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Why 1,000,000 died

Putting the record straight on Ireland's famine,
1845 – 49

Andrew Blackmore

1995

The Famine was not just a result of British Government incompetence or the greed of a few landlords. Andrew Blackmore explores what happens when you have a system that puts profits for the few above all else.

The conditions for Irish peasants leading up to the famine accentuated what was to be the worst disaster in Europe in the 19th century. Before the famine struck nearly half of rural families lived in windowless, mud cabins of one room. They were the lucky ones. The unemployed roamed the country, begging and sleeping in ditches.

With a population of 8 million, land was scarce, and many families had to survive on half an acre of land. They could only do this by growing potatoes to feed them through the winter months.

When the potato blight (a type of fungus) struck in 1845, mass starvation was inevitable. Families who relied on the potato to keep them alive were left with nothing. Even those who grew grain or barley were faced with a stark choice; sell the food in order to pay the rent, or eat the food and be evicted.

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As the years went on, the blight continued. Millions lost everything, their homes, their few possessions, and of course, their lives.

The rich too had to tighten their belts. But not as much. In 1847, while the famine reached a peak of death and despair, the Dublin 'season' continued as before in a lively fashion. With the exception of a few notable cases, the rich felt their only obligation was to make a donation to charity. After that they were free to hunt and party, as they always had done. Lord Bessborough, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, who died in that year complained that what had made him poorly was not the famine but too much 'balls and drawing rooms'

These landlords continued to make valuable cash through the export of foodstuffs such as grain, as well as wool and flax. All through the famine they were exporting food that could have kept people alive. John Mitchell (who published the United Irishman) claimed that for every ship that came to Ireland with food, there were six ships sailing out.

As far as landlords were concerned they had the right to do so. The right of the rich few to sell food to the highest bidder, came before the needs of the majority for food for survival. And the right of the rich to collect rent came before the right to housing. The British government supported that 'right' by bringing in the 'Coercion Act' enabling it to declare martial law, and a curfew between sunset and sunrise wherever they wanted.

The 'Coercion Act' and other previously existing laws were used to evict tenants who could not pay rent. The soldiers and constabulary were used to protect food for export from the starving.

In order to avoid mass revolt the government set up public works schemes. Impoverished peasants were asked to build roads that went from nowhere to nowhere, for such low wages that they could hardly buy enough food to live on.

Even this work was not available for many people. For example, in Mayo in 1846, 400,000 people applied for 13,000 jobs.

Along with such a pathetic response, the government pushed much of the responsibility to feed the poor onto the shoulders of charities. Soup kitchens were set up, by religious groups and charities throughout Ireland. In some cases the soup was so watery that doctors would advise people not to drink it!

Even if the charities had been able to feed everyone that was not the point. The right of people to food and the right to life should have come before everything else.

The famine caused roughly 1,000,000 deaths and 1,500,000 emigrants. In the aftermath, the population of Ireland was to halve to 4,000,000. It is an example of a terrible tragedy, but one that is inevitable only when the profit motive comes before people.