

LEVELED BOOK • Y

The Great Hunger



Written by Cynthia Kennedy Henzel
Illustrated by Gary Undercuffler

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United Kingdom and Ireland Today



0
120
240 Kilometers
240 Miles

United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland During the Great Hunger



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Liffey River Bridge, a popular tourist area of Dublin, Ireland

The Emerald Isle

Ireland, known as the Emerald Isle, is a beautiful island off northwestern Europe with rolling green hills, ancient castles, and windy shores. It has a colorful history and is famous for music, literature, and folklore. Some think of it as a magical land of elves, leprechauns, and faeries.

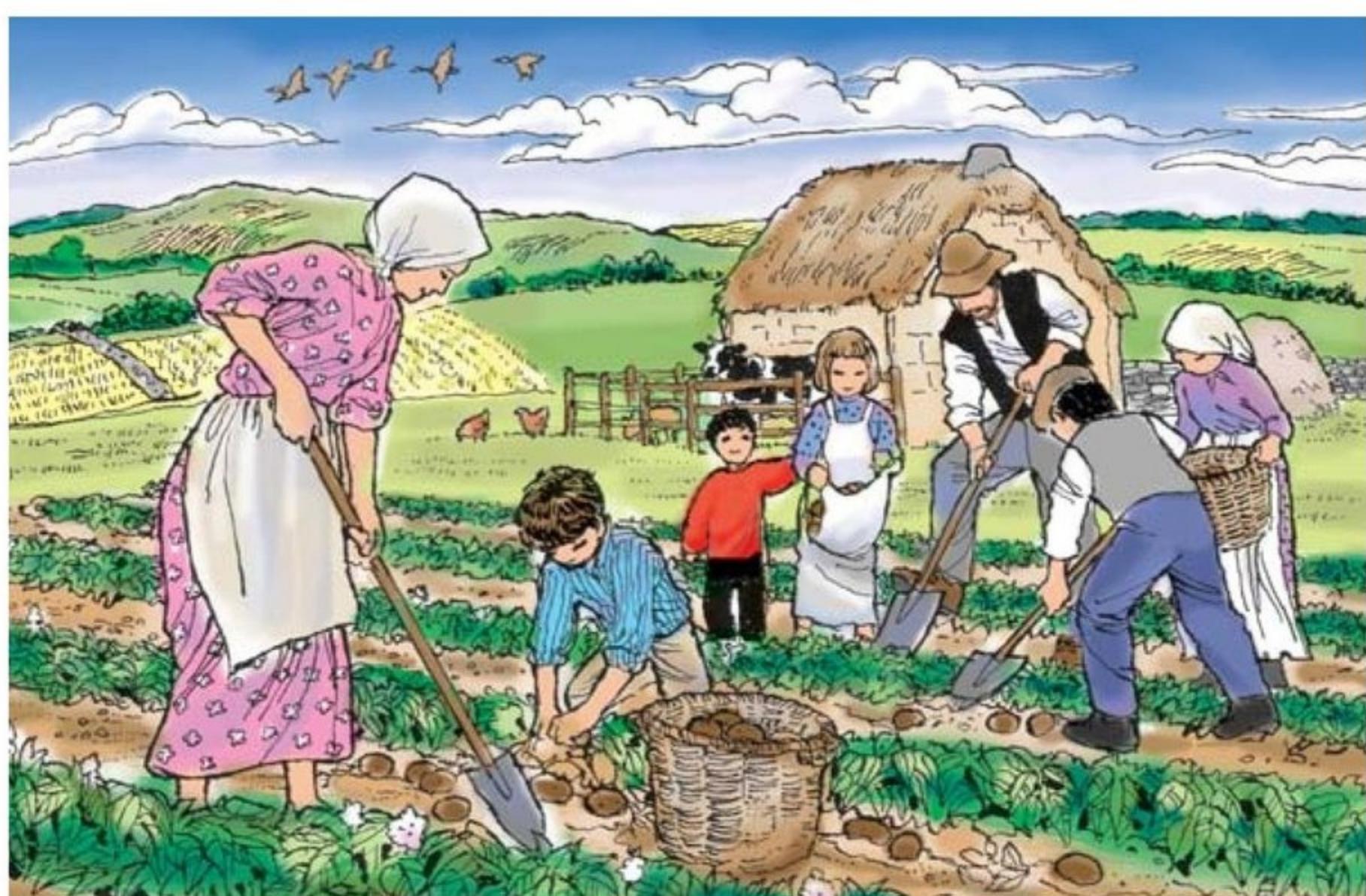
Beyond its natural beauty, Ireland is a hardworking country whose economic health matches that of most of Western Europe. Tourism remains a prime industry. Over six million people travel to Ireland each year to see the beautiful countryside and places of historical interest.

