Black '47: Peak of Great Irish Famine from 1845 to 1852 and Beyond
Rudy Ray Seward

Saturday, 21 October 2017
1:00-2:30pm
UNT New College at Frisco - Room 161
Keywords associated with Great Famine or Great Hunger (Irish: an Gorta Mór)

- Potato
- Mass mortality
- Fever/Infectious diseases
- Black ‘47
- Evictions/Clearances
- Emigration
- Official neglect
Provinces of Ireland

• Ireland has historically been divided into four provinces:

• Connacht (northwest), Leinster (southeast), Munster (southwest) and Ulster (northeast).

• Serve no administrative or political purposes, but function as historical and cultural entities.
Origins of the Irish Famine

British Colonialism since the 12th century

- 1689 King James (Catholic) defeated by King William (Protestant)
- “Protestant Ascendancy” established in Ireland
- Most land confiscated and given to 10,000 Protestant families loyal to the British Crown
- Most Catholics reduced to poor tenant farmers
Origins of the Irish Famine

The Penal Laws passed in 1690s

Illegal for Catholics To:

- Purchase land
- Vote or hold office
- Engage in certain trades
- Carry guns
- Own a horse worth more than £5

Catholic Church Forced Underground
Origins of the Irish Famine
Results of the Penal Laws and British Colonialism

% of land owned by the Irish people
• 1641 – 88%
• 1702 – 39%
• 1841 – 10%

Population explosion
• 1800 – 5 million
• 1845 – 8.5 million
Origins of the Irish Famine

Results of the Penal Laws and British Colonialism

• Impoverished peasantry

• Small plots of land
  – Ex: one farm in County Clare
    1793  1 tenant
    1845  96 tenants
  – Ex: County Mayo in 1841
    73% lived on 1-5 acres

• Dependence on the potato
Origins of the Irish Famine

- Many cottiers held land via joint tenancy:
  - land leased to one or two tenants who divided up amongst 20-30 others even whole villages
- High seasonal unemployment
- Poverty trap
- Too short of capital to be productive at home and too poor to emigrate to be productive elsewhere
Survived Despite Impoverishment

• Healthier than lack of wealth would predict due to:
  • Potato provided adequate nutrition and
  • Access to bog peat

• These mitigated the discomforts of
  • secondhand hand-me-downs cloths, etc.
  • single room thatched cabins with no glass windows, mud floors, and walls only height of human.
Potato Origins

• Not Irish

• Ancient South American Indians in Andes ascertained how to produce extremely high yields of potatoes on small plots of land

• By 16th Century Spanish conquest many of 3,000 types brought back to Europe

• Compared to grains:
  • Needed less labor, had shorter growing period, and immediate consumption as no processing required.
Peasants at first Despised Potato

- Associated with leprosy (misshapen)
- Considered devil’s food by some (not in Bible)
- Thought poisonous
- Caused flatulence.

- But greater reliability relative to grain especially in acidic soil and cool damp temperate climate in Ireland.

- Provided a consistent supply of nutritious and cheap food.
Irish Potato Origins: Legends

• Sir Walter Raleigh introduced in 16\textsuperscript{th} century on way back from Caribbean.

• Irish peasant discovered in galley of Spanish Armada ship washed up on beaches in 1588 after Armada attacked by English navy and dispersed by great storm.

• Ireland first to make enthusiastic conversion to potato farming; starting in southwest.

• Widespread fanatic devotion by end of 1600s.
Expansion of Potato Cultivation

• Due to landless laborers, renting tiny plots from English landowners (interested only in raising cattle or producing grain for market).

• A single acre of potatoes (75% U.S. football field) and the milk of a single cow (drink, butter, & cheese) enough to feed whole family a monotonous but nutritionally adequate diet.

• Often even poor families grew enough extra potatoes to feed a pig they could sell for cash.
Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 1776

- One of first defenders & predicted accurately:
  - Increases in cultivation would increase production, population, and land value (based Irish observations as only nation where widely cultivated at the time)
  - “Strongest men and the most beautiful women perhaps in the British dominions, are said to be, the greater part of them, from the lowest rank of people in Ireland, who are generally fed from this root” (based on observations of prostitutes and laborers imported from Ireland to London)
High nutritional value

- By 1840 the average Irish male in bottom 1/3 of SES population consumed 10 to 12 lbs. per day
- New source of vitamin C during long winters without fresh vegetables
Population expanded

• 3.2 million in 1754
• 8.2 or 8.5 million by 1845
• If add 1.75 million emigrants to New World, Irish population effectively tripled since 1754
• Increases led to notion that potato aphrodisiac (phallic shape & similarity to truffles)
Potato = Famine


• “The wretched people seem to be human potatoes a sort of emanation from ‘the root’ – they have lived by it and will die with it.” Lord Clarendon, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland from 1847.

