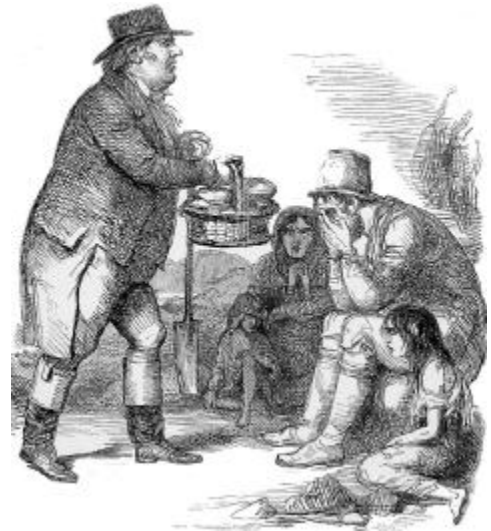


Why is the Irish Famine important in British & Irish History?

Notes for teachers



UNION IS STRENGTH

John Bull: 'Here are a few things to go on with, Brother, and I'll soon put you in a way to earn your own living.'

Punch, 17 October 1846

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<i>The Oxford Companion to Irish History</i> edited by S.J. Connolly, OUP, 1998, 1-19866-240-8, 185, 228-9	20

The unit

Place in Key Stage 3 programme of study

The unit is designed as a case study for 'relations between Britain and Ireland' and comes towards the end of the programme of study 'Britain 1750-1900'. At Christ the King the unit is taught in Year 8, but could also be taught in Year 9, depending on how the Key stage 3 curriculum is organised.

Anticipating the Modern World Study at GCSE

The unit also forms part of an Irish pathway through Key Stage 3 History to anticipate the Modern World Study on Ireland for the SHP GCSE in History. The pathway also includes the Norman intervention and the confiscations by Cromwell and William III.

It signals to pupils the importance of Ireland in the history of 'these islands' and relieves some of the pressure on GCSE coursework by providing them with a historical perspective on current events in Ireland.

Time allowed

3 weeks: 4 or 5 60-minute lessons, plus an assessment lesson.

History - key elements addressed - knowledge, skills & understanding

- i. knowledge and understanding of events, people and changes in the past: 2a, 2c, 2e
- ii. historical enquiry: 4a
- iii. organisation and communication: 5a, 5b, 5c.

Citizenship - key elements addressed

- i. knowledge and understanding about becoming informed citizens: 1a, 1b, 1c
- ii. developing skills of enquiry and communication: 2a, 2b, 2c
- iii. developing skills of participation and responsible action: 3a.

Thinking skills - key elements addressed

- i. information-processing skills
- ii. reasoning skills
- iii. enquiry skills
- iv. creative thinking skills
- v. evaluation skills.

Key questions

1. What was life like in Ireland in the early nineteenth century?
2. What happened to the potato crop in Ireland in the 1840s?
3. How did people deal with death during the Famine?
4. What effect did the Famine have on relations between Britain and Ireland?

Key question 1: What was life like in Ireland in the early nineteenth century?

Lesson objectives By the end of this lesson pupils will	Starter activity	Main activity	Plenary	Learning outcomes All pupils will be able to ...
<p>1. know that (a) population increase in Ireland was high and this put pressure on the land and (b) the advantages and disadvantages of relying on the potato as the main source of food;</p> <p>2. understand that hand in hand with poverty there existed a rich and enduring culture.</p>	<p>Pupils in pairs match up key words with definitions (A4 sheet), in pencil first. Discuss answers and ensure everyone understands the key terms.</p>	<p>1. Examine sources 1-3 with class; in groups of 4 pupils freeze-frame one of the sources. Give each group an opportunity to do a ‘tunnel of thoughts’ from the characters in their scene.</p> <p>2. Read sources 4-10; discuss questions 2-4 before pupils record the answers.</p> <p>3. For question 5 use a visual image of a set of scales surrounded by key words. Working in pairs pupils can ‘weigh up’ the negative and positive aspects of life in pre-Famine Ireland. This can be used for a piece of extended writing to question 5. Use knowledge of pupils’ abilities to suggest level of response and number of key word/phrases they should include in their answer.</p>	<p>‘Snowball’ activity - ask one pupil to say a fact they have learned in lesson; they in turn name another pupil who repeats the first fact and adds one more, then names another pupil who repeats the first two facts before adding another and so on. Give a target - e.g., keep ‘snowball’ going until someone can repeat 8-10 different facts.</p>	<p>1. give 5 facts about life in Ireland before the Famine (highlighting both positive and problematic aspects);</p> <p>2. explain the contrast between poverty and culture, a few by using 5 key words (less able), most by using 10 key words and supporting detail from the sources (core), some by using all/most key words and supporting argument using sources and statistics/graphs (G&T).</p>
<p>Key words: landlords, tenants, population growth, sub-division, folk tradition, poverty.</p>				
<p>Cross-curricular issues: literacy - key words; numeracy - graphs; citizenship - 2c, 3a; thinking skills - information processing, creative thinking, evaluation.</p>				
<p>SEN: peer support plus stepped activity to question 5.</p>			<p>G&T: question 5 - expectations of higher level response</p>	
<p>Homework: question 5 could be completed using the ‘scales’ prompt sheet.</p>				

Key question 2: What happened to the potato crop in Ireland in the 1840s?

