

The potato famine of 1845

Business



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Imagine living solely on one food crop such as corn or lettuce. Would you not become bored with eating the same food every day? That's how the Irish lived. Around the time of the potato famine of 1845, approximately one-half of Ireland, mostly the ones in poverty, depended only on potatoes for food (Moykr). Needless to say, the potatoes contained good nutrients needed to keep the Irish alive.

They never thought about what would happen if something happened to the potatoes. The Great Potato Famine made the Irish people aware of their dependence on potatoes. Potatoes are thought to have begun near Lake Titicaca, in Peru, thousands of years ago. From there, the potatoes spread because humans liked them and wanted to have potatoes where they lived. They spread to Europe, where they became a major food staple in Ireland.

Then came *Phytophthora infestans*, the potato-killing fungus, which caused one of the worst, if not the worst, famine of the 19th century. As one man quotes, " This was Western Europe's worst modern peacetime catastrophe with a million people dying of starvation, disease, and exposure and another million fleeing their homeland as refugees, seeking safety in England and the United States" (Newsinger). The Great Potato Famine began its destructive path in Toluca Valley, Mexico. It spread quickly to Europe, presumably by boat, and thus began the Great Potato Famine (Boyd). " In 1845 Ireland was extraordinarily dependent on a single subsistence crop-the potato.

Out of a population of eight and a half million, over a million and a half landless laborers and their families had no other significant source of food. Three million more, from smallholding and cottier families, were also very

largely dependent on the crop. Even the wealthier Irish consumed considerably more potatoes than the British, but it was the rural poor who were most at risk if the crop failed” (Gray 31). The population in Ireland at the time was around eight million people, making Ireland become the most densely populated country in Europe. Around three million people lived in great poverty as laborers. “ The three classes were wealthy and powerful landowners (called landlords), farmers, and farm laborers” (Bartoletti 19).

Working men would eat up to 14 pounds of potatoes a day, when women and children aged ten or older would eat about 11 pounds. Younger children would consume around 5 pounds of potatoes per day. The Irish would eat potatoes for breakfast, lunch, and dinner with salt, cabbage, or fish if they had it. “ An estimated seven million tons of potatoes were required each year for human consumption by the 1800’s” (Gray 32). “ The weather in Ireland has always been fickle, but the weather during the summer of 1845 was worse than the old people could remember. First the July days burned hot, much hotter than usual.

After several days, the hot spell ended and the weather turned gloomy, cold, and damp. For three weeks in August, heavy rains fell every day...’The old people all said they never saw such a coloured sky before,’ said Mr. Foley, a farmer from county Wicklow.

‘ The people went to bed in fear and dread that some great calamity was about to befall them’” (Bartoletti 5-8). At the beginning of the summer of 1845, the potato crops in Ireland were perfectly fine. Without warning, a mist came, then there were great storms. Farmers began to see brown splotches

spreading across the plants. The plants began to droop as they started to rot.

Overnight, many fields were covered in black, no longer edible. The new fungus, *Phytophthora infestans*, had invaded Ireland (Meltzer 47-48).

Although the fungus only infected about forty percent of the potato crops, many people were hurt by it. The Irish people tried everything they could to stop the fungus. This disease traveled around North America in 1842 from Nova Scotia southward to Boston. The most likely way it reached Ireland was that a diseased potato was accidentally brought on a boat from North America to Europe, spreading the fungus.

The people tried to live on berries and other crops, which was difficult since they were extremely dependent on potatoes prior to the famine. The Irish people wore rags because they sold all of their other clothes. They lived in poverty. Groups of indigent Irish men scavenged the roads for any scrap of food. One observer quoted that the men were “ more like famishing wolves than men” (Meltzer 48-50). “ The hardest hit were inevitably the rural poor, the landless laborers, cottiers, and small farmers: the number of landless laborers was to fall by over a quarter and of small farmers by nearly half in the course of the Famine” (Newsinger).

The shops on market day would be filled to their brims with food, but the Irish were so poor from the blight that they couldn't afford the food.