It hasn't always been that way, however.

Hard Times

Between 1800 and 1840, Ireland's population increased by over 50%, to 8.5 million people. There was little industry to support so many people. While the island had been ruled by Britain for over a century and was a part of the United Kingdom, the Irish people did not have equal rights with the people of Britain. Most could not vote or hold public office, and few owned land.

Unlike Britain, Ireland did not have many factories where people could work. Most people farmed land that they leased from wealthy **landlords** who lived in Britain. Many farms were only the size of a few acres. **Tenant** farmers grew wheat or other grains to pay the rent, and they grew potatoes to feed their families.



A Horrible Discovery

Farmers made a horrible discovery as they went to their fields on a foggy, fall day in 1845. The smell of **decay** filled the air, and the leaves of the potato plants were black and wilted. The farmers dug desperately beneath the plants, only to discover that the potatoes were mushy.

Something had happened during the night. Some thought it was the unusually wet, cool weather that had killed the potatoes. Others claimed it must have been tribes of warring faeries that had destroyed the crop. Some British people of the Protestant faith thought it was God's punishment on the Irish people for their Catholic faith.



A mushy, blackened potato destroyed by a potato blight

Voyage of the Potato

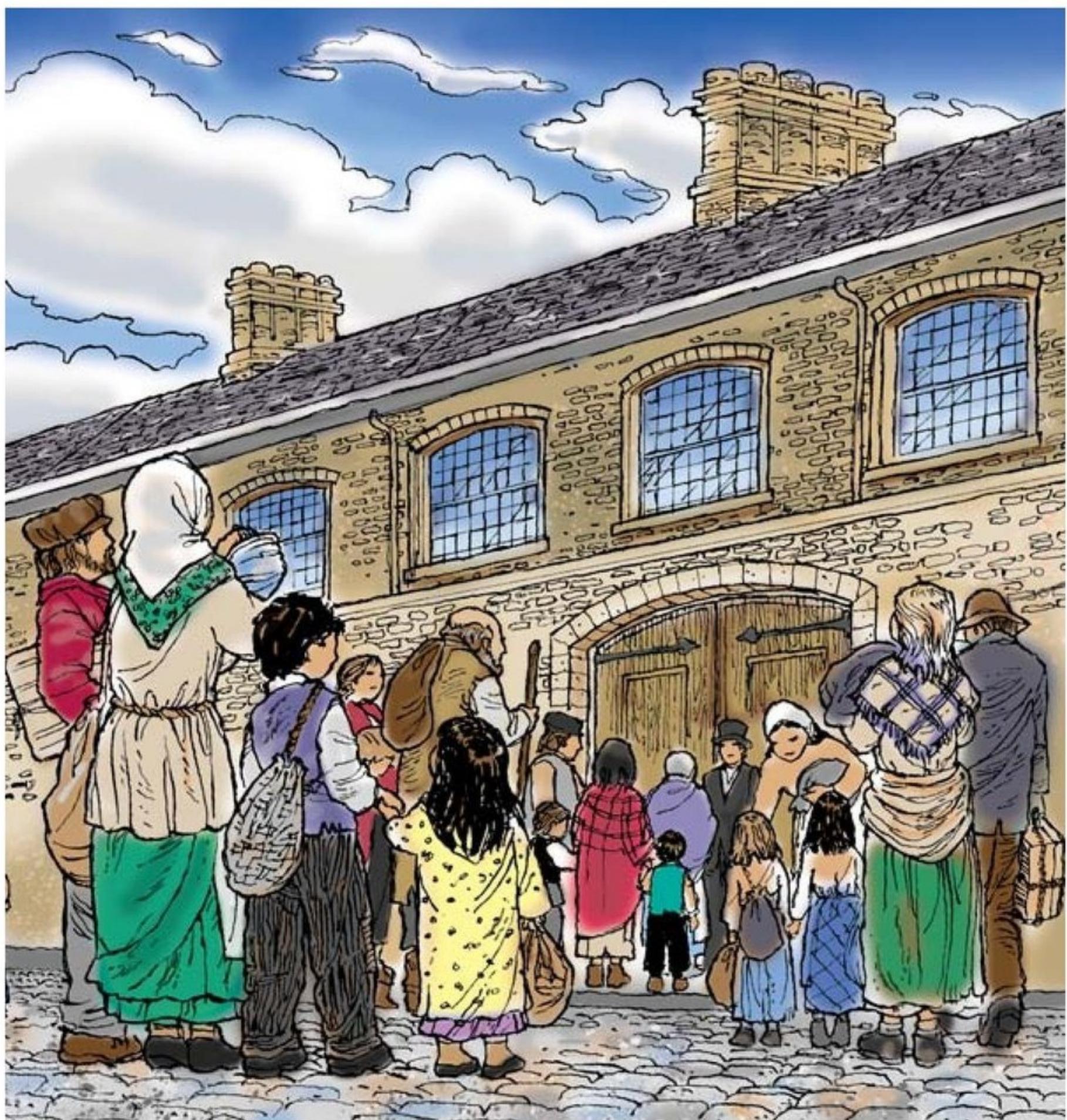
People often associate potatoes with Ireland, but the plant was originally grown in South America. The Spanish brought potatoes to Europe in the 1500s.