Lesson objectives By the end of this lesson pupils will	Starter activity	Main activity	Plenary	Learning outcomes All pupils will
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. have worked together to categorise information about the Famine; 2. have an overview of the causes, events and consequences of the Famine. 	N/A	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Explain that the pack of information cards contains details about the Famine - what happened, why it happened and so on. 2. Working in pairs, pupils read and then categorise the cards. Ask them to think about as many categories as they can. Discuss the initial sorting and ask pupils to explain their categorization. 3. Pupils can then complete the tasks in the student workbook. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Each pupil writes 5 things they have learned from the lesson in back of exercise book. Teacher asks cross-section of pupils to share one with the class - encourage pupils to put forward a different fact/concept from those already mentioned. 2. Discuss the statements/hypotheses pupils have written for question 7 and get pupils to explain their statements using evidence from the cards. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. know details about the causes, course and consequences of the Famine, a few will know 5 facts (less able), most will have a broad understanding and know about 8-10 facts (core), some will have a full understanding and will be able to explain the impact of the Famine on Irish attitudes to Britain (G&T); 2. be able to suggest a hypothesis about the impact of the Famine on Irish attitudes - some will be more sophisticated than others.
<p>Key words: eviction, potato blight, <i>laissez-faire</i>, famine.</p>				
<p>Cross-curricular issues: citizenship - 2a, 2c; thinking skills - information-processing, reasoning.</p>				
<p>SEN: Either work with more able partner or give less able pair fewer cards and suggest categories.</p>			<p>G&T: More able pairs could share ideas with another pair of able students (especially questions 4, 5, and 7).</p>	
<p>Homework: N/A.</p>				

Key question 3: How did people deal with death during the Famine?

Lesson objectives By the end of this lesson pupils will	Starter activity	Main activity	Plenary	Learning outcomes All pupils will
<p>1. know the problems caused by the large number of deaths, and the impact of this on traditional burial rites in Ireland;</p> <p>2. be aware of the fact that, although stripped of dignity, each death was of an <i>individual</i> and caused great distress to families.</p>	<p>Show picture of funeral at Skibbereen on OHT. Ask pupils to choose one of the characters - give them a brief 'profile' - age, name, family details - in back of exercise book. This will be referred to again in the plenary.</p>	<p>1. Discuss information on page 9 - stress the human/individual side of the tragedy, eg., although about one million died each death was of an individual - family member or neighbour.</p> <p>2. Read extract from Under the Hawthorn Tree to the class. Discuss the main characters' reactions plus questions 2 and 3 before pupils record responses to the tasks (page 10).</p>	<p>Put OHT on again - refer pupils back to starter activity. Having studied the issue of burial more thoroughly, now suggest the pupils write a thought or speech bubble for their character about the scene they are witnessing.</p>	<p>1. be able to empathise with the famine victims through interacting with the visual source and reading a fictional account of a baby's death.</p>
<p>Key words: wake, emaciated.</p>				
<p>Cross-curricular issues: citizenship - 1b, 3a; thinking skills - information processing, creative thinking.</p>				
<p>SEN: Additional support from teacher (or classroom assistant, if appropriate), or they could colour code the text in the extract (each character = different colour) and use this to help them answer question 1a. It may be appropriate for them to work on plenary task instead of the other activities.</p>			<p>G&T: Could be encouraged to complete question 1b plus one of the extension tasks.</p>	
<p>Homework: Pupils could extend the plenary exercise - write a descriptive piece of prose or a poem or a short play.</p>				

Key question 4: What effect did the Famine have on relations between Britain and Ireland?

This may take more than one lesson, especially if the extension activity is to be finished.

Lesson objectives By the end of this lesson pupils will	Starter activity	Main activity	Plenary	Learning outcomes
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. be able to explain the reasons for limitations of the responses/actions of the British government; 2. understand the reasons for the growing resentment of Irish people towards the British government. 	<p>‘Heads and tails’ - give each pupil a card with either a concept/name or description. Appoint one person to read out what is on their card - if someone thinks that they have the right ‘match’ they read out their card. If right, they appoint another pupil to read out their card before sitting down. Carry on until all pupils are seated.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Divide the class into groups of 4 to complete section 1 (pages 12 & 13). To ensure pupils share information and stay on task, allocate a number to each group member and make each group responsible for finding out about one of the actions of the British government. Explain that after 10 minutes of reading and discussion within the group there will be a signal for silence. Then one of them will have their number called out and will have to share the information discussed so far. Use this as a plenary to discuss issues further and fill in master grid. 2. You may wish to suggest that the groups do another still image/tunnel of thoughts activity for the <i>Punch</i> cartoon. This could then be related to question C plus the statement they wrote (in Lesson 2) at the bottom of the A3 sort card. 3. If possible, play the song while the pupils are reading the words. 	<p>Give pupils thinking time. Ask them to think about all they have learned during this topic. In pairs decide which were the 5 most important things they have learned - this could include skills as well as facts. Develop this into a whole class discussion.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. All pupils will have worked effectively as a member of a group; 2. Some pupils (the more able) may have completed the extension activity.
<p>Key words: self-help, free market, import, export, public expenditure.</p>				
<p>Cross-curricular issues: citizenship - 1a, 1b, 1c, 2a, 2b, 2c, 3a; thinking skills - information processing, enquiry, evaluation.</p>				
<p>SEN: Peer support.</p>			<p>G&T: Extension task - open-ended research activity.</p>	
<p>Homework: N/A. (If it is thought necessary, pupils could be asked to revise the topic in preparation for the assessment - although pupils will have access to their work and booklet.)</p>				