According to John Mitchel, “ It was not the failure of the potato crop that killed the Irish, but Political Economy” (Newsinger). One mother asked for just enough money to purchase a coffin for her deceased child. “ We either

met a coffin or a funeral at every hundred yards.” said James Mahony, an artist (Bartoletti 67). The United States of America attempted to help by importing cornmeal, but the Irish did not like it.

Also, it didn't have the nutrients that the Irish needed. By August 1847, up to three million people were getting rations at soup kitchens. Many Irish farms still exported grain, meat, and other foods to the United Kingdom because their people were too poor to afford them (Mokyr). Not many deaths occurred in the first year of the famine. Some historians say they provided enough in the second year, but others oppose.

Lord John Russell acceded to bring in extra Indian corn, but it would not be imported until December. The winter was harsh. “ Over three hundred thousand workers trudged five to seven miles each day through snowdrifts, cut by icy [sic] winds...

The strongest men were reduced to mere skeletons. They could be seen daily with their clothes hanging on them like ghosts” (Bartoletti 50-61). Not many people died solely from starvation, but they were so malnourished that it weakened their immune systems. This led to harmful, if not fatal, diseases. The first were “ social infections”.

There were also cases of typhus, also known as “ black fever”, and “ yellow fever”. Dysentery was also a problem because of poorly cooked maize. Diarrhea, measles, and tuberculosis spread as people's immune systems weakened more and more. These infectious diseases were the cause of almost one third of the deaths (Gray 56-57). The United Kingdom's

government ended up spending around seven million dollars to try to help Ireland.

This is very different than the twenty million dollars spent on reimbursing slave owners when slavery ended in 1833. Of course, the slaves received no money for their work, but their owners who whipped them and were extremely mean to them were given money. One family who had owned 2,000 slaves was bestowed 80,000 dollars. Some people were aggravated because the money could've gone to helping keep the Irish alive later. The Sultan of Turkey donated 10,000 Liras to help the Irish, but Queen Victoria only donated 1,000. The British ambassador eventually got the Sultan to lower his donation to 1,000 and the Queen upped her donation to 2,000 because she was embarrassed (Newsinger).

“ Back then, however, some coldly blamed the Irish themselves for their troubles and said they got what they deserved. Anyhow, it would all work out for the best in the end. The best? Ireland lost two million people because of the potato famine. One fourth of the total population. A million died of starvation and of diseases like cholera that struck when hunger weakened the body. And a million more fled their homeland” (Meltzer 56).

There are other enemies of the Irish potatoes. There are at least 46 fungal, 18 viral, 6 bacterial, and 5 worm diseases, but there are many others that we do not know about. Another main enemy is the Colorado potato beetle, which will eat any potato. Plant pathologists are trying to find a solution to these problems (Meltzer 49). “ Late blight is the worst agricultural disaster in the world because it not only affects the production of food in Asia, Africa,

and Latin America, but also rural employment, and the introduction and use of pesticides.

.. Late blight, the disease caused by the fungus *Phytophthora infestans*, affects potato crops from every climate zone, leading to US \$2.5 billion in losses annually and causing developing countries to spend an additional \$750 million for pesticides” (Boyd). In 1998, a new strain of the same fungus, *Phytophthora infestans*, returned, threatening potato crops worldwide. Peru, Uganda, and Canada were a few of the many countries affected by this fungus.

A “cotton-like film” stretches across the leaf, suffocating it quickly. Because of the El Niño effect, approximately 6,000,000 acres in the Peruvian Andes are threatened by the fungus. Around 125,000,000 acres have received damage which means the fungus has affected 10% of Peru’s crops. It also spreads down to the roots and the potatoes (Boyd). The International Potato Center in Peru created a hybrid potato that is immune to the deadly disease. When the blight that hit Ireland in 1845 returned, it was stronger than the older pesticides, so these hybrid potatoes were needed (Boyd).

I think that people should be more aware of this natural disaster. I don’t think many people know much about this, but they should. Considering the technological advancements in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this should not happen again. It is much easier now than it was in 1845 to import other foods from other countries. Also, Ireland is not nearly as dependent on potatoes as they were back then.

Their food preferences are more diverse, and they grow more food crops.

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