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The Third Horseman: Preventability Versus Apocalypse in the Great Famine of 1315 and the Irish Potato Famine

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The Third Horseman:

Preventability Versus Apocalypse in the Great Famine of 1315 and the Irish Potato Famine

Luke Ziegler

Abstract

Famine is a huge problem for societies, even in the modern world. Throughout history, famine has reared its ugly head and brought about demographic and societal collapse. The Great Famine of 1315 and the Irish Potato Famine, despite their differences, had similar underlying factors of land management and overpopulation paired with an environmental catalyst, and also show that governmental response has the potential to both cause and prevent a famine, but only if the scale of the problem is limited. They both examine the question of national identity and create a multitude of debates in later historiography. Although these two crises were separated by 500 years, they share geographic similarities as well as similar causative factors.

In terms of differences, however, the Great Famine was a continent wide catastrophe; nothing could have been done to prevent it. The Irish Famine, on the other hand, raises questions of preventability and concerns over culpability on the part of the British government. They also show how a disaster can shape identity. Despite the scale of the Great Famine, it has been paid relatively little attention in later scholarship, while in the same amount of time the Potato Famine has moved through three historiographical camps. The Potato Famine has been formative in the Irish identity, especially later during the Troubles. It contributed to a narrative of oppression and subjugation felt by the Irish people at the hands of the English. Each of these famines wrought devastation on their respective societies and created some of the worst disasters in human history.

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Introduction

Famine is a crisis that people are still at a loss to navigate. It is one of the few societal problems that receives its own attention in Revelation. John of Patmos wrote, “There before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, ‘Two pounds of wheat for a day’s wages, and six pounds of barley for a day’s wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!’”¹ Alongside death, war, and conquest, famine still plagues the modern world.

What causes a general food shortage? When does a food shortage become a famine? There are no simple answers to these questions, particularly when scholars cannot even completely agree on a single definition of “famine.” Cormac Ó Grada in his *Famine: A Short History*, defines famine as, “A shortage of food or purchasing power that leads directly to excess mortality from starvation or hunger-induced diseases.”² Ó Grada enumerates other methods used to define famine: quantitatively, etymologically, and even narratively, but there is not a consensus. Famines are complicated by different social, political, and environmental contexts across the historical and global landscape. The Great Famine of 1315 and the Irish Potato Famine of 1845-48 both wrought devastation on society, but represent vastly different socio-political paradigms. Both events raise different historiographical questions and tie into historical memory and identity differently. The 1315 Famine and the Irish Potato Famine, despite their differences, had similar underlying factors of land management and overpopulation paired with an environmental catalyst, and also show that governmental response has the potential to both cause and prevent a famine, but only if the scale of the problem is limited. A cataclysmic

¹ Revelation 5:5-6 NIV.

² Cormac Ó Grada, *Famine: a Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 4.

environmental event is not preventable, but without that government interventions are more effective. There were changes in England in the intervening 500 years to agriculture and agricultural infrastructure, such as dikes, diversity of crops, and diversification of the economy. However, in Ireland, a regional monoculture created an environment for a perfect storm in which one crop failure led to a crisis.

These two famines, although separated by time, occurred in relatively similar geographies. English speaking sources made research more accessible. Despite their relative similarities, they were not totally analogous. The different temporal and social settings allowed for an examination of famine in a pre- and post-industrial world. The key similarities of geographic, linguistic, and cultural contexts contrasted with the obvious differences centered the discussion of these two famines.

The first of these two famines was a continent-wide problem. The summer of 1315 experienced torrential rainfall, which ruined crops across the European continent, as well as the British Isles. When it came time to harvest that autumn, all the crops had been destroyed by the flooding. This uncommonly wet and cold weather persisted until 1317, and a livestock disease remained until 1322. The weather was so cold that the Baltic Sea froze over in 1316.³ The successive bad harvests caused a collapse of grain markets and distribution. In France, the price of cereal grains rose by 800%.⁴ Even in areas that were not densely populated, like the Northeast of England, the widespread catastrophe of the famine was still felt.⁵ The medieval feudal government was not the bureaucratic machine of Westminster in the 21st century, nor even that of the 19th, and consequently was not equipped administratively to handle a crisis of that

³ William Chester Jordan, *The Great Famine: Northern Europe in the Early 14th Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 18.