Starter activity: lesson 1

Read the following descriptions and, with a partner, match them up to the correct word

Music, dance, storytelling passed on from generation to generation.	Landlords
This increased by 3 million in forty years and put great pressure on the land.	Tenants
A lack of money and other resources leading to poor living standards and inadequate food.	Population growth
They did not own the land they farmed, but paid rent for it.	Sub-division
This was the practice of sharing out land between the sons of the family. It continued through many generations causing farms to become smaller and smaller.	Folk tradition
They owned thousands of acres of land in Ireland which they divided up and rented out. Many lived in huge mansions, often in England.	Poverty

Absentee landlord	Potato blight	Quakers
Charles Trevelyan	Workhouse	Choctaws
Public works schemes	Bridget O'Donnell	<i>Laissez-faire</i>
Emigration ships	Food exports	Yellow maize/ Indian corn
Self-help/ 'industry'	Denis McKennedy	Skibbereen

<p>This was a religious group who set up soup kitchens to try to help the famine victims.</p>	<p>The leaves of the potato plant turned black and died. Then there was a sweet decaying smell.</p>	<p>Most of the land in Ireland was owned by these people, although many did not live on them.</p>
<p>They raised 710 dollars for the famine victims.</p>	<p>These places were packed with people who had left or been evicted from their homes. Disease and overcrowding made them terrible places to live in.</p>	<p>This person believed that the famine was caused by God to control the population growth and also that Irish people should be encouraged to work harder.</p>
<p>This was the policy that the government should not interfere with the economy or people's lives. It said people should stand on their own two feet.</p>	<p>This person was taken in by neighbours after she had been evicted. She was pregnant and suffering from fever, and her baby was born dead, while her son died of hunger.</p>	<p>These employed people to do work like road building. The hours were long, the work hard and the pay was about 4p a day.</p>
<p>One stone of this a day was needed for a family to survive. It cost 15p and needed to be cooked very slowly.</p>	<p>This was allowed to continue to pay for rents, even though people were starving.</p>	<p>Thousands of people died in these from overcrowding and disease as they tried to escape from the famine.</p>
<p>This place is in the west of Ireland and was badly affected by the famine.</p>	<p>This person had not been paid for fourteen days before he died and so could not buy food. At his inquest the coroner blamed his death on the 'gross neglect of the Board of Works'.</p>	<p>This idea was that hard work would end the famine, because some people believed it was caused by laziness on the part of the Irish.</p>

What was life like before the Famine?

This question tries to encourage pupils not only to understand some of the long-term reasons for the Famine but also to appreciate the extent of its impact on people in Ireland. The Famine had devastating human as well as economic consequences. Although those remaining in Ireland tended to prosper economically after the Famine, life was socially and culturally much poorer.

Population growth

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the whole of Ireland was part of the United Kingdom and, with over 8 million people, it was one of the most densely populated regions.

The population had been growing rapidly since the late eighteenth century. Between 1799 - 1841 it had increased by 172 per cent. A number of factors can account for this increase:

- a healthy diet (potato plus milk)
- early marriages
- high birth rate
- high infant-survival rate

Such a large number of people meant that there was a great deal of pressure on the land. This was more of a problem in some parts of Ireland, for example the West. In this region the population increase had been higher. In County Mayo there were 475 people for every square mile of farmland. Most people in Ireland made their living from farming the land. However there were many different types of farmer and lifestyle, as the map in source 13 (page 4 of the Student Workbook) shows.

Landlords & tenants

Eighty per cent of Irish people lived in the countryside and worked on the land. However the land they farmed did not belong to them. Instead it was owned by about 20,000 landlords. Each landlord had a large estate with 1,000s of acres. He divided his land into farms and rented them out to tenant farmers. If the farmers did not pay their rent, they could be evicted (thrown out) from their farms.

Irish landlords lived in large houses with servants, plenty of food, fine clothes and entertainment. Some landowners did not live in Ireland at all, but lived on large estates in England. They were called absentee landlords, and were not popular with their Irish tenants.

Subdivision of the land

A common practice, especially along the West Coast where there were few jobs outside of farming, was for farmers to divide the land among their sons. Sub-division created many small farms in Ireland as the sons eventually also sub divided the land. In 1845 almost 200,000 farming families lived on less than 5 acres per family and 135,000 families had less than 1 acre. While farms got smaller and smaller rents were increasing - they were 100 per cent higher than in England.

The potato

An economical way of using the land was to grow potatoes. Although farms were small, one acre of farmland could produce 8¾ tons of potatoes a year. Some experts in the nineteenth century estimated that it would take almost 4 acres to produce the equivalent amount of food in wheat.

Moreover, the potato could grow on most types of land, even bogland. This meant that the traditional, and wasteful, system of crop rotations became unnecessary. Now land which was previously left fallow could be sown with potatoes.