People depended on the potato crop for food; three million Irish people ate almost nothing but potatoes. A farmer with an acre of land could grow enough potatoes to feed his family. Potatoes, which could be stored all winter, provided a nutritious diet when eaten with milk, cabbage, and fish. Now a third of the crop rotted in the ground, and struggling families worried about how they would survive until spring.



First Winter

The landlords took the farmers' grain as payment for rent. Without potatoes, families had little to eat. They sold their livestock, furniture, and clothes to buy food. The government opened large **workhouses** where desperate families could live in exchange for work. No one wanted to go to a workhouse for help. Families worked long hours for a ragged bed and a little food, and no one could leave without permission.



The government bought Indian corn from America to help feed the hungry population, but people did not have a way to grind the hard, dry kernels into cornmeal, and some got sick from eating poorly cooked corn. Food got more expensive, and people became desperate to find a way to earn money.

The government started public works projects, such as building roads and bridges to provide jobs. The work was hard, and the pay was low. It took nearly five days of work to buy cornmeal to feed a family of six for three days. Still, men walked many miles and stood in long lines to get any work they could find.



Hope, Disaster, and Relief

Finally the long winter ended, and farmers eagerly waited for the new potato crop. Disaster struck again in August, when three-fourths of the crop failed. Desperate families had nothing left to sell, the workhouses were crowded, and a long winter with no food loomed ahead.

Families like ten-year-old Michael O’Kane’s had no choice but to go to the workhouse because his father, a farm laborer, could find no work. Michael, his parents, two brothers, and three sisters walked hours to the workhouse from Killylea (kih-lee-LAY) Village in September of 1847. He had to live with the boys and men in a separate area away from his mother and sisters. He went to school in the morning and then whitewashed walls or cleaned pigpens all afternoon. His youngest sister, Bridget, died over the winter.

Diseases spread easily, especially in the workhouses. Even more people died of typhus and cholera than died of **starvation**.

Despite the obvious need, many officials and landowners in Britain ignored all pleas for help or relief plans. Grain was exported to other countries rather than kept to help Irish farmers.

Other people wanted to help. The British Relief Association and the Society of Friends (Quakers) raised money for relief. Irish **immigrants** in America sent money to help family and friends. Soup kitchens opened, and each day up to three million men, women, and children stood outside in long lines for a bowl of soup and a piece of bread. It was not nearly enough.



Going to America

Every penny a family had was spent for food, so there was nothing left to pay the overdue rent on their farm.

Some landlords gave money or grain to their starving tenants, but it was only a temporary help. Other landowners evicted families from their homes, then tore down or burned the empty houses to avoid paying taxes on them.

Driven from their country by hopeless conditions, hundreds of thousands of Irish people crowded onto ships bound for the United States or Canada, leaving their Irish **homeland** forever.



It was a difficult journey because a ship took forty days to cross the Atlantic Ocean, even when the weather was good. Many of the ships carrying the Irish **emigrants** were called “coffin” ships. Passengers were packed below deck, where disease spread in the overcrowded, filthy conditions. There often was not enough food, water, or blankets for the passengers. Many died, and many of those who survived arrived in America sick and weak.

