

Irish Famine Rebellion of 1848: Context and Consequences

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Selected Slides





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
 - Too poor to emigrate to be productive elsewhere

Survived Despite Impoverishment

- Healthier than lack of wealth would predict due to:
 - Potato provided adequate nutrition.
 - 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 human height.

Potato Origins

- Not Irish?
- South American Indians in Andes have cultivated the potato on mountain slopes and in valleys for at least 4,000 years.
- Ascertained how to produce extremely high yields of potatoes on small plots of land.
- By time of 16th Century Spanish conquest producing 3,000 types for every type of soil, sun, and moisture conditions.



Peasants at First Despised Potato

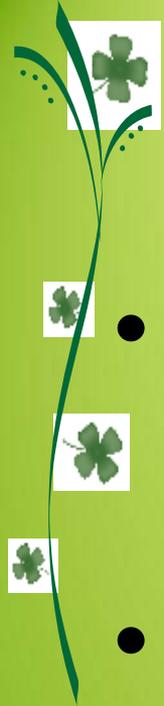
- Unsightly, misshapen appearance led many to believe could cause various ailments
 - from leprosy, syphilis, narcosis, scrofula, early death, sterility, and rampant sexuality, plus destroying the soil where it grew.
- Considered devil's food by some as not mentioned in the Bible.
- Thought poisonous: Part of nightshade family of flowering plants of which many species are poisonous
- Caused flatulence.

Ireland First in Europe

- To make enthusiastic conversion to potato farming.
- Starting in southwest - Munster.
- Widespread fanatic devotion by end of 1600s.

“Only two things in this world are too serious to be jested on, potatoes and matrimony.”

Irish saying



Expansion of Potato Cultivation

- Due to landless laborers, renting tiny plots from English landowners (interested primarily 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.



Population expanded

- 3.2 million in 1754
- 8.5 million by 1845
- If add 1.75 million emigrants to New World, Irish population effectively tripled since 1754
- Increase supported notion that potato aphrodisiac (phallic shape & similarity to truffles)

Daniel O'Connell, The Liberator

- Barrister, who led successful Catholic Emancipation campaign with British government reluctantly conceding in 1829.
 - general emancipation but simultaneously disenfranchised the small mainly Catholic tenants.
- He attempted same methods to have Acts of Union of 1801 between Great Britain and Ireland repealed that had:
 - eliminated Irish parliament and
 - falsely promised Catholic emancipation.

Daniel O'Connell and his Repeal Association

- In 1830 started campaign for a repeal of the Acts of Union of 1800.
- Aim was to revert Ireland to the constitutional position briefly achieved in the 1780s, but with full Catholic involvement.



Loyal Repeal Association (Est. 1840)

- Conciliation Hall built 1841 and
- *Nation* starts publication 1842.
- Repeal Year declared 1843.
 - Series of ‘monster’ political meetings.
 - Final scheduled meeting at Clontarf banned.
 - O’Connell complied but arrested with four others.
- Arrest and imprisonment led William Smith O’Brien, independent MP, Protestant, and Co. Clare landowner to join Repeal Association.
 - Descended from Brian Boru, hero of Battle of Clontarf in 1014.

The Famine Begins

Crop Loss During the Famine

1845	40%
1846	80%
1847	30%*
1848	50%



* Very few potatoes planted

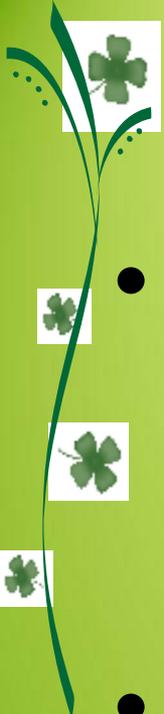
Food Shortages?

- 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.



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.