Finally, the potato was a nutritious and flexible food. Especially when supplemented with milk as it usually was, it provided most of the calories and vitamins needed for a healthy life. Poverty may have been a problem but children grew healthy and strong and fatal childhood illness was very rare. This surprised many English visitors.

Food value of the potato

	Calories (gm)	Protein (gm)	Calcium (mgm)	Iron (mgm)	Vitamins A (ius)	C (mgm)
<i>Average requirement</i>	3,000	70	0.56	8.40	3,500	52.5
Per 10lb potatoes	3,459	45	1.92	21.34	1,600	444-1,218
Per pint of fresh whole milk	393	19	0.71	0.41	797-3,983	171-1,650
Per 10lb potatoes & pint of whole milk	3,852	64	2.63	21.75	3,990	1,741

Chicken or egg?

While the importance of the potato is recognised, there is still doubt about its precise role. What came first, the potato or the increased population - the chicken or the egg?

The potato had been introduced into Ireland in the seventeenth century. Therefore, some people think that its gradual adoption *caused* population growth. They say that the potato made the population history of Ireland different from that of the rest of the United Kingdom. The potato enabled people to marry earlier and support larger families using less land.

Others argue that the potato was adopted *as a result of* population growth. They say that the Irish population began to expand for the same reasons as in the rest of the United Kingdom. Increasing pressure on limited resources forced people in the first half of the nineteenth century to resort to the potato as a way of feeding the family.

A brighter side to life

Life was hard and most farming families did not have much money to spend on luxuries after paying the yearly rent. Yet it was not all poverty and hard work. There were feast days (Christmas, Easter, Shrove Tuesday and May Day), fairs and markets. Fairs in local towns were very popular with the young and the old.

The Irish had a rich culture of music, sport, dancing and story telling. Musical instruments would be played on Sundays after church, at crossroad dances, weddings and funerals (wakes). In winter stories would be told around the fireside and dances held in one of the bigger farmhouses.

‘Despite the grinding poverty endured by the poor, pre-Famine Ireland was renowned for the exuberance of its folk tradition in music and dance.’

What happened to the potato crop in the 1840s?

The danger

The danger was that some people became too dependent upon the potato. If the potato crop failed, thousands of people would face starvation. This is what happened in 1845.

The blight

In 1845 disaster struck Ireland. The humid summer, the weather both very warm and damp, provided ideal breeding conditions for the 'blight', a fungus recently brought to Europe from South America on boats carrying guano, a newly-popular fertiliser, the droppings of sea birds. The fungus turned potatoes into a foul smelling mess only a few days after they were dug from the soil. The areas most affected were Counties Waterford, Antrim, Monaghan, Clare, Dublin, Meath and Down. Most families managed to survive the winter of 1845.

Ireland's unique experience

The blight also affected Europe. In 1845 Belgium lost a staggering seven-eighths of its potato crop. Where Ireland was different was that the blight kept returning to destroy the potato crop. Drought killed the fungus in Europe, but Ireland's climate encouraged it. In 1846 more than two-thirds of the crop was destroyed, particularly in the West (Region C). Although the summer of 1847 was dry and warm, few potatoes had been planted for growth that year. The summer of 1848 was again humid and the blight returned, with crops failing in 1849 and 1851.

The potato crop at the time of Famine (* = estimate)

Year	Acres (000)	Yield per acre	Produce (000 tons)
1844	2,378	*6.25	*14,862
1845	2,516	*4.00	*10,063
1846	1,999	*1.50	*2,999
1847	284	7.20	2,046
1848	810	3.80	3,077
1849	719	5.60	4,024

Search for food

As a result, thousands of Irish people, who had depended on the potato, found themselves without their food. The overriding need was to find food. To buy food people sold what they had, borrowed or economised. From Donegal it was reported that 'The small farmers and cottiers had parted with all their pigs and their fowl, and even their bed-clothes and fishing-nets had gone for one object: the supply of food.'

When people had no money they searched the fields for food. They dug in the ground for ferns and dandelions. They then boiled, roasted or crushed them with meal to make bread. Children searched the woods for nuts and berries. They ate the fruit of trees - holly, beech, crab-apple and laurel. They also ate the leaves and barks of trees.

1847

1847 was the worst year of suffering. That winter was one of the coldest and wettest in history. The conditions in that year were described in a *Famine Diary* relating the tragic personal account of the emigration from Sligo to Canada of a schoolteacher, Gerald Keegan. The *Diary* is now considered to be a work of fiction, part of a nineteenth-century novel. However, when it was published in 1991 it was seen as a powerful record of the suffering endured in the Famine.

The weather on the bleak, cold February day is in tune with the mood and the condition of the people all over the land. We have come to the end of our rope. Famine and disease hold sway over the land. People are dying so fast that their surviving relatives are unable to bury them all. Every thatched cottage and every shelter is in mourning. Disease would not be claiming so many lives if it were not for the famine. It is such a puzzle to me that, in Ireland, one of the richest agricultural lands in the world, people are dying of hunger.

Was there really not enough food in Ireland?

Ireland was genuinely short of food during the famine. There were other foods besides the potato. Grain continued to be exported, as did livestock, including cattle, sheep and pigs. The sight of ships leaving Irish ports loaded with food sometimes provoked riots. However, even if such food had been kept in the country, it would not have been sufficient to feed the population. Nor would it have been possible to ensure that the food reached those who really needed it.

