Ireland, especially during the winter of 1846-47 and early in the following spring, when there was little food in the country and before large supplies of foreign grain began to arrive. Once there was sufficient food in the country (imported Indian corn or maize), from perhaps the beginning of 1848, the government could have taken steps to ensure that this imported food was distributed to those in greatest need. Second, the government could have continued its so-called

soup-kitchen scheme for a much longer time. It was in effect for only about six months, from March to September 1847. As many as three million people were fed daily at the peak of this scheme in July 1847. The scheme was remarkably inexpensive and effective. It should not have been dismantled after only six months and in spite of the enormous harvest deficiency of 1847.

Third, the wages that the government paid on its vast but short-lived public works in the winter of 1846-47 needed to be much higher if those toiling on the public works were going to be able to afford the greatly inflated price of food. Fourth, the poor-law system of providing relief, either within workhouses or outside them, a system that served as virtually the only form of public assistance from the autumn of 1847 onwards, needed to be much less restrictive. All sorts of obstacles were placed in the way, or allowed to stand in the way, of generous relief to those in need of food. This was done in a horribly misguided effort to keep expenses down and to promote greater self-reliance and self-exertion among the Irish poor.

Fifth, the government might have done something to restrain the ruthless mass eviction of families from their homes, as landlords sought to rid their estates of pauperized farmers and labourers. Altogether, perhaps as many as 500,000 people were evicted in the years from 1846 to 1854. The government might also have provided free passages and other assistance in support of emigration to North America - for those whose personal means made this kind of escape impossible.

Last, and above all, the British government should have been willing to treat the famine crisis in Ireland as an imperial responsibility and to bear the costs of relief after the summer of 1847. Instead, in an atmosphere of rising 'famine fatigue' in Britain, Ireland at that point and for the remainder of the famine was thrown back essentially on its own woefully inadequate resources.

Doctrines of inaction

What, then, were the ideologies that held the British political élite and the middle classes in their grip, and largely determined the decisions not



Ruined cottage on the site of a famine eviction, Connemara, Galway ©

to adopt the possible relief measures outlined above? There were three in particular-the economic doctrines of laissez-faire, the Protestant evangelical belief in divine Providence, and the deep-dyed ethnic prejudice against the Catholic Irish to which historians have recently given the name of 'moralism'.

The idea of feeding ...a large proportion of the Irish population violated ...the Whig's cherished notions.

Laissez-faire, the reigning economic orthodoxy of the day, held that there should be as little government interference with the economy as possible. Under this doctrine, stopping the export of Irish grain was an unacceptable policy alternative, and it was therefore firmly rejected in London, though there were some British relief officials in Ireland who gave contrary advice.

The influence of the doctrine of laissez-faire may also be seen in two other decisions. The first was the decision to terminate the soup-kitchen scheme in September 1847 after only six months of operation. The idea of feeding directly a large proportion of the Irish population violated all of the Whigs' cherished notions of how government and society should function. The other decision was the refusal of the government to undertake any large scheme of assisted emigration. The Irish viceroy actually proposed in this fashion to sweep the western province of Connacht clean of as many as 400,000 pauper smallholders too poor to emigrate on their own. But the majority of Whig cabinet ministers saw little need to spend public money accelerating a process that was already going on 'privately' at a great rate.

An act of Providence?

Recent historians of the famine, while not neglecting the baleful role of the doctrine of laissez-faire, have been inclined to stress the



The Irish were portrayed as freeloaders in the British press of the time ©

potent parts played by two other ideologies of the time: those of 'providentialism' and 'moralism'. There was a very widespread belief among members of the British upper and middle classes that the famine was a divine judgment—an act of Providence—against the kind of Irish agrarian regime that was believed to have given rise to the famine. The Irish system of agriculture was perceived in Britain to be riddled with inefficiency and abuse. According to British policy-makers at the time, the workings of divine Providence were disclosed in the unfettered operations of the market economy, and therefore it was positively evil to interfere with its proper functioning.

This mentality of Trevelyan's was influential in persuading the government to do nothing...

A leading exponent of this providentialist perspective was Sir Charles Trevelyan, the British civil servant chiefly responsible for administering Irish relief policy throughout the famine years. In his book *The Irish Crisis*, published in 1848, Trevelyan described the famine as 'a direct stroke of an all-wise and all-merciful Providence', one which laid bare 'the deep and inveterate root of social evil'. The famine, he declared, was 'the sharp but effectual remedy by which the cure is likely to be effected... God grant that the generation to which this great opportunity has been offered may rightly perform its part...' This mentality of Trevelyan's was influential in persuading the government to do nothing to restrain mass evictions - and this had the obvious effect of radically restructuring Irish rural society along the lines of the capitalistic model ardently preferred by British policy-makers.

Finally, we come to 'moralism'-the notion that the fundamental defects from which the Irish suffered were moral rather than financial. Educated Britons of this era saw serious defects in the Irish 'national character'-disorder or violence, filth, laziness, and worst of all, a lack of self-reliance. This amounted to a kind of racial or cultural stereotyping. The Irish had to be taught to stand on their own feet and to unlearn their dependence on government.

'Moralism' was strikingly evident in the various tests of destitution that were associated with the administration of the poor law. Thus labourers on the public works were widely required to perform task labour, with their wages measured by the amount of their work, rather than being paid a fixed daily wage. Similarly, there was the requirement that in order to be eligible for public assistance, those in distress must be willing to enter a workhouse and to submit to its harsh disciplines—such as endless eight-hour days of breaking stones or performing some other equally disagreeable labour. Such work was motivated by the notion that the perceived Irish national characteristic of sloth could be eradicated or at least reduced.

Famine fatigue

This set of ethnic prejudices, which have now been abundantly documented, had the general effect of prompting British ministers, civil servants, and politicians to view and to treat the Catholic Irish as something less than fully human. Such prejudices encouraged the spread of 'famine fatigue' in Britain at an early stage, and they dulled or even extinguished the active sympathies that might have sustained political will - the will to combat the gross oppression



A ruined cottage - the site of a famine eviction ©

of mass evictions, to alleviate the immense suffering associated with reliance on the poor-law system, and to grapple with the moral indefensibility of mass death in the midst of an absolute sufficiency of food.

It seems doubtful that the British governing classes learned much from their Irish experience.

The Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has rightly insisted that famine is almost always a preventable occurrence if only the government in question has the political will to prevent it. This dictum applies as much to Ireland in the late 1840s as Sen meant it to apply to India a century later. Just as in the case of the Bengali victims of famine in the early 1940s, so too with those of the Great Famine in Ireland, the mass death of enormous multitudes of people stemmed partly from their perceived status as the cultural and social inferiors of those who governed them. This status, imposed by British rulers on their colonial subjects, made their plight seem much less urgent in Britain and caused it to be misperceived.

It seems doubtful that the British governing classes learned much from their Irish experience in the late 1840s. In British India, during the years 1876-79, famine claimed the lives of between six and ten million people. And between 1896 and 1902, an almost certainly even higher toll from starvation and disease (the estimates range from six to nineteen million) was recorded there, just as the reign of Victoria, the Empress-Queen, came to its inglorious close.

Find out more

Books

The Great Irish Potato Famine by James Donnelly (Sutton Publishing, 2002)

Places to visit

Pay a visit to the **Irish Labour History Museum** - articles, journals and resources relating to past and current history of Ireland's workers. Beggars Bush Barracks, Haddington Rd, Dublin 4 Tel: 00 353 1 668 1071