• Massive and repeated failure of potato crop from 1845 were ‘root’ of great famine.
Potato blight

Phytophthora infestans
WHERE DID IRISH GO WRONG?

• Extreme lack of genetic diversity left the crop vulnerable to disease.
• Lumper potato bland, wet, and poorly resistant to the potato blight.
• First spotted on 20 August 1845 in Dublin's Royal Botanic Gardens, and could spread up to around 50 miles per day.
• Blight quickly turned harvest-ready and newly harvested potatoes into a putrid mush.
The Famine Begins

Crop Loss During the Famine

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Loss</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1845</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1846</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1847</td>
<td>30%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1848</td>
<td>50%</td>
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</table>

* Very few potatoes planted
The British Response to the Famine

*Peel’s Response – Action to Prevent Starvation*

- Prime Minister Robert Peel acted quickly
- Nov. 1845 purchased £100,000 of corn
  - sold at cost to local Relief Committees
  - then sold it to those in need of food.
- Established public works programs
  - provided jobs and wages to thousands.
Success -- no one starved in the first year of crisis (August 1845-August 1846)

Selling Corn in Cork, London Illustrated News, 1846
Food Shortages?

• In 1845, 3,251,907 quarters (8 bushels = 1 quarter) of corn and 257,257 sheep and in 1846, 480,827 swine and 186,483 oxen were exported from Ireland to Britain.

• Huge quantities of food were exported from Ireland to England throughout famine.

• Sufficient food, wool and flax, to feed and clothe not nine but eighteen millions of people.
Food Shortages?

- During first nine months of "Black '47" export of grain-derived alcohol from Ireland to England included:
  - 874,170 gallons of porter
  - 278,658 gallons of Guinness, and
  - 183,392 gallons of whiskey.

- Most shocking export concern butter –
  - 822,681 gallons exported to England from Ireland during nine months of worst 1847.
Mass Mortality
The Famine

“The number of deaths and the multitude of starving people is shocking. People are screaming for food or dying in their houses, whole families are found dead, sometimes the living are lying with the decomposing dead, unable to move. People are dying on the roadsides. The traditions of waking and keening the dead are not being observed as they have been…”

“No pen can describe the distress by which I am surrounded. You may now believe anything which you have hear and read, because what I actually see surpasses what I ever read of past and present calamities.”

-- 1847 letter from representative of the British Association for the Relief of the Extreme Distress in the Remote Parts of Ireland and Scotland
Mass mortality & Fever

- At least a million (estimates up to 2 million) deaths famine related.
- Main cause infectious diseases like typhoid that attacked weakened bodies (also dysentery).
- Young and old most at risk but women withstood marginally better than men.
- Better understanding of transmission of infections would have saved lives of rich and poor.
Skibbereen, County Cork

• One of hardest hit regions.
• Estimates that 8,000 to 10,000 famine victims buried in pits of Abbeystrewery cemetery close to town.
• Available records indicate a drop of population from 58,335 in 1841 to 32,412 in 1861.
• Immortalized (infamous) in folk song ‘Skibbereen’, ‘Dear Old Skibbereen’, 'Farewell to Skibbereen', or 'Revenge For Skibbereen'. 
The Famine

- “walking skeletons”
- green mouths
- cannibalism

“Noth pen nor pencil ever could portray the misery and horror ... to be witnessed in Skibbereen. ...[T]here I saw the dying, the living and the dead, lying indiscriminately upon the same floor, without anything between them and the cold earth, save a few miserable rags upon them.”

-- Irish artist James Mahony, Illustrated London News 1847
Skibbereen Song

• A dialogue wherein a father tells his son about the Irish famine, being evicted from their home, and the need to flee as a result of the Young Irelander Rebellion of 1848.
  • First known publication 1880; attributed to Patrick Carpenter, a poet and native of Skibbereen.

• Current views of landscape, town, cemetery, monuments, etc.
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7unN-aHLnw

• Historical documents and illustrations
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSjmHXzboxk
My son I loved our native land with energy and pride
Until a blight came on the land and sheep and cattle died,
The rent and taxes were to pay, I could not them redeem,
And that’s the cruel reason why I left old Skibbereen.
Weather Exacerbated Famine

- 1846 bad weather delayed planting, then drought delayed growth, followed by heavy rain in late July early August caused spores of fungi to wash in soil and attach bulbs.

