The potato famine in Ireland

Potatoes arrive in Ireland

The potato originated in the Andes Mountains of Peru, South America. In the early 1500s, Spanish conquerors brought it back to Europe and, in about 1590, potatoes were introduced to Ireland. There, farmers quickly discovered they thrived in their country's cool, moist soil with very little labour and could feed a large family for a year, with the leftovers going to the family's animals.



Irish Famine Memorial, Custom House Quay, Dublin

The potato blight

Ireland in the mid-1800s was an agricultural nation, populated by eight million people who were among the poorest in the Western World and almost totally dependent on one crop: potatoes, and, specifically, the Lumper variety. Since potatoes could be propagated vegetatively, all of them were clones, genetically identical to one another. But evolutionary theory suggests that populations with low genetic variation are more vulnerable to changing environmental conditions than populations with high genetic variation. That is why the genetically identical lumper potatoes were all susceptible to a rot caused by *Phytophthora infestans*, which turned non-resistant potatoes to inedible slime. No cure existed in Ireland for the dreaded 'potato blight' and, even if a cure had existed, the people on the land would not have been able to afford it. It was not until 1882, almost 40 years after the famine, that scientists discovered a cure for *Phytophthora infestans*: a solution of copper sulphate sprayed before the fungus gained root.

How the disease spread

Sporadic potato crop failures had already plagued Ireland in the 1700s and early 1800s. In 1844, the blight caused by a fungus had been identified in America, France and in the Isle of Wight, but the wet and mild summer of 1845 had the perfect weather conditions for this disease to spread in Ireland, too.

Diseased potatoes used as planters sprouted diseased shoots. Not all of the potatoes were infected the first year, so farmers replanted the same potatoes during the next few years, hoping for better results. However, the situation worsened as the spores spread.

The consequences

Lasting for six years, the Irish Famine, known as "The Great Hunger", was the great turning point in Irish history. It changed the society forever, reducing the population by 2 million people (25% of the total): half of these died of starvation or diseases associated with the famine, and half emigrated to North America or Great Britain. The famine led to severe poverty and homelessness, which in turn led to unsanitary conditions and diseases such as cholera, dysentery, scurvy, typhus and lice infestations.

The horrors of the potato famine were worsened by the inadequacy of relief efforts by the British Government, which was sharply criticised for its *laissez-faire* economic policy and particularly because it allowed food to be exported to other countries while Ireland was starving. That was the consequence of the Protestant evangelical belief in divine Providence, and the ethnic prejudice (called moralism) of the educated British middle classes against the Catholic Irish, guilty of being lazy, inefficient, violent and responsible for the calamity.

guilty: *colpevole*
lice: *pidocchi*
planter: *pianta da semina*
potato blight: *peronospora della patata*
relief efforts: *soccorsi*
scurvy: *scorbuto*
slime: *poltiglia*

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1 Find the words which correspond to these definitions.

1. Extreme and general scarcity of food. .....
2. Anything left or remaining from a larger amount. .....
3. A condition of great weakness or death due to lack of food. .....
4. A small wingless insect with sucking mouthparts that lives on humans and animals. .....
5. Disease caused by a lack of vitamin C. .....
6. Any sticky, mostly liquid matter. .....
7. A blue crystal used in agriculture to kill fungus. .....
8. Plant disease marked by breakdown of tissues and caused especially by fungi or bacteria. .....

2 Read the text and write questions for the given answers.

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1. Potatoes were introduced to Ireland around 1590.

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2. Ireland was essentially an agricultural country.

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3. Because the Lumper variety had low genetic variation, so it was more vulnerable to the rot caused by *Phytophthora infestans*.

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4. The potato blight was cured with a solution of copper sulphate sprayed before the fungus had gained root.

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5. The population was reduced by 2 million people.

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6. The most widespread diseases were cholera, dysentery, scurvy and typhus.

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7. No, the relief efforts by the British Government were completely inadequate.

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8. The Irish were considered by the British middle class to be lazy, inefficient, violent and responsible for the calamity.

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