

Famine in Ireland

State aid or self-help?

What was Ireland like in 1845?

Ireland in 1845 was part of the United Kingdom, governed from London, and was on the verge of a major disaster. Its population was over 8 million. Many lived on small plots of land on which it was possible to survive only because most of these people ate potatoes as the main part of their food. In 1845 the potato crop failed, destroyed by a fungus, the potato blight. It failed again in 1846 and 1848.

How severe was the suffering in Ireland during the famine?

All contemporary accounts emphasise the horrific conditions, with *'cowering wretches almost naked in the savage weather prowling in turnip fields ... little children, their bodies half-naked, their faces bloated yet wrinkled and of a pale greenish hue [colour] ... children who could never, oh it was too plain, grow up to be men and women.'* Daniel O'Connell, the Irish leader, told the House of Commons: *'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 her population will perish unless you come to her relief.'* By the time the famine ended in 1850, about one million people died of starvation or diseases associated with famine. A further million left the country, mainly migrating to North America and Britain.

What did the government do to help?

Successive British governments took three main measures to provide famine relief. *First*, they imported grain, Indian corn, into Ireland, partly to give people food to eat and partly to try to keep the price of food down. *Secondly*, they set up public works so that people could earn money to buy food. By February 1847 700,000 people were so employed but by the middle of the year nearly all work had ceased. *Thirdly*, soup kitchens provided food in the form of a porridge called 'stirabout'. This government aid was in addition to the shelter provided by overcrowded workhouses and the relief given by private charity, most notably by the Society of Friends (Quakers). The Quakers gave food, clothing and seed where they were most needed.

Did the government do enough?

Many people thought that the British government did not do enough to help relieve the suffering in Ireland. They thought that the government could have stopped the export of food from Ireland and could have given more money to relieve the suffering instead of making people earn money on public works.

Why did the government not do more?

The government's actions were, however, limited by two factors. *First*, there **was the policy of *laissez-faire*, the Victorian belief about the proper role of government. Victorians believed that the government's main duty was to maintain law and order, defend the realm, and keep public expenditure to the minimum. Governments should not interfere with the economy or the private lives of people. There should be a 'free market' for people to buy and sell goods as they wished. People should stand on their own two feet. To provide free food would take away the self-respect of Irish people, who would be better off earning their food. More importantly, it would stop private traders from making up for the shortage of food.**

Secondly, leading figures in England were suspicious of the Irish. They thought that the Irish were exaggerating the extent of suffering to extract money from England. At the Treasury (where the British government's money was managed), the most important civil servant was Charles Trevelyan. Unsympathetic to the Irish, thinking them a disorderly race, he was more interested in saving money than in saving lives.

What were the consequences of the Famine?

The Famine had important consequences for Ireland and, particularly, for relations between Britain and Ireland. Many in Ireland resented the actions of the government or at best saw them as inadequate. This helped to make Irish people even more bitter towards England. Such bitterness took root in the new Irish communities abroad, especially in America. It helped to motivate Irish nationalist movements, providing supporters of Irish Home Rule with an argument for demanding separation from Britain.

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Sources

1 '... Having for many years been intimately connected with the western portion of the County of Cork and possessing some small property there, I thought it right personally to investigate the truth of several lamentable accounts which had reached me of the appalling state of misery to which that part of the country was reduced.... I shall state simply what I saw there on reaching the spot I was surprised to find the wretched hamlet apparently deserted. I entered some of the hovels to ascertain the cause, and the scenes which presented themselves were such as no tongue or pen can convey the slightest idea of. In the first, six famished and ghastly skeletons, to all appearances dead, were huddled in a corner on some filthy straw, their sole covering what seemed a ragged horsecloth I approached with horror, and found by a low moaning they were alive - they were in fever ... In a few minutes I was surrounded by at least two hundred such phantoms, such frightful spectres as no words can describe Their demoniac yells are still ringing in my ears and their horrible images are fixed upon my brain

Nicholas Cummins, a magistrate of Cork, to the Duke of Wellington. The letter was also published in *The Times*, 24 December 1846.

2 The balance between consumption and production makes price. The market settles, and alone can settle, that price.... I beseech ... Government ... manfully to resist the ... idea that ... that it is within the competence of Government ... or even of the rich ... to supply to the poor those necessaries which it has pleased the Divine Providence for a while to withhold from them.

Edmund Burke, *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, 1800, distributed by Charles Trevelyan in 1846

3 Dependence on charity is not to be made an agreeable mode of life. (1845)
Do not encourage the idea of prohibiting exports, perfect Free Trade is the right course. (1846)
[By importing food] the government ... would come into competition with our merchants and upset all their calculations. (1846)

Too much has been done for the people. Under such treatment the people have grown worse instead of better, and we must try what independent exertion will do. (1847)

Charles Trevelyan on government policy during the Famine.

4 I cannot make up my mind entirely about the merchants. I know all the difficulties that arise when you begin to interfere with trade, but it is difficult to persuade a starving population that one class should be permitted to make 50 per cent profit by the sale of provisions whilst they are dying in want of these.

Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Lord Bessborough, who believed that merchants had 'done their best to keep prices up', 1847.

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1. Look at source 1.
 - a. Why do you think Mr Cummins went into the countryside near Skibbereen ?
 - b. How do you think Mr Cummins felt about what he saw? Choose some key words from his letter and include them in your answer.
2. Look at sources 2, 3 and 4.
 - a. What seems to have been Trevelyan's attitude towards people starving in Ireland?
 - b. What do you think Trevelyan's main concern was?
 - c. Does source 4 support Trevelyan's views? Give reasons for your answer.
3. Look at source 5, the cartoon from *Punch*
 - a. What is John Bull giving the Irish family?
 - b. What does the cartoon tell you about English attitudes towards Irish people and the Famine?



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, 1846