- Resorting to public works not new but never for this long nor during harsh winter weather (usually in spring and summer). Many weak and ill-clad died from exposure. 1846 was exceptionally cold but not like 1740-1741 when frost destroyed food.
The British Response to the Famine

The Work Houses and Public Works

- Hard manual labor - 12 hours a day, 6 days per week
- Projects carried on through the winter
- Wages set far below market rates to discourage dependency
- Historian Kerby Miller: Trevelyan “seemed more concerned that charity might demoralize the Irish than that starvation might kill them.”
- Food prices soared
- Still, by December 1846 some 441,000 people were employed on public works.
- March 1847 740,000
163 Workhouses (indoor relief)

• The Irish Poor Relief Law Act of 1838 divided country into 130 unions, financed by land tax.

• Pre-famine few entered but by autumn of 1846, options were emigration, starvation, workhouse (people flooded in) or prison.

• Could not cope with overcrowding, disease, and deaths (Some preferred prison as food was better and regime not as strict).

• Corpses, without coffins or temporary ones, carried on carts day after day to be thrown into mass burial pits in workhouse grounds.
The British Response to the Famine

The Work Houses and Public Works

“140 died in the Skibbereen Workhouse … 3 have died in one day! And Mr. M'Carthy Downing states that ‘they came into the [work]house merely and solely for the purpose of getting a coffin.’” – London Times, 1847
"Mr. Marmion says that work on the public road is even more destructive than fever; for the unfed wretches have not energy enough to keep their blood in circulation, and they drop down from the united effects of cold and hunger -- never to rise again."

-- report in London Times, January 1847
The British Response to the Famine.

Starvation = Soup Kitchens in early 1847

By summer 1847, 3 million Irish (37% of pop.) kept alive on a pound of “stirabout” and a four-ounce slice of bread per day.
The British Response to the Famine

“Black ’47”

"They are going. They are going with a vengeance. Soon a Celt will be as rare in Ireland as a Red Indian on the streets of Manhattan."

-- Times of London, 1847

Illustrated London News - 1847

Holding her dead child, a mother begs for enough money to get a coffin.
Black 47 Peak or End?

Punch, September 16, 1847, celebrates current cheap price of English bread and supposed recovery of Irish potato crop.

Loaf, “Well! old Fellow I’m delighted to see you looking so well– Why they said you had the Aphis Vastator”

The potato responds, “all humbug Sir never was better in my life thank Heaven”
Evictions, Ejectments, Cleaveances

Ejectment: Illustrated London News, December 16, 1848

• “The fearful system of wholesale ejectment, of which we daily hear, and which we daily behold, is a mockery of the eternal laws of God— a flagrant outrage on the principles of nature. Whole districts are cleared. Not a roof-tree is to be seen where the happy cottage of the labourer or the snug homestead of the farmer at no distant day cheered the landscape.”
Cottiers and Laborers

• Held cabin and land on a year-to-year basis
• Rent was often paid in labor
• Land considered unprofitable for any other use
• No incentive to improve land holding, as improvements usually prompted rent increase.
• Famine survival strategies: deception, petty thieving, emigration
### EVICTIONS SOAR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Families Evicted</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1846</td>
<td>3,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1847</td>
<td>6,026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1848</td>
<td>9,657</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1849</td>
<td>16,686</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>19,949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1851</td>
<td>13,197</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

500,000 people were evicted from their homes during the Famine.

“Perhaps in no instance does the oppression of the poor … come before the mind so vividly as when going over the places made desolate by the famine, to see the tumbled cabins, with the poor, hapless inmates … lingering and oftimes wailing in despair, their ragged barefoot little ones clinging about them.” – witness to an eviction, 1848
It’s well I do remember that bleak December day,
The landlord and the sheriff came to drive us all away;
They set the roof on fire with their demon yellow* spleen,
And that’s another reason why I left old Skibbereen.

Your mother too, God rest her soul, fell on the stony ground
She fainted in her anguish seeing desolation ’round
She never rose but passed away from life to immortal dream
She found a quiet grave, me boy, in dear old Skibbereen.