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

August 1847 Famine Declared Over and Soup Kitchens Closed



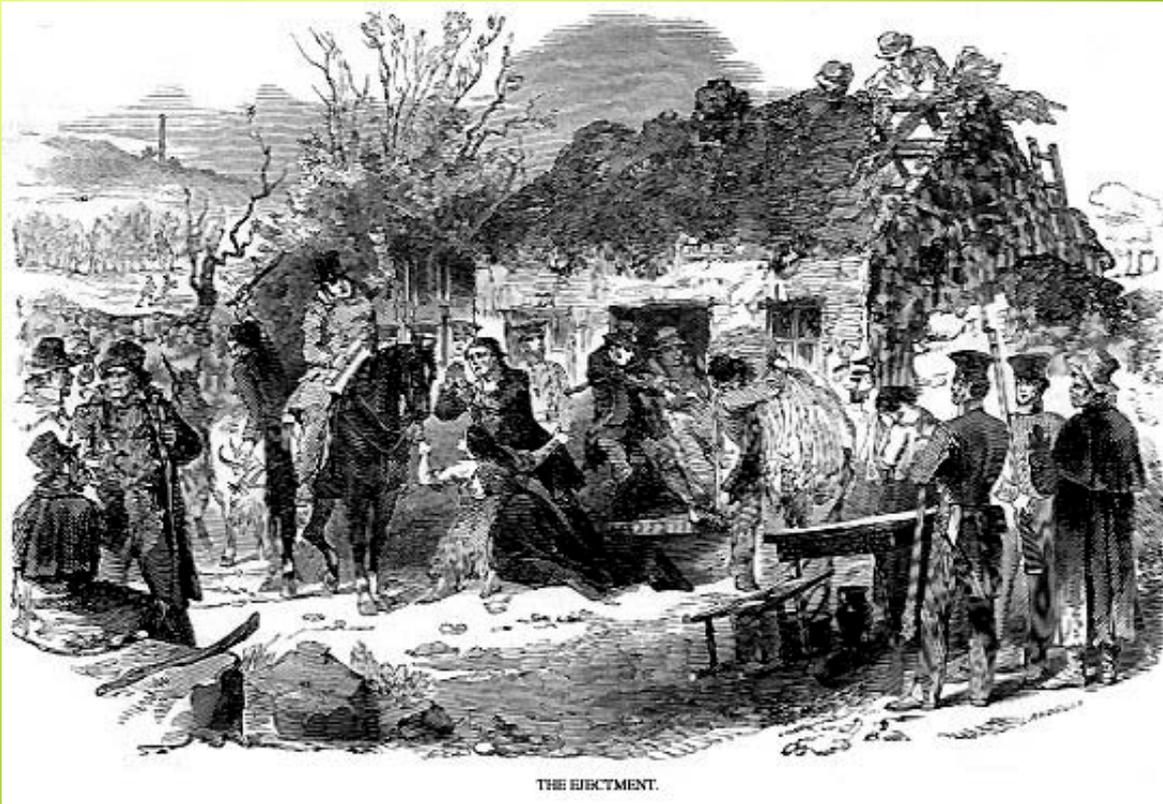
The loaf: "Well! old Fellow I'm delighted to see you looking so well-- Why they said you had the Aphis Vastator"

The potato: "all humbug, Sir, never was better in my life thank Heaven"

Punch, September 16, 1847

EVICTIIONS SOAR

Year	Families Evicted
1846	3,500
1847	6,026
1848	9,657
1849	16,686
1850	19,949
1851	13,197



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 oftentimes wailing in despair, their ragged barefoot little ones clinging about them.” – witness to an eviction, 1848

The Famine

Responses by the Irish Peasantry

Emigration



Irish emigrants depart Liverpool for North America.