⁴ Ibid., 50.

⁵ Dodds, 54.

magnitude, nor was the king, Edward II, one of the weaker of the medieval English monarchs. Furthermore, the famine only exacerbated the war with the Scots, as Edward needed grain for his war and the famine caused an already unstable Northern England to become even more lawless, as the Scots raided the countryside and crime and petty theft rose.⁶

The Irish Potato Famine, in contrast to the Great Famine, was regional and not continent wide. In the summer of 1845, a fungus infested Irish potatoes, leading to a disastrous harvest that autumn. The fungus was not limited to Ireland, and affected England, America, and areas on the European continent. However, the famine was localized to Ireland. The potato was the staple crop for the Irish peasant due its dependability, high nutritional value, and low land needs. An acre and a half could provide a family of six with enough food for a year. Irish farmers would grow potatoes to feed their families, and grow any wheat they could to sell for cash. The crop failure caused many Irish paupers to be on the brink of starvation. In response, the British Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, attempted relief measures, but British racial prejudices against the Irish, laissez-faire ideology of the Whigs, and concepts that poverty was self-inflicted crippled relief efforts. As a result, many Irish historians study how much blame to assign to Britain for the disastrous impact of the famine. Although Irish historiography mostly concerns itself with culpability, the systems behind this culpability relate the historiography of the Great Famine in the general themes of famine research.

One of the most critical aspects in both famines was population. Europe in 1315 contained around 3 million, and Ireland had in 1845 8.2 million. The Great Famine killed around 7.8 million people across Europe, 300,000 in England, and the Potato Famine killed 500,000 Irish. Demographics explain one of the exacerbating causes of famine. Thomas Malthus, perhaps

⁶ Buchanan Sharp, "Royal Paternalism and the Moral Economy of Edward II: The Response to the Great Famine," *The Economic History Review* 66, no. 2 (May 2013): 640; Jordan, 163.

one of the most famous English economists, working in the late 1700 and early 1800s created much of the foundation of modern demographic studies. In his *Essay on the Principle of Population*, Malthus theorized that population grew due to abundant harvests, but as it grew it became more vulnerable to demographic collapse because the population grew too large for the resources within a country. According to Malthus, a crisis would eventually occur and cull the excess population.⁷ On the eve of both the Great Famine and the Potato Famine, the population had outstripped what the agriculture could support. Malthus was writing just when population numbers in Ireland were increasing. This phenomenon worried Malthus, as well as other economists such as David Ricardo. In both famines, the population growth of the previous century had affected the land subdivision and the distribution of resources. Land management systems were tied to this and created a situation in which famine or crisis was more likely to occur.

While some of the population issues were the same, the governments which faced these two eras of famines were vastly different. Edward II and Parliament in 1315 attempted relief efforts, but were hindered by the scale of the Great Famine and technological constraints of the Middle Ages. Westminster in 1845, on the other hand, was blinded by ideological assumptions, namely how poverty was treated in the 19th century and the pejorative view of many British politicians towards Ireland. These hindrances, although different, stopped each government from adequately providing relief.

⁷ Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population: The 1803 Edition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

Historiography

The historiographies of each famine are quite distinct, which is partially a reflection of the different social and political contexts of their eras. Interestingly, no one debate centers the historiography of the Great Famine. Rather, various different historians, theorists, and schools of thought use it to support their own separate arguments about other issues related to the Famine. On the other hand, the historiography of the Irish Famine is almost exclusively concerned with the culpability of the British government. Potato Famine historiography became especially important later during the Troubles.

Despite the extent of the Great Famine, it was not until the 1970s, and more so into the 1990s, before the Great Famine was realized as its own event, distinct from the Black Death. In the 1929 edition of the *Cambridge Medieval History*, there is no description of the Great Famine; the word “famine” is only mentioned six times throughout the entire work.⁸ In 1930, Henry Lucas published an article in *Speculum*, providing one of the first overviews of the event, arguing that it was the most devastating famine of the Middle Ages, but despite this scale had received little to no scholarly attention.⁹ Ian Kershaw’s 1973 article was the first to argue the Great Famine was a major event that deserved examination. Kershaw’s article came after Fernand Braudel’s work in 1949, *The Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, promoting social history and the *Annales* school, which studied how societies changed over long periods of time. Furthermore, Kershaw’s study was published right after Alfred Crosby pioneered research

⁸ J. B. Bury, *Cambridge Medieval History, Volume 6* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1929).

