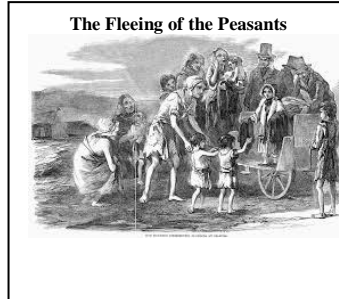


# Aim #13: Why is the Irish Potato Famine so important?

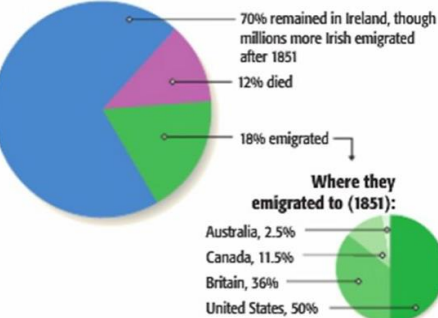
## Mini Lecture

- Changes in agricultural practices and ideas about trade, brought forth by the Agricultural & Industrial Revolutions, combined for terrible results- such as the **Irish Potato Famine**.
- In the 1840s, Ireland was part of the United Kingdom (Britain). A few wealthy Protestant Irish families owned the country's large farms and the poor Catholic Irish worked on these farms for very low wages.
- Following the practices of the Agricultural Revolution, the wealthy landowners grew **cash crops** (profit crops). They gave their tenant farmers small plots to grow food crops for themselves.
- Irish peasants found potatoes the best to grow- easy to plant in Ireland's soggy & thick soil & very nourishing. Therefore, small farmers planted no other crop.
- 1845-1851, a disease (**blight**) caused by fungus from America destroyed the yearly potato crop. The Irish were so dependent on the potato that without it, a massive deadly famine gripped Ireland.
- The British government was not prepared to handle this disaster & were incompetent. At first, they did open up soup kitchens, but stopped them when their banks experienced financial troubles.
- This loss of potatoes turned into a terrible tragedy under the control of the wealthiest country – England
- The British then turned the problem over to the Irish Poor Law system-set up workhouses where poor people could live & work for their aid. They wanted the Irish to be self-reliant. There were no facilities for sick & dying people who were too weak to work.
- Though tenants had no food, wealthy landlords could still demand they pay their rents. When the starving tenants were unable to come up with the money or framework, the landlords evicted them. British troops often forced the evictions.
- The famine and the treatment of the Irish by the British sparked a mass exodus from Ireland- as many as 2 million emigrated, half going to the U.S. Another 500-750,000 people starved to death or died from diseases caused by malnutrition.



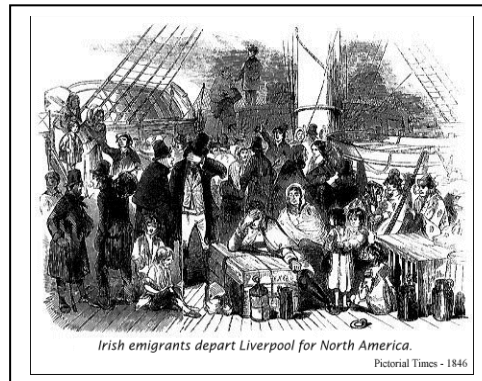
### The Great Famine, 1845–1851

#### Fate of the Irish during the famine:



Sources: R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600–1972*; D. Fitzpatrick, *Irish Emigration, 1804–1921*

### Document 7



**Past as Prologue: Blair Faults Britain in Irish Potato Blight**

By SARAH LYALL

LONDON, June 2 — In Ireland, even distant history is never very far away. So when Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister, expressed regret over the weekend about Britain's role in the potato famine that devastated Ireland in the mid-19th century, he inserted himself into a debate that seems almost as fresh as if the famine took place in the 19th century instead of the 1840s.