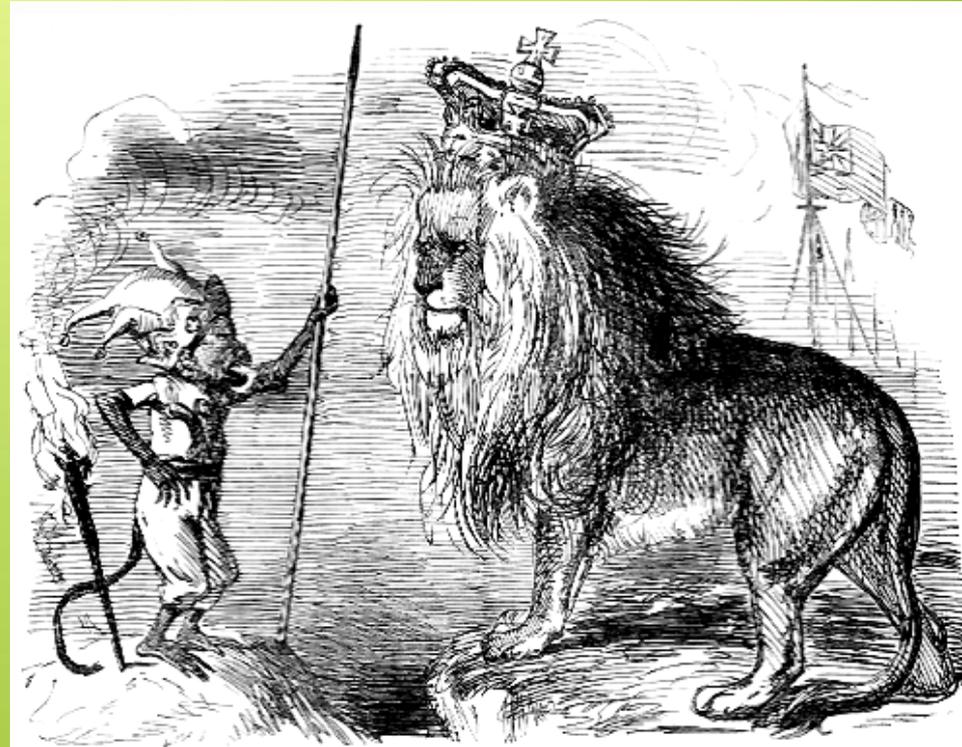
Pictorial Times - 1846

- 1.2+ million emigrate
- Most to U.S., but also
 - England
 - Canada
 - Australia
- “Assisted Emigration” by landlords
- Funds from Irish in America

The British Response to the Famine

The Role of Anti-Irish Racism

- Many British officials saw the Irish as lazy and brutish.
- Free food would
 - reward laziness
 - foster dependency
 - and prevent Ireland's modernization.
- Charles Trevelyan: “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.”



THE BRITISH LION AND THE IRISH MONKEY.

Monkey (Mr. Mitchell). "One of us MUST be Put Down."

Springtime of the People: Europe 1848

- Spring of Nations, People's Spring, or Year of Revolution refer to absolutist governments replaced, at least temporarily, by liberal administrations.
- Suffrage introduced for portion of population.
- Elections held to constituent assemblies to draw up new national constitutions.
- Remains the most widespread revolutionary wave in European history.

Origin of Young Ireland(ers)

- Inspired by liberal, romantic nationalism on European mainland.
- Led by eclectic group of middle-class intellectuals who left Repeal Association.
- Concerns about Daniel O'Connell and association.
- In 1847 formed the Irish Confederation.
- Uncompromising stand for national Parliament with full legislative and executive powers.

Origin of Young Ireland(ers)

- Did not call for rebellion but would not make absolute pledges for peace.
- Goal independent, truly inclusive, Irish nation using any means to achieve consistent with honor, morality, and reason.
- February 1848, King Louis-Philippe of France overthrown and Second Republic proclaimed.
- Sent political shock waves across Europe.
- Revolutions broke out in Berlin, Vienna, Rome, Prague, and Budapest.

Springtime of the People: Europe 1848

- William Smith O'Brien and Thomas Francis Meagher led YI delegation to Paris in March to congratulate Republic and seek support.
 - Returned with tri-color flag as a symbol of reconciliation but little else.
- After initial flurry of revolutionary activity, order was quickly restored and conservative governments and monarchies re-installed.
 - In France, revolution abandoned after June Days Uprising that resulted in over 10,000 deaths or injuries plus 4,000 insurgents deported.