*English in original lyrics
Some Charity
Emigration

Siad n praiti dubha do dhein ar
Gcomharsana a scaipeadh uainn
-- Amhran na bPratai Dubha

‘Twas the black potatoes
that scattered our people
-- The Song of the Black Potatoes, ca. 1847
Emigration (Type of Relief)

• During famine years roughly one million (estimates up to 2 million) Irish emigrated.
• Massive emigration to Britain, U.S., Canada, Australia.
• Close to a million poor and uneducated Irish Catholics began pouring into U.S.
• Tide was not turned until the 20th century, when Ireland's population stood at less than half of the pre-famine level of over 8 million.
“Coffin Ships” to America

Black ’47 – approximately 20,000 out of 100,000 emigrants perished at sea

1847 *Exmouth* foundered off Scotland, 248 lost

1847 *St. John* smashed on the rocks near Cohasset, Massachusetts, 99 lost
Dear Father and Mother, Pen cannot dictate the poverty of this country at present. The potato crop is quite done away all over Ireland. There is nothing expected here, only an immediate famine. If you ever knew what danger we and our fellow countrymen are suffering, if you were ever so much distressed, you would take us out of this poverty isle. … So, dear father and mother, if you don’t endeavour to take us out of it, it will be the first news you hear by some friend of me and my little family to be lost by hunger. … So, I conclude with my blessings to you both and remain, Your affectionate son and daughter,
Michael and Mary Rush
For God’s sake take us out of poverty, and don’t let us die with the hunger.
It’s well I do remember the year of forty-eight
When I arose with Erin’s boys to fight against the fate,
I was hunted through the mountains for a traitor to the Queen
And that’s another reason why I left old Skibbereen.

And you were only two years old and feeble was your frame
I could not leave you with my friends for you bore your father’s name
I wrapped you in my cóta móir in the dead of night unseen
I heaved a sigh and bade goodbye to dear old Skibbereen.

Oh father dear, the day will come when vengeance loud will call,
And we will rise with Erin’s boys and rally one and all,
I’ll be the man to lead the van beneath our flag of green,
And loud and high we’ll raise the cry: ‘Revenge for Skibbereen’.
Resistance?

- Frequent resistance to eviction and other forms of injustice was common, especially in the early years of the Famine.
- Crime soared during the Famine, but mainly against property (usually stealing food).
- Crimes against individuals (landlords, rent collectors, evictors and police) remained at pre-Famine levels.
- The exception: sensational assassination of Roscommon landlord Major Denis Mahon in late 1847.
Resistance
The Young Ireland Uprising of 1848
Famine Rebellion on 29 July 1848

- In village of Ballingarry, South Tipperary
- Failed nationalist uprising led by Young Ireland movement.
- After chased by a force of Young Irelanders and supporters, Irish Constabulary unit raided a house and took those inside as hostages.
- A several-hour gunfight followed, but rebels fled after a large group of police reinforcements arrived.
The British Response to the Famine

Russell and Trevelyan’s Response – Minimalism

• June 1846 Peel replaced by Lord John Russell
  – a Whig fervently committed to free trade and a conservative laissez-faire economic philosophy that argued against government interference in economic affairs, even in times of crisis.

• Charles Trevelyan, his like-minded Permanent Secretary at the Treasury
Many British officials held negative views of the Irish as lazy and brutish. Charles Trevelyan, Secretary of the Treasury argued, “The great evil with which we have to contend, is not the physical evil of the famine, but the moral evil of the selfish, perverse, and turbulent character of the Irish people.” Free food, Trevelyan and others argued, would reward laziness, foster dependency, and prevent Ireland’s modernization.
The British Response to the Famine

The Role of Religion

The Famine as the work of God.
Heretical Irish “papists” whose sin and laziness had earned God’s wrath.
Trevelyan: the Famine was “the judgement of God on an indolent and unself-reliant people.”
Trevelyan: the Famine was, “a direct stroke of an all-wise and all-merciful Providence. …the appointed time of Ireland’s regeneration is at last come.” The Times of London: “For our parts we regard the potato blight as a blessing.”
Total British Expenditures on Famine Relief

• The British spent £10,000,000 on Famine relief.
• More than half in the form of a loan for which repayment was due.
• Most was spent on the punitive public works phase of relief in 1846-1847 -- the period of greatest mortality.
• British Famine Relief in Comparison:
  – 1833 Britain spent £22,000,000 to compensate British slave owners when slavery was abolished.
  – 1853-56 Britain spent £69,000,000 on the disastrous Crimean War.
Official neglect or adequate relief?