Through his statement was the straightforward admission of culpability by a British Prime Minister yet, Mr. Blair stopped short of making a full apology on behalf of his country. Instead, in a letter to the organizers of an event commemorating the famine's 150th anniversary, he spoke regretfully of the "deep scars" caused by the famine, which left about 1.2 million people dead of starvation or famine-related disease and led to a mass emigration as people fled an increasingly dire situation at home.

"Those who governed in London at the time failed their people through standing by while a crop failure triggered one of the most massive human tragedies," the Prime Minister said in the letter, which was read aloud on Saturday in Millstreet, County Cork, by the Irish actor Gabriel Byrne at a concert marking the end of three years of events commemorating the famine.

"That one million people died in what was then part of the richest and most powerful nation in the world is something that still causes pain as we reflect on it today," the letter said.

Cattle from Ireland even as the poor starved.

Bertie Ahern, leader of the Fianna Fail, Ireland's largest political party, said two years ago that the famine, which removed anti-British violence in Ireland and paved the way for the country's eventual partition and for the start of the "troubles" in Northern Ireland, marked the low point in Britain's relationship with Ireland. It would help, he said then, if Britain would apologize.

hands took part, as an inappropriate festive way to commemorate a tragic era.

"It has been described as one great big party, but I can't think of a worse description for an event to recall the proportions of a famine which killed a million of our people in the most appalling circumstances," Joe Murray, a spokesman for Action from Ireland, a relief organization, told the Daily Telegraph. "It smacks of disaster on the shores of the Aegean."

effect it would have a round of talks on the pros and cons, which are the Belfast on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, Irish support keeping Blair under British control of Blair's remarks as they said they would make once to his standing in it "I don't think anyone give for matters which are in their lifetime in

### Document 8

"The famine was a defining event in the history of Ireland and Britain. It has left deep scars. Those who governed in London at the time failed their people through standing by while a crop failure turned into a massive human tragedy. That one million people died in what was then part of the richest and most powerful nation in the world is something that still causes pain as we reflect on it today. We must not forget such a dreadful event"

— Prime Minister Tony Blair, 1997

### Review Questions:

1. What caused the Irish Potato Famine? (was it a natural disaster or a human-made disaster?)
2. What were the results and effects of the Irish Potato Famine?
3. Why did the Irish Potato Famine/Hunger cause Irish resentment toward the British?

### Enduring Issue:

Scarcity of resources exists in every society.

## What were the causes and effects of the Irish Potato Famine?

### Introduction: What is famine?

The Neolithic Revolution led to settled societies that depended on crops for food. Many societies experienced food surpluses, or an excess of food. Other societies experienced the opposite, famines. A famine is an extreme scarcity or shortage of food. According to [Oxfam International](#), famine is caused by "triple failure:"

- (1) **Production Failure:** Crops fail due to a bacteria or a natural disaster like a drought or flood makes it difficult to maintain crops
- (2) **Access Failure:** Food is too expensive or located too far away
- (3) **Response Failure:** There is not the infrastructure and services to respond to the famine and/or the governments does not intervene quickly enough to address the famine

**Directions:** As you read the documents below, identify whether the document is a **cause** or an **effect**. Also, identify the cause- P (Production), A (Access), R (Response) Failure.

### Document 1

The Famine began quite mysteriously in September **1845** as leaves on potato plants suddenly turned black and curled, then rotted, seemingly the result of a fog that had wafted across the fields of Ireland. The cause was actually an airborne fungus (*phytophthora infestans*) originally transported in the holds of ships traveling from North America to England.

Winds from southern England carried the fungus to the countryside around Dublin. The blight spread throughout the fields as fungal spores settled on the leaves of healthy potato plants, multiplied and were carried in the millions by cool breezes to surrounding plants. Under ideal moist conditions, a single infected potato plant could infect thousands more in just a few days.

The attacked plants fermented while providing the nourishment the fungus needed to live, emitting a nauseous stench as they blackened and withered in front of the disbelieving eyes of Irish peasants. There had been crop failures in the past due to weather and other diseases, but this strange new failure was unlike anything ever seen. Potatoes dug out of the ground at first looked edible, but shriveled and rotted within days. The potatoes had been attacked by the same fungus that had destroyed the plant leaves above ground.

