5. –The Great Hunger An Gorta Mor

Potatoes were the staple food of a **growing** population at the time. When blight (a form of plant disease) struck potato crops nationwide in 1845, 1846 and 1847 disaster followed. Potatoes were inedible and people began to starve to death. The response of the British government also contributed to the disaster – trade agreements were still controlled by London. While hundreds of thousands of people were suffering from extreme hunger, Ireland was forced to export abundant harvests of wheat and dairy products to Britain and further overseas.

Between 1845 and 1851 two million people died or were forced to emigrate from Ireland. The population of Ireland has never since reached its pre-famine level of approximately 8 million.

Ireland's history of emigration continued from this point onwards with the majority of Irish emigrants going to the United States of America.

The Great Hunger was caused by:

1 – Racism, 2 – indifference, 3 - Penal Laws, 4- Starvation, 5,- Disease, 6, – Gynecide?

According to an article in the New York Times, February 24, 1995, "there was no Irish potato famine, the starvation of Ireland was planned in London. They did not die from lack of potatoes, they died from lack of food".

In 1845 absentee English landowners owned 95 percent of the land in Ireland as a result of harsh Penal Laws. Penal laws imposed on the Irish in 1695 "forbade Catholics from owning land, practicing their religion, speaking their Gaelic language, fishing in any waters, attending a Catholic school, owning a gun, marrying a Protestant. joining the military or civil guards, and much more…" It was the total subjugation and genocide of the Irish Catholic Race.

In Parliament, members referred to the landless Irish Catholics as ignorant, lazy, uncouth, apes, monkeys and papists.

Professor Lecky said in his History of Ireland in the 18th Century... "the object of the Penal Laws was three-fold: to reduce the Irish Catholic to a condition of:

1: extreme poverty

2: brutal ignorance and

3: to disassociate them from the soil"

Later he would add "to expatriate the race"

When the potato plight (root rot) struck in August 1845, Ireland was a member state of the United Kingdom, the greatest economic and military power on earth.

In August 1845 tenant farmers (5 or less acres) noticed the green potato stalks were turning yellow and when they dug up the stalks the potatoes were black and mushy. This blight (root rot) affected most of the potato crops in Ireland, leaving the people without enough food for the upcoming winter

of 1846, one of the worst winters in Ireland's history. There were not sufficient seed potatoes for the upcoming spring plantings.

An acre of potatoes could sustain a family of six for one year.

Because tenant farmers could not pay the rent to the absentee estate owners, their cabins were torn or burned down, sometimes with the occupants inside.

They died in their cabins from hunger and disease by the hundreds of thousands.

Starving diseased people walked in the fields and Boreens eating grass, tree bark, worms and frog bread and when they died their bodies were thrown into ditches without the benefits of a proper burial, their identities gone forever. But thanks to you and I, never forgotten

In a Letter to the editor Cork Examiner, 1847...the people are in a starving state, The Poor House is crowded with people dying 10/20 a day...

"The London Times, 1849...604 homes have been deliberately leveled in the last two years, nothing could be more wretched in Kilmurry Co Cork."

Poor Laws - One hundred and thirty workhouses were built in Ireland where Catholics lived and worked to pay for their keep. Many were forced to convert from Catholicism before gaining acceptance into workhouses.

At night men and women were separated, men/boys upstairs women/girls on ground floors. Men built walls and ditches to nowhere, women did housework.

An estimated 350,000 people died in workhouses. A million or more died from starvation and disease, another two million or more would leave their families, friends and homes forever to go to foreign lands.

England refused to feed their starving SUBJECTS. Absentee estate owner George Trevelyan a member of the United Kingdom's Parliament said:

"it was God's way of reducing the population and punishing the backwards and inefficient Irish Catholics because the majority of them were ignorant and lazy Papists"

During the Great Hunger, grain, cattle and other food stuff were shipped out of Ireland under armed guard to markets in England.