What is true, however, is that a ban on grain exports late in 1846 might have reduced the suffering of the year 1847. It could have bridged the 'starvation gap' between the destruction of the potato crop in August and the arrival of the first imports of maize or Indian corn in the following winter.

Who lost most?

Labourers and smaller farmers were the main victims of the famine, but the standards of living of most sections of society suffered. The high price of food meant that people had not the money to spend on other things. Tradesmen of all kinds lost work, and landlords lost rents.

As in all disasters, however, some people did well. Food traders, clever enough to see that prices would rise, made 'a whacking profit at the expense of the poor'. They bought when prices were relatively low and sold when demand rose, like the Cork merchant who bought maize at £10.75 a ton and sold it to retailers and relief committees for £16 to £17.

Large farmers also did well, selling surplus food at a goodly profit.

By contrast, 'The small farmer is ruined, he must sell his corn, sell his stock at the unseasonable time because he has not fodder and therefore must leave himself penniless for the coming year.'

How did people deal with death during the Famine?

Number of deaths

Ireland lost about two million people as a result of the Famine, half through emigration, the rest by death.

Some one million people died during the famine, often in macabre circumstances, and the terrible stories live on in people's memories, handed down from generation to generation. The experiences of ancestors during the famine have been told and retold around the firesides of the farming and fishing communities of the districts who bore the brunt of the disaster.

One day Stephen Regan met a dog dragging a child's head along. He took the head from the dog and buried it and set a tree over it. The family to whom the child belonged were getting relief for the child and for that reason did not report its death.

Victims

As in most famines, children were particularly badly affected. They needed more nutrition than other people. Without a proper diet, they became wizened and shrunken, looking like old men and women, their eyes bulging. One aid worker reported in 1846 seeing 'in front of the cottages little children leaning against a fence - for they could not stand - their limbs fleshless, their bodies half-naked, their faces bloated yet wrinkled and of palish green hue - children who could never, oh it was too plain, grow up to be men and women'.

Killer diseases

Few people died directly of starvation. Most perished from epidemic diseases arising from starvation. Typhus, relapsing fever, dysentery and scurvy swept Ireland during the famine, and cholera made an appearance in 1849.

Typhus is one of the most common and deadly of the famine diseases. It is caused by small bodies which are carried by lice and penetrate the human skin, invading blood vessels, and attacking the skin and the brain. The skin becomes dark and delirium and stupor set in. According to a Belfast doctor at the time,

One day the patient is in a state of perfect health, and on the next day ... seized with rigor, headache, pain in the back and the usual symptom of fever - high temperature, erratic pulse and eruptions on the skin (sometimes, measles). Attacks last for fourteen days, ending in a crisis either by an increased secretion of urine or gentle perspiration. A lot of perspiration was generally a fatal symptom.

Spread of disease

Disease spread quickly as people left their homes in search of food or refuge. Hospitals and workhouses became overcrowded and a source of infection rather than refuges. Kanturk workhouse, built for 800, had in 1847 1,653 inmates. One visitor reported,

In the bedrooms we entered there was not a mattress of any kind to be seen; the floors were strewn with a little dirty straw, and the poor creatures were thus *littered* down as close together as might be, in order to get the largest possible number under one miserable rug - in some cases six children, for blankets we did not see.

Home remedies

People did not just lie down and die. With the aid of their families many fought back. One man recalled his mother's account of how she and her brother were rescued from fever, after their mother had diagnosed 'the bad sickness' from the colour of their urine:

There was no doctor called in, nor was there any medicine given; the old woman was nurse and doctor herself. They did not get a mouthful to eat, but plenty of drinks of two-milk whey, the lightest and most sustaining drink going at the time.... She knew again, from the colour of the urine, when it had cleared away.

Burial

There were so many deaths that burial rituals, so important to the Irish, often had to be overlooked. In fact bodies were often taken away in carts to be buried, without coffins, in mass burial places. Source 1 on page 9 of the Workbook shows a funeral which took place near Skibbereen, County Cork, one of the worst hit areas.

Under the Hawthorn Tree

Marita Conlon-McKenna's *Under the Hawthorn Tree* (O'Brien Press, 0-86278-206-6) is perhaps the best-selling of all historical novels about the Famine for young people. When tragedy strikes their family, Eily, Michael and Peggy are left to fend for themselves. Starving and in danger of the dreaded workhouse, they escape, their one hope is to find the great-aunts they have heard about in their mother's stories. With tremendous courage they set out on a journey that will test every reserve of strength, love and loyalty they possess.

The death of Bridget occurs in the second chapter.

The novel has been made into a film by Channel 4 and is available on video from 4Learning (ISBN: 1-86215-496-1; produce reference: 154961). There is also a study guide to the book and the film by Irene Barber (*Under the Hawthorn Tree ... A Study Guide to the Novel and the Film* O'Brien Press, 0-86278-583-9).

Other links with English

Other Famine novels include *The Long March. A Famine Gift for Ireland*, by Marie-Louise Fitzpatrick, Wolfhound Press, 0-86327-644-X; *The Coldest Winter* by Elizabeth Lutzeier, OUP, 0-19275-202-2; *The Silent People* by Walter Macken, Pan Books, 0-33030-328-7.