Ireland’s Potato Blight and Famine

1800 to 1840s - POPULATION INCREASE

Ireland’s population soars by 50% between 1800 and 1840, but employment remains limited. Struggling rural families depend on potatoes as their main food source.

1845 - FIRST BLIGHT REPORTED IN AUGUST

By September, the potato blight has spread from southern Britain, Scotland, Belgium, and Holland to Ireland.

1846 - RELIEF EFFORTS BEGIN

Workhouses are expanded, and government work projects begin. Three-fourths of the year’s potato crop is lost that fall.

1847 - MASS EVICTIONS BEGIN

Soup kitchens feed over 3 million people a day. Landlords begin to evict tenant farmers and burn homes to avoid paying taxes.

1848 to 1849 - WORKHOUSES ARE FULL - DISEASE SPREADS

Reports of cholera increase, especially in overcrowded, filthy workhouses. Two-thirds of the 1849 potato crop is lost.

1852 - BLIGHT GRADUALLY ENDS

By 1852, the potato blight has ended. Over one million people have died, and another million have emigrated.

Aftermath

The potato **blight** was over by 1852, but Ireland was changed forever. A million people had died, and over a million had emigrated.

Many people who stayed in Ireland were homeless and jobless. The landlords could not make money, so they sold the land for other purposes or simply abandoned it rather than pay high taxes.

With no land and no jobs, many Irish people continued to emigrate over the next decades. By 1861, the population of Ireland had dropped from over 8.5 million to 5 million; more than one in three people were gone. Ten years later, the population had dropped even further to 4.5 million.

Many Irish people blamed Britain, the most powerful country in the world at that time, for not helping more. This bitterness would help fuel the revolution that finally split Ireland into two countries in 1922.

The Two Irelands

Since 1922, the island of Ireland has been divided into two countries. The independent Republic of Ireland is in the south. Northern Ireland is still part of the United Kingdom.

Conclusion

Scientists eventually discovered that the potato plants died of a disease called *late potato blight*, which was caused by the funguslike organism *Phytophthora infestans*. Spores from the organism were blown by wind and washed into the soil by rain.

Even after the Great Hunger, as the **famine** was called in Ireland, Irish immigration to the United States continued. Over five million people arrived between 1850 and 1920. Some ran for political office, and others started businesses. Famous Americans, including President John F. Kennedy and inventor Henry Ford, had ancestors who came to America during the famine.

Today, forty million Americans proudly claim Irish roots, celebrate its folk traditions and holidays, and continue to popularize Irish literature, music, and film as an established part of world culture.

The statue of Annie Moore and her brothers at Cobh Harbor, Ireland, has come to represent all of the famine emigrants who left Ireland in search of a better life.



Glossary

blight (<i>n.</i>)	a disease that damages or destroys plants (p. 14)
decay (<i>n.</i>)	the process or state of rotting or decomposing (p. 6)
emigrants (<i>n.</i>)	people who move away from one country or region to settle in another (p. 13)
famine (<i>n.</i>)	a major food shortage in a large area (p. 15)
homeland (<i>n.</i>)	the region or country where a person is born (p. 12)
immigrants (<i>n.</i>)	people who come to live in a new country, especially for the purpose of settling there (p. 11)
Ireland (<i>n.</i>)	an island in northwestern Europe that contains the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland (p. 4)
landlords (<i>n.</i>)	people who rent land, an apartment, or a building to tenants (p. 5)
population (<i>n.</i>)	all the members of one species in a particular area (p. 5)
starvation (<i>n.</i>)	a state of extreme hunger or dying because of a lack of food (p. 10)
tenant (<i>n.</i>)	a person who rents land, an apartment, or a building from a landlord (p. 5)
workhouses (<i>n.</i>)	places where people who are poor or dependent live and work in exchange for shelter and food (p. 8)

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Front cover: An abandoned hill farm in the scenic Mourne Mountains area of County Down in Northern Ireland

Back cover: Children in Celtic costumes perform traditional Irish dances at a town fair in Birr, Offaly, Republic of Ireland.

Title page: Lismore Castle in Lismore, County Waterford, Ireland, was built as an abbey in the seventh century. It was once owned by Sir Walter Raleigh.

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Level Y Leveled Book
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