⁹ Henry S. Lucas, “The Great European Famine of 1315, 1316, and 1317,” *Speculum* 5, no. 4 (Oct. 1930): 343-377; Ian Kershaw, “The Great Famine and Agrarian Crisis in England 1315-1322,” *Past & Present* 59 (May 1973): 3-50.

into the agricultural and biological ramifications of the Columbian exchange in 1972.¹⁰ The Great Famine's historiography was linked to both the new *Annales* school and sub-field of environmental history.

After the new interest in the Great Famine, different historiographical discussions used it as part of their arguments. One historiographical camp provided a Marxist critique of the agricultural and feudalistic aspects of medieval English society to explain the Great Famine. In 2002, Jason Moore argued feudalism did not favor innovation or promote increased productivity, which exhausted soil fertility. He wrote that this inadequate system snowballed into crisis because of the excessively cold weather of 1315-17, "So it was that the feudal system of production exhausted the soil, which led to malnutrition, which prepared the ground for epidemic disease and, in short order, a terminal systematic crisis."¹¹ This argument demonstrated a Marxist view of history, as it conflated the feudal political system with the manorial agricultural system. It did not acknowledge any of the technological advances in agriculture during the late Middle Ages, like the three field system, nor did it give the peasant population any form of agency within their own agriculture. Additionally, according to this line of reasoning, the famine was further exacerbated by ineffectual, if not malignant, responses by the government. Cormac Ó Gráda acknowledged this, and argued that any blame the government garnered should be for enabling the wealthy to hoard food.¹² This trend in historiography blended the shortcomings of feudalism with unsustainable agriculture to explain some of the devastation of the Great Famine. These scholars acknowledged the initial crisis caused by heavy rainfall in 1315, but argued that

¹⁰ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995); Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1972).

¹¹ Moore, 304.

¹² Cormac Ó Gráda, "Markets and Famines in Pre-Industrial Europe," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 36, no. 2 (2005): 165.

because of the perceived inefficiencies of agriculture in a feudal state, England was poised for disaster at the onset of the famine.

These arguments were blinded by a Marxist lens of class struggle and exploitation of the peasants by the lords. Within agriculture, the farming peasants were not continually crushed under the heel of the manorial lord. Bruce Campbell in 2005 argued for an active view of peasants within economic markets and manorial agriculture. He wrote that the right of tenants under village customs actually superseded that of lords and provided tenants with extremely low rents for land. Additionally, these tenants were able to reinvest their land, and that, “Available technology certainly provided ample potential for increasing output and raising productivity.”¹³

Other scholars focused on other economic explanations of the causes and impact of the Great Famine. In 1973, Kershaw proposed a Malthusian explanation. He argued that England’s population was too great for its agriculture to sustain, as well as decreasing the amount of land availability.¹⁴ He wrote, “In some areas Malthusian causes seem to have been in operation. The drying-up of all available sources of colonizable land, falling crop yields from exhausted soil... could all have played their part in some places.”¹⁵ Another economic theory prevalent in the literature is Sen’s theory of food entitlement decline (FED), which asserted that during famine people were unable to purchase food because of the disruption of economic markets, not that the crops were literally destroyed. Mark Bailey in 1998 described the English economic system of the 1290s to the 1320s as one in which rural peasants were unable to feed themselves or obtain food from the economic market.¹⁶ This theory was then expounded upon by Philip Slavin in early

¹³ Bruce Campbell, “The Agrarian Problem in the Early Fourteenth Century,” *Past & Present*, no. 188 (2005): 8.

¹⁴ Kershaw, 4, 48.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁶ Bailey, “Peasant Welfare in England, 1290-1348,” 246.