John Mitchel YI Early Popular Leader

- Left *Nation* to start more radical *United Irishman* in 1848.
- Mitchell, O'Brien, and Thomas Francis Meagher arrested in April:
 - Mitchell sedition; others inflammatory speeches.
- Only Mitchell convicted under 1848 Treason Felony Act.
- Packed jury and severity of his sentence—14 years transportation—had a catalytic effect.

John Mitchel YI Early Popular Leader

- Aroused widespread indignation.
- Helped to close the ranks of the Repeal movement.
- Mitchel hoped fate would precipitate a rescue attempt by the Dublin Confederate clubs.
- Thus ignite the country to rebel.
- After his deportation Young Irelanders met secretly to plan for an uprising for September after the harvest.

Famine Rebellion on 29 July 1848

- Most continental revolutions were relatively bloodless, so O'Brien and YI leaders believed could attain similar results in Ireland.
- Hoped to unite Irish landlords and tenants in protest against British rule.
- But Government's 22 July 1848 suspension of *habeas corpus* meant YI and other opponents could be imprisoned without trial.

Famine Rebellion on 29 July 1848

- Had to choose between being arrested, ignominious flight, or armed resistance.
- O'Brien decided that YI had to make a stand so as not to lose face and honor.
- 23 to 29 July, O'Brien, Meagher and John Dillon raised support for revolt in Counties Wexford, Kilkenny, and County Tipperary.
- YI leaders met (more by accident than design) in village of Commons of Ballingarry on 28 July.

Famine Rebellion on 29 July 1848

- Next day barricades had been erected, near Commons colliery to prevent O'Brien's arrest.
- O'Brien, other YI leaders, and local supporters (miners, tradesmen and small tenant farmers) awaited arrival of the military and police.
- When police approached crossroads before Commons from Ballingarry, saw barricades in front of them and, thinking discretion the better part of valor, they veered right up the road toward County Kilkenny.

Famine Rebellion on 29 July 1848

- Rebels followed across fields.
- 47 policemen barricaded themselves in large two-story farmhouse, taking five young children hostage, pointing guns out windows.
- House was surrounded by the rebels and a stand-off ensued.
- Mrs. Margaret McCormack, owner of house and mother of children, demanded to be let into her house, but the police refused and would not release the children.

Famine Rebellion on 29 July 1848

- McCormack found O'Brien reconnoitering house from out-buildings, and asked him what was to become of her children and her house.
- Both went up to parlor window where O'Brien stated, "We are all Irishmen—give up your guns and you are free to go." and shook hands with some of police through window.
- After insurgent threw a stone a constable fired first shot at O'Brien, followed by shooting between police and rebels for several hours.

Famine Rebellion on 29 July 1848

- Evident to rebels that the position of police almost impregnable.
- Catholic clergyman endeavored to mediate in interests of peace telling locals to return home.
- When a large party of Cashel police approached, rebels attempted to stop them but the police continued to advance.
- Became clear that the police in the house were about to be reinforced and rescued.

Famine Rebellion on 29 July 1848

- So after two insurgents claimed casualties the rebels faded away.
 - One alleged victim, James Stephens, showed up in Paris later.
- The leaders went on the run but four of the leaders, including O'Brien, Meagher, were captured and sentenced to death.
- A few minor 'risings' occurred in fall and in 1849.

Famine Rebellion on 29 July 1848

- Decision not to execute leaders immediately following convictions in October was pragmatic.
- Government preferred to create fools rather than national martyrs.
- In July 1849, on eve of Queen Victoria's visit to Ireland, death sentence on four leaders was commuted.
- They were transported to Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) joining John Mitchel and others.

Legacy of Famine and Rebellion

- 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 Famine and Rebellion

- Nationalism: millions left Ireland hating English rule and new generation of rebels and agitators born leading to:
 - Fenian raids, rising, and dynamite campaign in 1860s
 - 1916 Easter Rising
 - War of Independence 1919 - 1921
 - Free State 1921
 - Civil War 1922 - 1923
 - Independence 1937



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