Among the many poems about the Famine is Seamus Heaney's 'At a Potato Digging', which is sometimes included in GCSE anthologies (*The Penguin Book of Irish Verse* edited by Kennelly, B., Penguin, 1-14058-526-5, pp 427-9).

What effect did the Famine have on Anglo-Irish relations?

The suffering and death experienced in Ireland during the Famine years had long reaching consequences. Evictions, emigration and the lack of effective Government action, despite eloquent appeals for aid, made many Irish people very bitter.

Appeals for aid

1846

If ministers regard us as fellow subjects and wish to snatch us from the jaws of death, let them interfere without loss of time.

Daniel O'Connell, 1847

Ireland is in your hands, in your power. If you do not save her she cannot save herself. I solemnly call on you to recollect that I predict with the sincerest conviction that a quarter of the population will perish unless you come to her relief.

What did the government do?

To begin with the government tried to improve the supply of food by importing yellow maize (called 'yellow meal' or 'Indian Corn'). This was sold at a low cost but it needed to be cooked slowly. Hunger drove some people to eat it raw, which caused health problems.

Public Relief Works were set up so that people could earn money to buy food. Unfortunately many of these were poorly administered and badly organised. Only men with cards saying they were entitled to work were allowed to become involved. Mainly though, people were often too weak from hunger and disease to do the heavy work required.

Furthermore the cost of food rose steeply. By November 1846 a stone of meal (what a family needed each day to survive) cost 15p. A labourer employed on the Public Works scheme earned no more than 4p a day. It was not unheard of for labourers to die of hunger or exhaustion while employed on Public Works.

In 1846 soup kitchens were set up. These were organised by government agencies as well as private organisations and religious groups. But by the end of 1847, when O'Connell made a passionate appeal for aid, government funding for Public Work Schemes and other aid was withdrawn. The cost of famine relief was passed to the Irish landlords. Some responded by evicting their tenants.

There were many landlords who acted kindly towards their tenants. Some used up all their money trying to stop their tenants from starving. However throughout the famine period many landlords continued to evict any tenants who could not pay their rent. Sometimes tenants were evicted because more money could be made from using the land for sheep grazing.

Many individuals were appalled by these acts but there was no official condemnation of eviction. In fact an MP declared in March 1846 that 'undoubtedly it was the landlord's right to do as he pleased'.

Perhaps the action which caused the most bitterness was that the government allowed the policy of grain export to continue. Cattle, sheep and pigs were also exported. Many riots broke out in Irish Ports when ships were being loaded with food.

Why did the government not do more?

Some historians say that banning exports would not have stopped widespread starvation. Ireland did not produce enough food for the whole population and it would not have been possible to ensure food reached those who really needed it. However some people would have been saved from starvation and suffering if the government had stopped food exports. Desperate from hunger people, seeing food being shipped off for sale abroad, even began to accuse the government of deliberately trying to starve Irish people.

The people of Ireland were British subjects. Just like the Welsh, English and the Scots they belonged to the United Kingdom. Many at the time and since have asked why the British government did not do more to relieve

the suffering of its population.

For a start, the government was reluctant to believe that the crisis was so severe - many thought it was grossly exaggerated.

Another major reason was the Victorian belief about the role of Government - law and order, defence of the Realm and minimum public expenditure. Under no circumstances, Victorians believed, should governments interfere with the economy or people's private lives. This policy - laissez-faire - ensured a 'free market' and encouraged people to stand on their own two feet. More than anything, though, there was a general belief that the famine was a result of Irish 'indolence'.

In such circles, little sympathy was shown towards the famine victims. Instead emphasis by the press and the Government was put on hard work ('industry'). Charles Trevelyan, the civil servant put in charge of Irish Famine Relief, made his lack of sympathy well known through his references to the 'idle', 'feckless' and 'improvident' Irish, and his comments on government policy during the famine period.

Punch

In the main, British press coverage of the Famine was coloured by anti-Irish prejudice and political and practical considerations. The general tenor was that the Irish were a backward race and lived on inferior food - the potato; they were ungrateful and disloyal; Ireland was a drain on British resources; and Britain was being flooded with Irish paupers.

The English satirical journal, *Punch*, consistently under-estimated the severity of the crisis in Ireland and depicted the famine as a moral issue. It blamed indolence of the Irish for the continuation of the famine and for 'sponging' on the British taxpayer. Hard work or industry at home or emigration were *Punch's* answers to poverty in Ireland.

In the cartoon 'Union is Strength', 17 October 1846, on page 14 of the Workbook, John Bull (England) presents his Irish 'brother' not only with food but also with a spade, a symbol of industry, to help him 'to earn your own way of living'.

Such cartoons summed up what most people in England thought about the Irish people and the Famine. Indeed, *Punch* along with *The Times* 'reinforced traditional animosities and alienated the sympathies of the British upper and middle classes'. These attitudes did much to promote stereotypes and fuel anti-Irish feelings. Sentiments like these were magnified when some Irish, escaping from Famine and disease, began to migrate to Britain.

Irish resentment

Supporters of the Union in Ireland and Britain held that the British connection saved Ireland from a far worse fate at that time. However, for Irish nationalists the Famine is a central event, demonstrating the abject failure of the Act of Union to ensure fair and equal treatment for Ireland and its peoples.