The Fields of Athenry

"By a lonely prison wall

I heard a young girl calling

Michael they are taking you away

For you stole Trevelyans corn

So the young might see the morn

Now a prison ship lay waiting in the bay

Chorus:

Low lie the fields of Athenry

Where once we watched the small free birds fly

Our love was on the wing

We had Dreams and songs to sing

It's so lonely round the fields of Athenry

By a lonely prison wall

I heard a young man calling

Nothing matters Mary when you're free

Against the famine and the crown

I rebelled they cut me down

Now you must raise our child with dignity

Chorus

By a lonely harbor wall

She watched the last star falling

As the prison ship sailed out against the sky

For she lives to hope and pray

For her love in Botany bay

It's so lonely around the fields of Athenry

The British government bears most of the responsibility for failing to take the action needed to prevent starvation and the loss of life on a scale never seen before. The party in the power at the time, the Whigs led by Prime Minister Lord John Russell, believed in the political doctrine of laissez-faire, which advocated that governments should not interfere in the operation of the free market for fear of disrupting trade and preventing prices finding their own true level.

They also believed the Irish were mainly to blame for their plight because they had outdated and inefficient farming systems. Many believed the Irish were lazy and didn't deserve help.

Some civil servants like Charles Trevelyan even believed that the famine was God's way of ridding Ireland of excess population. It would therefore be sinful to interfere and help the Irish as that would be thwarting God's will.

This was a dangerous belief considering that Trevelyan was the man appointed to oversee the famine crisis. True to his beliefs and those of his colleagues in the Whig Party, Trevelyan did little to provide food and help for the starving.

What should the English government have done?

The historian James Donnelly in his book, The Great Irish Potato Famine, has identified six key strategies that could have alleviated the suffering and saved hundreds of thousands of lives.

1. The government could have prevented Irish wheat and barley from being exported once it was clear that the potato crop had failed. It was advised to do so by its own officials including Sir Charles Routh who urged that the ports should be closed so food could not leave the country. The government refused for fear of distorting the market. It meant that grain that could have been used to feed the starving was instead exported to maintain the profits of wealthy merchants and landowners.

2. The soup kitchens should have stayed open much longer. The kitchens were only in operation for about six months between March and September 1847. During this time, they were able to feed up to three million people cheaply and effectively. They were closed down even though the potato crop failed again in 1847.

3. The government introduced a series of public works to enable the poor to earn money to buy food. However, the wages were too low and should have been increased significantly so that labourers could afford the escalating food prices.

4. The poor law system, which provided relief for the destitute in various way but most notably within workhouses, needed to be less restrictive. Numerous bureaucratic obstacles were used to avoid giving generous relief to the starving. Again, the reason was to keep down costs and to promote self-reliance.

5. The government could have stopped landlords evicting tenants from their homes because they were unable to pay their rents due to the crop failures. Donnelly estimates that up to 500,000 people were evicted between 1846 and 1854.

6. Finally, the government should have accepted the famine crisis as a responsibility of the British Empire and been prepared to bear the costs of providing help. Instead, it treated the crisis as a local Irish issue that the Irish themselves should pay for, something they were clearly unable to do under the circumstances because most of the country's wealth was in the hands of British owners.

The government, of course, did none of these things regardless of how the death toll mounted.

The following provided assistance during the Great Hunger:

The Choctaw Indian Nation of Tribes $170.00

Three thousand Quakers in Ireland and around the world.

Ladies Relief Associations of Dublin and Belfast

Irish immigrants in American

Queen Victoria Two thousand pounds

American railroad companies

The Ottoman Sultan, Abdulmecid sent 5 ships of food and money to the port of Drogheda. Today the city seal of Drogheda has an Islamic emblem in recognition of the efforts to feed our starving people.

Fr. William Flannely of the Catholic Church stated in a letter dated April 1849 to Daniel Murry, Archbishop of Dublin that the Catholic Church was mainly interested in increasing its land holdings in Ireland not in helping their people. The Church took advantage of the prevailing destitution to increase its land holding.