

History



The Village of Killard in Kilrush Union, County Clare

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AN GORTA MOR: THE REASON WHY

“An Gorta Mor”, “The Great Hunger”, “The Irish Potato Famine” are all names to describe what was perhaps the most decisive event in the history of Ireland and an event that changed the world. It is in fact two stories: “The How” and “The Why”. To understand fully the famine; both must be told.

“The How” is relatively straightforward. Phytophthora Infestans, an air carried fungus was identified in Mexico in 1843. From there it traveled to the United States and then to Europe, likely as exported seed or as ships stores used to feed sailors. In 1845 it reached Ireland, a country of 8 Million people, the vast majority of whom lived almost exclusively on the potato (the potato is almost a perfect food containing almost all the nutrients a person needs) and on one particular variety of potato, “The Lumper”, that was particularly susceptible to the blight. Literally overnight healthy potato fields would be turned into blighted, stinking desolation with the potatoes themselves turned into black inedible mush. Famine quickly spread, reaching its peak in 1847, Black ‘47, to be soon followed by disease. In the six famine years, the population of Ireland was reduced from 8 million to 6 million people, a million believed to have died and a million to have emigrated.

This is the story as told, if it is told at all, in schools. However, the Famine was not “an ecological disaster” or the result of

“overreliance on one food source.” The real story is the “Why?” From the Act of Union, where the English Parliament took direct control of the governing of Ireland in 1800, to the outbreak of the Famine 150 committees and commissions had made reports on the precarious state of Ireland, but the government had done nothing. The Penal Laws, particularly “The Act to prevent the further Growth of Popery”, sometime called The Popery or Gavelkind Act, had been successful in driving Irish Catholics onto smaller plots of land, land where only potatoes could grow, for decades. Protective acts and tariffs stunted any diversity in the Irish economy to the benefit of English industry.

In 1847, the height of the famine the agricultural produce of Ireland was valued in the currency of the time at £44,958,120. Despite its local population starving, Ireland was a food exporter, which makes it “unique” among famines. France, Belgium, Holland, Germany and Russia all suffered from the same potato blight as was effecting Ireland in 1847, but the scope of human suffering was much less because their governments banned food exports, an action which Britain failed to take. The British “relief efforts” were directed by Charles Trevelyan, Assistant Secretary of the Treasury, a man whose chief fear that relief would make the Irish “habitually dependent” on the British Government and “paralyze all private enterprise”. In spite of the fact that Ireland was governed by the British Parliament, Trevelyan stated that “Irish property must pay for Irish poverty”, the same “Irish property” that the British government had created and whose Penal

laws had been successful in creating a divisiveness toward the native Irish. As such, the British relief efforts under his direction were invariably halting and inadequate. At the same time Trevelyan failed to take responsibility for the suffering and deaths in Ireland, claiming it was “Providence”

From 3,000 miles away. Bishop John Hughes’s of New York saw the situation in Ireland more clearly from his pulpit than the members of parliament from their benches in Westminster, or indeed modern day revisionists ; “They call it God’s famine! No!-No! God’s famine is known by the general scarcity of food...There is no general scarcity...But political economy.”

Did you Know that....

- The Popery or Gavelkind Act required that when a Catholic died, his estate was divided equally among his sons, unless one of the sons converted to Protestantism, in which case he could claim the entire estate and disinherit his family.
- The Ottoman Sultan attempted to donate £10,000 to famine relief. The offer was refused by the British government as Queen Victoria had donated only £2,000. The Sultan did send several shiploads of food, despite British government interference.
- British Prime Minister Peel purchased cheap American Indian Corn, maize, to be shipped to Ireland. Unfortunately, there were no facilities in Ireland to grind the finer Indian Corn. The improperly processed corn was almost impossible to digest and became known as “Peel’s Brimstone”
- When the “Great Fire” destroyed London in 1666, Ireland sent to England 20,000 cattle whose value far exceed the total relief sent to Ireland from England and Europe.
- One of the most cynical acts of the famine was the ‘Quarter Acre Act’ or “Gregory Clause” which deemed that anyone with more than a quarter acre of land was ineligible for aid.