The consequent bitterness is dramatically expressed in songs later written about the Famine, songs such as 'Skibbereen' (The Alias Acoustic Band, *Irish Songs, Tunes, Poetry and Speech of Rebellion, Resistance & Reconciliation*, CD, 1998, Proper/Retro, R2CD 40-73), which cry out for 'Revenge'.

Famine songs

'Skibbereen' is one of the three best-known about famine and hunger in Ireland. The others are 'The Famine Song' (Oh, the praties they grow small) and 'The Fields of Athenry'. Although about the Famine, the songs were not written at the time of the Famine but later in the nineteenth century or early twentieth century.¹ (Recent songs include 'Thousands are Sailing' by The Pogues and 'Famine' by Sinéad O'Connor.)

¹ For instance, 'The Famine Song' used to be quoted in anthologies as a song of the famine period. In fact, the air was learnt in South America and 'does not sound Irish', while words were written by A.P. Graves and first printed in 1897. 'Skibbereen' was written after the Famine, but there seems no agreement on the exact date. 'The Fields of Athenry' was first published in the 1880s with a very simple tune, very different from the modern hit recording by Paddy Reilly (words by Pete St John, 1979).

Their value in history teaching is twofold. First, the songs and the music provide excellent stimulus material. The Alias Acoustic Band's arrangement of 'The Famine Song' (in *Irish Songs, Tunes, Poetry and Speech of Rebellion, Resistance & Reconciliation*) is particularly effective in evoking a darkly tragic and threatening atmosphere.

Secondly, the songs underline the enduring mark the Famine left on Irish folk memory and the way in which the Famine was used by Irish nationalists to condemn British rule in Ireland, citing it as a spectacularly conclusive demonstration of the failure of the Act of Union of 1800 to provide fair and responsible government.

Political songs, such as 'Skibbereen', accused the British government of having conspired to destroy the Irish nation. The relation of tragic scenes was linked with a denunciation of oppression and calls for vengeance, as in the last stanza:

Oh father, dear, the day will come when on vengeance we will call
When Irishmen both stout and stern will rally one and all
I'll be the man to lead the van, beneath the flag of green
And loud and high we'll raise the cry, 'Revenge for Skibbereen'.

In 1913, at the height of the crisis over the Third Home Rule Bill, *Sinn Féin* reprinted a broadside - 'New song on Skibbereen where thousands patiently lay down and died for want of food'.

Such lines appear in songs circulated some time after the disaster. By contrast, contemporary ballads tried to sustain hope in a better future in Ireland or America or protested only against badly managed relief.

Famine in Ireland

The Oxford Companion to Irish History edited by S.J. Connolly, OUP, 1998, 1-19866-240-8, 185, 228-9

Famine has afflicted societies since the beginning of history. It may be defined as a persistent failure in food supplies over a prolonged period. It is something experienced by society, whereas starvation is something that affects individuals. During famines more people are likely to die of famine-related diseases than from starvation. The causes are complex. Adverse weather conditions (drought, excessive rain, intense cold) at crucial times, effects of war (scorched earth policies, the provisioning of armies, disruption of trade), pestilence and disease: all these individually or in combination may be to blame.

Famine is generally perceived as the result of a failure of food supplies, typically arising from the Malthusian pressure of population on resources. However some analysts, following the Indian economist Amartya Sen, argue that famine is less commonly caused by an absolute shortage of food than by the lack of 'entitlements' - that is, the existence of large numbers of persons who do not possess the means either of producing food or of acquiring it through purchase or through transfer payments sanctioned by the state or by custom. Famine thus becomes a product of political and social structures, rather than of neutral economic forces.

In Ireland over a period of six centuries from 1300 to 1900 there were up to 30 episodes of severe famine. Between 1290 and 1400 there were around a dozen, mostly clustering in the decades before and including the Great European Famine of 1315-17. Another dozen or so occurred between 1500 and 1750. After 1750 there were several periods of acute regional shortages, culminating in the Great Famine of 1845-9.

The famines experienced in Ireland over the centuries illustrate their nature both as event and structure. Bad weather to 1294-6 and 1308-10, for example, damaged grain crops, resulting in many deaths. In 1315-17 wet weather produced devastating famine throughout Europe, exacerbated in the Irish case by Edward Bruce's scorched earth policy. Heavy rains destroyed crops in 1330-1 and the price of wheat and oats rose manyfold. A century later in 1433 a severe famine led to 'the summer of slight acquaintance'. In 1504-5 continual rain and storms ruined crops, and cattle disease decimated livestock. The 17th century was also heralded by bad weather, famine, and disease. The rising of 1641 ravaged crops and precipitated famine. Two famines in the 18th century, 1728-9 and 1740-1, caused great suffering. The famine of 1740 is noteworthy as the first potato crisis; in terms of mortality rates, it may have been greater than the Great Famine of 1845-9. The latter earns the sobriquet because it was the last and best remembered. But for 'this great calamity', it is doubtful that Ireland would be regarded as more famine-prone than other European countries.

Great Famine (1845-9), caused by the failure, in three seasons out of four, of the potato crop. The harvest of 1845 was one-third deficient. In 1846 three-quarters of the crop were lost. Yields were average in 1847, but little had been sown as seed potatoes were scarce. In 1848, yields were only two-thirds of normal. An alternative measure of the crop loss is demonstrated by the fall in potato acreage. Before the Famine it was 1 million acres, falling to around a quarter of a million acres in 1847.