• Administrative and ideological constraints.
• Poorly devised and financed relief schemes.
• Claims of genocide from some especially in Irish America but no evidence of murderous intent.
• Charge of doctrinaire neglect is easier to sustain than one of genocide.
• Critics underestimate or overlook the enormous challenge facing relief agencies.
The Quakers in Famine Relief

- The Quakers, or Society of Friends
- took an early interest in the Irish crisis and provided some of the most important relief.
- As early as October 1846 they were serving free soup in Ireland -- a policy later adopted by the British government.
- wrote some of the most important first-hand accounts of the suffering and lackluster British measures.
- At least eighteen Quakers died of disease and exhaustion while in Ireland.
- The Quakers also raised substantial sums of money (£200,000) both in Britain and the United States.
Compassion fatigue

• Society of Friends wound down operations in 1848
• Less sympathetic public opinion from early 1847
• Irish irresponsibility and dishonesty portrayed in London *Times* and satirical weekly *Punch*
Daniel O'Connell and his Repeal Association

Set up in 1830 to campaign for a repeal of the Acts of Union of 1800 between Great Britain and Ireland.

Aim was to revert Ireland to the constitutional position briefly achieved in the 1780s, but with a full Catholic involvement.

Conciliation Hall was built in 1841 as the headquarters of the Repeal Association.
How different from most modern famines?

• Killed proportionately more people than other famines (at least 1/8th or 12.5% of population).
• Next to prosperous region not in economically struggling area.
• Philosophical context:
  • Underlying hands off attitudes conviction that over generous relief would demoralize the Irish poor and merely postpone reckoning.
  • Many in high places believed famine nature’s response to Irish demographic irresponsibility.
Why should not have been as bad?

- Bureaucratic structure in place
- Newspaper accounts, police monitoring, and relatively free press of 2\textsuperscript{nd} harvest failure in 1846 provided early warning system.
- Road system good and worst-affected areas easily reached by sea.
- Relatively tranquil place (no war)
- Modern famines problem more one of agency that ideology, in Ireland in 1840s was the other way around.
Was Malthus right?

- Famine struck hardest in poorest areas.
- Afterwards standard of living increases greatest where population loss greatest.
- Pop growth associated with poverty.
- Positive association between pop growth before and after.
- Area with sea boundary fared better with access to fish, seashells, and seaweed plus nearer relief or employment in port towns.
U.S.: “No Irish Need Apply”

• Until mid-19th century, most Irish immigrants were members of the Protestant middle class.
• Famine accelerated presence of mostly poor Irish Catholics eroding sense of progress.
• Despised for their religious beliefs and funny accents by the U.S. Protestant majority.
• Immigrants had trouble finding even menial jobs.
• Newspapers portrayed them in cartoons as drunk, violent monkeys.
Relief from the United States

- US Senate passed in February 1847 a bill authorizing $500,000 in aid to Ireland and Scotland.
- When deemed unconstitutional, Congress approved the use of the warships *Jamestown* and *Macedonia* to bring privately raised supplies.
- The *Jamestown* (destined for Ireland) began loading in Boston on St. Patrick’s Day 1847 and arrived in early April.
The Legacy of the Famine

Socio-Economic Transformation

- The Famine decimated the cottier class
- In 1845, there were 628,000 farms of fewer than 15 acres
- In 1851 there were 318,000
- the number declined steadily for the rest of the century.
- The Famine “solved” Ireland’s chronic agricultural crisis.
Legacy of the Famine

• Cultural Changes: Gaelic/Irish language, already in decline, suffered a near fatal blow.
• Land holdings became larger, as the tendency to subdivide the family farm declined (farm given to one son and the others often emigrated).
• Cottier class almost wiped out.
• Emigration continued by 1900, over 4 million had left Ireland and continued into the 1950s.
Legacy of the Famine

• Nationalism: millions left Ireland hating English rule and new generation of rebels and agitators born leading to:
  • 1916 Easter Rising, War of Independence, Civil War, Free State, and Independence.

• Beginning of the End for the Landlord System:
  • 1/12 insolvent eve of famine
  • most reluctant to live in remote, thinly pop areas
  • Encumbered Estates Act in 1849, making it easier for landlords to sell off their land
May the road rise to meet you
May the wind be always at your back
May the sun shine warm upon your face
May the rains fall soft upon your fields
And until we meet again
May God hold you in the palm of His hand

~ Irish Blessing
QUESTIONS ON Great Famine
National University of Ireland, Galway
Donal Igoe

Colleague in IRELAND and fellow former doctoral student at Southern Illinois University
Rudy, (Irish Language Writer Pádraic Ó Conaire), and His Mother Corine, Eyre Square, Galway, IRELAND
Rudy, (Irish Language Writer Pádraic Ó Conaire) and his brother Russ, Eyre Square, Galway, IRELAND

*Rudy Ray Seward*