### Document 2

Prime Minister Peel came up with his own solution to the food problem. Without informing his own Conservative (Tory) government, he secretly purchased two shipments of inexpensive Indian corn (maize) directly from America to be distributed to the Irish. But problems arose as soon as the maize arrived in Ireland. It needed to be ground into digestible corn meal and there weren't enough mills available amid a nation of potato farmers. Mills that did process the maize discovered the pebble-like grain had to be ground twice.

To distribute the corn meal, a practical, business-like plan was developed in which the Relief Commission sold the meal at cost to local relief committees which in turn sold it at cost to the Irish at just one penny per pound. But peasants soon ran out of money and most landowners failed to contribute any money to maintain the relief effort.

The corn meal itself also caused problems. Normally, the Irish ate enormous meals of boiled potatoes three times a day. A working man might eat up to fourteen pounds each day. They found Indian corn to be an unsatisfying substitute. Peasants nicknamed the bright yellow substance 'Peel's brimstone.' It was difficult to cook, hard to digest and caused diarrhea. Most of all, it lacked the belly-filling bulk of the potato. It also lacked Vitamin C and resulted in scurvy, a condition previously unknown in Ireland due to the normal consumption of potatoes rich in Vitamin C.

Out of necessity, the Irish grew accustomed to the corn meal. But by June 1846 supplies were exhausted. The Relief Commission estimated that four million Irish would need to be fed during the spring and summer of 1846, since nearly £3 million worth of potatoes had been lost in the first year of the Famine. But Peel had imported only about £100,000 worth of Indian corn from America and Trevelyan made no effort to replenish the limited supply.

### Document 3

The British government's efforts to relieve the famine were controversial. Prime Minister Charles Trevelyan replaced PM Peel and was in charge of Irish relief efforts during the famine. He believed in minimal intervention and attempted to encourage the Irish to be more self-reliant. He wrote, "...Besides, the greatest improvement of all which could take place in Ireland would be to teach the other people to depend upon themselves for developing the resources of the country, instead of [relying on] the assistance of the government on every occasion..."

### Document 4

The Irish landowners themselves were expected to provide relief. However, when the poor and starving ran out of money to pay rent, the landlords soon ran out of funds with which to support them. The British government limited their help to loans, soup kitchens, and providing employment on road building and other public works. Throughout the famine, many Irish farms continued to export other high-quality foods to Britain because the Irish poor did not have the money to purchase them.

### Document 5

I did not see a child playing in the streets or on the roads; no children are to be seen outside the doors but a few sick and dying children. In the districts which are now being depopulated by starvation, coffins are only used for the more wealthy. The majority were taken to the grave without any coffin, and buried in their rags: in some instances even the rags are taken from the corpse to cover some still living body.

On arriving at Cappagh, in the first house I saw a dead child lying in a corner of the house, and two children, pale as death, with their heads hanging down upon their breasts sitting by a small fire. The father had died on the road coming home from work. One of the children, a lad seventeen years of age, had been found, in the absence of his mother, who was looking for food, lying dead, with his legs held out of the fire by the little child which I then saw lying dead. Two other children had also died. The mother and the two children still alive had lived on one dish of barley for the last four days. On entering another house the doctor said, "Look there, Sir, you can't tell whether they are boys or girls." Taking up a skeleton child, he said, "Here is the way it is with them all; their legs swing and rock like the legs of a doll, they have the smell of mice."

### Document 6

... "I started from Cork, by the mail [coach] (says our informant), for Skibbereen and saw little until we came to Clonakilty, where the coach stopped for breakfast; and here, for the first time, the horrors of the poverty became visible, in the vast number of famished poor, who flocked around the coach to beg alms: amongst them was a woman carrying in her arms the corpse of a fine child, and making the most distressing appeal to the passengers for aid to enable her to purchase a coffin and bury her dear little baby. This horrible spectacle induced me to make some inquiry about her, when I learned from the people of the hotel that each day brings dozens of such applicants into the town. . ."