

Historical Topics Series: 3



The Great Irish Famine

There have been many famines in the history of Ireland but when people refer to 'The Famine', it is always to that of the 1840s. What made this famine different from any previous event was not just the number of people who died (proportionally, more people died during the famine of the 1740s), but the duration, the lack of effective aid, and the radical change in attitude of those who survived.

Chronology

The potato blight, *Phytophthora Infestans*, struck Ireland in late August, 1845. To a people whose staple diet was the potato, this was a disaster. At this stage, however, the blight did not affect the whole of Ireland, so some potatoes were available (at vastly inflated prices) and most people had some resources to trade for substitute foodstuffs, such as oats or maize. The following year (1846), the blight was total. By this stage, fewer people had any resources to fall back on. They also had less strength to get through another hard winter. The death rate increased dramatically. In 1847 there were few seed potatoes left for planting. Amazingly, those planted were blight free and commanded high prices in the markets. With the new crop came renewed hope. Government withdrew the emergency measure it had put in place and Irish agriculture returned to 'normal'. Without aid, however, the death rate increased further. The crop of August, 1848, was anxiously awaited. It too, was affected by the blight. Again, in 1849, there were few seed potatoes for planting and so there was a very small harvest of blight-free potatoes in August 1849. The following year, the crop was more plentiful and mainly blight-free but by then it was too late for the thousands who had died of hunger and of famine-related diseases.

Population

It is estimated that during the years 1845 to 1850, around 800,000 people died of starvation or of a famine-related disease such as typhus, dysentery, scurvy or pellagra. A further two million people emigrated. Unlike earlier famines, in which the population recovers quickly from the catastrophe and continues to grow, the after-effects of the Great Irish Famine were such that the population of Ireland, standing at 8.2 million people in 1841, declined to 6.6 million in 1851. Fifty years later, Ireland's population was still showing a decline (down to 4.5 million), even though every other European country was showing a population increase. Ireland's population did not return to its pre-famine heights until over one hundred years later (in 1964). These

figures imply that approximately 8 million people left Ireland between 1801 and 1900 - the equivalent of the entire pre-Famine population.

Emigration

Emigration was obviously a major reason why population continued to decline. From 1820 to 1830, emigration from Ireland to North America was running, on average, at just less than 5,000 people per year. From 1831 to 1845, however, the overall yearly average was 26,250, consisting mainly of middle-class family groups, younger sons seeking adventure, artisans, or merchants taking business overseas. Between 1846 and 1851, over 1,000,000 Irish people arrived at North American ports, making an average of 200,000 per year. This time the main flow came from the poorer classes, young single women making up a disproportionately large section.

Marriage rates

There were other reasons for the decline in population. The cottier class, the poorest of the population, who had lived by hiring a potato plot on a year-by-year basis, had been more or less eliminated. This class had, by custom, married young and had large families. After the Famine, the average age at first marriage rose to 27 for women, and the average family size fell. There was also a much greater percentage of the population that remained unmarried. Again, this trend continued well into the next century.

Sources

There are few events that have caused such cataclysmic change in the history of a country and few that still, over a hundred and fifty years later, arouse such emotion. For those studying this watershed period of Irish history, PRONI holds some excellent material.

The **Boards of Guardians** records (**BG**) are a good place to start. There are minute books giving, among other information, details of committee meetings and on those receiving aid to emigrate; there are admission and discharges registers; registers of births and deaths in the workhouses, and outdoor relief books.

Valuation Records (VAL/1B) show land use and ownership, as well as rateable value for the 1830s, just prior to the Famine. Compare with Griffith's Valuation (**VAL/2B**), undertaken 1848-64, which shows land use, ownership and rateable value just after the Famine. Griffith's Valuation is also available on the Search Room shelves.

Landed Estate Records are an excellent source: see particularly **D4131**, the Lissadell papers; **D1928**, the Brownlow papers; **D623** the Abercorn papers and **D607** & **D/671**, the Downshire papers. The Vere Foster papers, **D/3618/D** are invaluable.

Emigrant letters of the period frequently mention the effects of the Famine. See **T3258** especially for a collection of informative letters.

Newspapers (N) of the period give details about famine relief and death rates. They are also very useful for showing the prices of consumables at the various markets. Other newspapers in private collections include *The Illustrated London News* **D3618/D/1**, which provides most of the images of the Famine.

Census statistics are available for the years 1841 to 1921 (although the earlier statistics are not considered totally reliable). They can be consulted in our Library, as can a number of **books** on the Famine.