2014. He argued more explicitly for food entitlement decline theory, asserting that the famine was exacerbated by crop markets collapsing, disruption of trade, the wealthy classes hoarding food, and the peasantry being unable to purchase food.¹⁷ He noted that while many examine the famine as a subsistence problem, the destruction of the food supply was only part of the issue.¹⁸ Economic theory might be applicable to modern famines, however that is not the case here. The extent of the famine cannot be attributed to a breakdown in economic markets when England's entire cereal crop was destroyed in 1315.

Campbell rejected these economic theories. In a 2010 article he argued that the extent of the destruction caused by the famine was because it was an extreme event in its own right, and not because of how the medieval economy functioned at the time.¹⁹ He wrote, "To interpret [the Great Famine] as a classic Malthusian positive check is to presume that its human impact owed more to the straitened economic circumstances of the day than to the unprecedented scale and extraordinary nature of the natural forcing agents."²⁰ However, the population of England definitely increased the impact of the Great Famine, which follows Malthus's principles

Another piece of the historiographical debate that drew in the Great Famine was Edward II and his ability to rule England. By most accounts, Edward was one of England's worst kings, and some placed the scope of the famine on his shoulders. Ilana Krug, in particular, used the famine to demonstrate Edward's ineptitude in planning military campaigns in Scotland, and by extension his inability to rule effectively.²¹ While Edward was certainly a weak king who made

¹⁷ Philip Slavin, "Market Failure During the Great Famine in England and Wales (1315–1317)," *Past & Present*, no. 222 (2014): 10.

¹⁸ Slavin, 11.

¹⁹ Bruce M. S. Campbell, "Nature as a Historical Protagonist: Environment and Society in Pre-Industrial England," *The Economic History Review* 63, no. 2 (2010): 287.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 287.

²¹ Ilana Krug, "Food, Famine, and Edward II's Military Failures," in *Journal of Medieval Military History* 16 (2018): 77.

poor decisions, some scholars take a more sympathetic approach. Buchanan Sharp in 2013 argued that Edward did attempt some relief efforts during the famine, some of which were more successful than others.²² Additionally, Seymour Phillips, looking at all aspects of Edward's reign, asserted that while he was an ineffective king, the conflict with Scotland and the Great Famine were forces outside his control; he inherited the Scottish wars from his father and the famine was, of course, a catastrophic act of nature.²³

Due to the unnaturally cold weather during the famine, there has been a lively scholarly debate about climatology during the Great Famine. In the same issue of *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Morgan Kelly and Cormac Ó Gráda argued with Sam White over the role of the Little Ice Age in the famine. The Little Ice Age, a period of cooling from the 1300s to the 1800s, is an established piece of history for many historians as well as scientists; Kershaw even acknowledged its role in causing the famine's poor weather in his work in 1973.²⁴ However, in 2014, Kelly and Ó Gráda argued that no such period actually existed. They re-evaluated statistical temperature data, as well as disputing anecdotal evidence pointing to the Little Ice Age.²⁵ In response, White wrote a blistering critique of their findings, saying, "On close examination, the objections raised in this issue of the journal by Kelly and Ó Gráda turn out to be entirely unfounded."²⁶ He argued with their statistical data and pointed out that anecdotes do not function as data, but as illustrations of bizarre phenomena. The fact that such anecdotes remain was proof that something unnatural was occurring.²⁷ The climatological data examined by Kelly,

²² Buchanan Sharp, "Royal Paternalism and the Moral Economy in the Reign of Edward II: The Response to the Great Famine," *The Economic History Review* 66, no. 2 (2013): 628.

²³ J. R. S Phillips, *Edward II* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 6.

²⁴ Kershaw, 7.

²⁵ Kelly Morgan and Cormac Ó Gráda, "The Waning of the Little Ice Age: Climate Change in Early Modern Europe," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 44, no. 3 (2014): 301.

²⁶ Sam White, "The Real Little Ice Age," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 44, no. 3 (2014): 327

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 329, 334, 336.

Ó Gráda, and White show that studies of weather are critical for the Great Famine; the severe rainfall initially caused the famine.