A fungal disease, *Phytophthora infestans*, commonly called potato blight, damaged the crops. Its origins are unclear, though bird droppings imported as fertilizer from South America have been suggested as a likely source. The first region of Europe to be affected by blight was Belgium in June 1845. Transmission to Ireland was swift, the first signs appearing in September 1845.

To cope with the loss of a large part of the staple diet of one-third of the population, relief measures were implemented by private organizations and by government. The Society of Friends was at the forefront, providing food, clothing, cooking equipment, seeds and money. Their kitchens dispensed soup in towns, cities, and rural districts. Religious houses, churches, and some local gentry were also involved in philanthropic work.

Government's response to the crisis was circumscribed by a range of influences. The prevailing ideology of *laissez-faire* held that any tampering with market forces would bankrupt landlords and dislocate trade. There was the belief that the collapse of the potato economy provided an opportunity for agricultural reorganization, through the consolidation of smallholdings and the removal of surplus population. (For many, indeed, the Famine, in line with the prevalent evangelical theology of the day, was seen as the workings of divine providence, acting to correct the ills within Irish society.) The government was also concerned to make Irish landlords meet the cost of a crisis widely blamed on their greed and negligence, and to ensure that local taxpayers did not evade their share of the burden of financing relief. As the crisis continued, repetition blunted the response of the British public to reports of Irish misery. Severe economic recession in Great Britain itself during 1847 further limited sympathy for Ireland's problems, as did the apparent ingratitude for help given displayed in the return of 36 repeal MPs in the general election of 1847 and the Young Ireland rebellion of 1848.

In the first year of famine, 1845-6, Sir Robert Peel's Tory government purchased Indian meal from America for sale from government depots, and inaugurated a programme of public works managed by grand juries and the Board of Works. The Whig government of Lord John Russell, which took office in June 1846, greatly extended the public works schemes, while refusing to interfere either in the internal market in food or in the export of agricultural produce. In February 1847 ideology was at last set aside and kitchens opened throughout the country to supply cooked food directly to the starving without cost or imposition of a 'work test'. This operation at its peak supplied 3 million meals daily. From September 1847, however, the government wound up the soup kitchens, insisting that further relief should come from the greatly expanded but still wholly inadequate workhouses run under the poor law.

The severity of the Great Famine is indicated by the widespread incidence of disease. The potato-eating population had become accustomed to a diet rich in vitamin C and quickly succumbed to scurvy. Symptoms of marasmus and kwashiorkor, although not identified as such, were described in the medical journals. The lack of vitamin A in the famine-constrained diet was manifest in xerophthalmia - a disease causing blindness - among workhouse children.

Typhus and relapsing fever were the most common diseases afflicting the weakened population. Both were transmitted by the body louse and famine conditions provided an ideal environment for spreading the infection as starving masses congregated in urban centres searching for food. Typhus affected the small blood vessels, especially the brain and skin vessels, which explains frequently described symptoms of delirium and stupor and the distinctive spotted rash. Relapsing fever, as the name implies, was characterized by numerous relapses. It usually invaded its victims through the skin. Popular names included 'gastric fever' and 'yellow fever', as some patients became jaundiced. Typhus and relapsing fever were no respecters of persons, afflicting rich and poor, old and young, though mortality among the rich was particularly high.

In the absence of official figures we will never know precisely how many died. Neither was there systematic enumeration of emigrants. Estimates of excess mortality range from half a million to just over one million; recent research supports the latter figure. The highest levels of mortality occurred in Connacht, and the lowest in Leinster. More died of disease than starvation; the old and the very young were particularly vulnerable.

The pace of evictions increased during the Famine. The ruthlessness of many landlords stemmed from two problems: drastic reduction in rent receipts and rising taxation. Experience varied from district to district. Reliable figures are unavailable before 1849, but in that year the constabulary recorded the eviction of over 90,000 people, increasing to over 100,000 in 1850.

The legacies of the Famine were several. The population declined by one-fifth between 1845 and 1851 and never regained its pre-Famine level. The cottier class was decimated, altering the social structure of Irish society. Many thousands escaped hunger by emigrating to Britain, North America, and Australia, accelerating an outward flow already established.

The immediate cause of the Great Famine was blight, but there were underlying forces that had resulted in 3 million people subsisting on the potato. One view would be that the disasters of 1845-9 represented the culmination of a long-term crisis resulting from rapid population growth against a background of economic decline. More recently some economic historians, pointing to the levelling off in population growth, to the progress of new, agriculturally based manufacturing industries such as brewing, distilling, and flour milling, and to improvements in transport, communications, and banking, have argued that the pre-Famine economy had not in fact 'ground to a halt'. In this perspective the failure of the potato should be seen as a massive exogenous blow dealt to an economy that had begun to adjust to changing market conditions. These contrasting perceptions are central to the debate on how far the Famine changed the course of Ireland's development in the 19th century. They also have at least an indirect bearing on the equally disputed question of whether the government of the United Kingdom, notwithstanding prevailing ideology, could have been expected to have done more to alleviate distress in a part of the world's richest nation.