Across the Irish Sea, the historiography of the Irish famine deals much more with blame than that of the Great Famine. While those studying the Great Famine do seek to understand how the famine became so destructive, Irish historians argue to what degree the British Parliament caused the misery of the Irish people, with some even alleging that the negligence of relief officials and Parliament constituted genocide.²⁸ Historians of the Irish Potato Famine organize themselves into camps based on the amount of blame assigned to the British. Due to the turbulent and often violent Anglo-Irish relations in the mid 20th century, many famine historians sought to be as neutral and analytic as possible, so as not to give “Ideological bullets to the Irish Republican Army,” as Christine Kinealy described in 1997.²⁹ They did not want to provide the IRA, a paramilitary group that fought to end British rule in Ireland during the 19th and 20th centuries, with an ideological basis in the form of British mistreatment of Ireland during the famine. These historians formed the revisionist camp, which emerged in the 1950s and included figures like Robert Dudley Edwards and Conor Cruise O’Brien.³⁰ These scholars attempted to mitigate the politicized nature of the famine and downplay Britain’s culpability. In an effort to raise pro-Irish sentiments, the nationalist camp emerged after Cecil Woodham-Smith’s seminal text *The Great Hunger in Ireland* was published in 1962.³¹ The nationalists formed in opposition to the revisionists, placing all the blame on the British and arguing that Parliament’s actions, or

²⁸ Mark McGowan argues against this view, see McGowan, Mark, “The Famine Plot Revisited: A Reassessment of the Great Irish Famine as Genocide,” *Genocide Studies International* 11, no. 1 (2017): 87-104.

²⁹ Christine Kinealy, *A Death Dealing Famine: The Great Hunger in Ireland* (London: Pluto Press, 1997), 11.

³⁰ Robert Dudley Edwards and T Desmond Williams, eds. *The Great Famine; Studies in Irish History, 1845-52* (New York: NYU Press, 1957); C. C. O’Brien, “The Embers of Easter,” in *1916: The Easter Rising*, ed. O. D. Edwards and Fergus Pyle (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1968).

³¹ Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger in Ireland, 1845-1849*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

inactions, were the result of Irish hatred and British imperialism. In the mid 1990s, at the 150th anniversary of the famine, a new surge of scholarship developed, partly because of the famine's anniversary and partly because of the de-escalation of the Troubles. Many reevaluated the revisionist camp and argued that while it did contain some pieces of truth, it required a more nuanced view. These post-revisionist scholars still looked at the famine analytically and did not agree with the nationalists' impassioned argument, but they recognized that a piece of the famine was caused by Parliament's adherence to laissez-faire ideology. Laissez-faire, meaning let do, is a political theory where the government seeks to interfere as little as possible in the daily lives of its citizens, especially regarding the economy. In this case in Ireland, Whig controlled Parliament did not want to interfere in the country and so let the famine run its course until starvation reached a critical level. The historiography of the Irish Potato Famine is far more politicized than that of the Great Famine, most likely due to the Troubles. The Troubles were a series of armed conflicts in Northern Ireland lasting from the 1960s to 1998. It was fought between Nationalists, who wanted Northern Ireland to leave the United Kingdom and join the rest of Ireland, and Unionists, who wanted to keep Northern Ireland a part of the UK. The Troubles concluded with the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Most scholarship of the Potato Famine was influenced to a certain degree by the Troubles and Anglo-Irish relations, however it still dealt with common themes found in most famine literature.

The nationalist approach gained steam in 1962 with Woodham-Smith's *The Great Hunger*. In this landmark book, she argued against the prevailing revisionist thought, which maintained a neutral stance on Anglo-Irish relations to not aggravate the Troubles. During the 1950s and 60s, the revisionist camp held sway. Championed by authors such as Dudley Edwards, it took a more analytical approach in famine discussions. These historians downplayed the role

of the British government during the famine in an effort to not incense the Troubles further. Woodham-Smith, however, wrote that Britain was at fault for the extent of the famine due to mismanagement guided by their devotion to laissez-faire capitalism.³² According to her, the government knew the Irish Poor Law could not support Ireland during the famine but left the poor to the mercy of a system that could not help them.³³ She was the driving impetus behind the nationalist camp. *The Great Hunger* remained an enduring classic of Irish famine historiography, and became a touchstone for all subsequent writings.

In the 1990s, as the 150th anniversary of the famine approached, the nationalist camp gained more and more prominence. New studies by Christine Kinealy in particular ushered in a new wave of nationalist research. In *A Death Dealing Famine*, Kinealy argues that throughout the famine the British kept exporting food from Ireland and their public works relief caused more harm than good.³⁴ Additionally, she posits that for the British elites, the famine presented a “chance for the economy (belatedly) to achieve its natural balance: to do any more than the minimum to alleviate the starvation would deprive Ireland of the opportunity to achieve the right balance and to modernize.”³⁵

In response to this, several scholars reworked the revisionist camp to make it more compelling. The basic tenant of the post-revisionist camp was that while the Whig government maintained laissez-faire policy, at times at the expense of the Irish poor, they did not set out to be malignant or commit genocide, as some nationalists argue. In 1995, George Bernstein examined the role of poor relief under the Whig administration, and argued that public works employed

³² Woodham-Smith, 410.

³³ Ibid., 408.

³⁴ Kinealy, 8.

³⁵ Ibid., 10.

715,000 men, and by extension supported about half of Ireland.³⁶ Furthermore, Patrick Brantlinger made the case in 2004 that the British government was just as ill-prepared as the Irish; they did not know how to address the famine either.³⁷ He also addressed Kinealy's argument over the exportation of food. Kinealy cited Bills of Entry, records of ships' cargo, from the port in Liverpool from ships arriving from Ireland in a single day. According to her data, hundreds of pounds of oats, oatmeal, and other grain along with countless livestock and other agricultural products entered England, all of which came from Ireland.³⁸ Brantlinger provided no numerical data, but simply wrote that during the famine importation of food greatly exceeded exportation.³⁹ Finally, in 2017 Mark McGowan reasoned that the actions of the British do not constitute genocide, but they certainly prolonged the suffering of the Irish people by their devotion to laissez-faire policy.⁴⁰ The post-revisionists maintain that the British certainly did not help, but there were more factors at work than simply their culpability.

The Great Famine

Famine was not unheard of in the Middle Ages. Numerous local famines occurred during the 1200s, usually short, localized crop failures. However, what distinguished the Great Famine was its duration and universal impact. Instead of affecting merely one county in England for a single season, the Great Famine devastated the entirety of England, along with the rest of Europe, for three years. The *Gesta Edwardi de Carnarvan*, a mid-14th century chronicle, said that "The mortality of men and the mortification of herds was so great that such had not been

³⁶ George L. Bernstein, "Liberals, the Irish, and the Role of the State," *Irish Historical Studies* 29, no. 116 (1995): 513.

³⁷ Patrick Brantlinger, "The Famine," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 32, no. 1 (2004): 193.

³⁸ Kinealy, 80.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁴⁰ McGowan, 88.

seen for centuries.”⁴¹ Additionally, a cattle plague remained in England until 1322, killing off another food and cash source, which further exacerbated the effects of famine.

Few documents that discuss the famine have survived to the present. Only a handful of governmental records exist from this time period, and those that do are not always the most illuminating regarding the famine; court rolls and parliamentary rolls do not concern themselves outright with famine, although the devastating impact can be inferred at times. The *Calendar of the Close Rolls, Fine Rolls, and Patent Rolls*, documents of Edward II’s decrees and Parliament’s actions, do occasionally provide useful information.⁴² Following those records, the next most helpful sources are chronicles. These documents, however, are hindered by the personal bias of the author, such as the chronicler’s opinion on Edward II, how far removed they are from the actual events being discussed, and misinformation. The chronicles closest to the famine are the anonymous *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, John of Trokelowe’s chronicle, and the *Annales Londoniensis* (annals of London).⁴³ The *Annales Londoniensis* was the most contemporaneous, as it ended in 1316. Composed by an unknown citizen of London, it included details of how the famine impacted London in particular. The *Vita* narrated the life of Edward II until 1325, when the account inexplicably ended. The author of the *Vita* remained anonymous, although many scholars believe it was written by a monk at the Abbey of Malmesbury in the south of England. John of Trokelowe, hailing from St. Alban’s Abbey, also located in the south, wrote his account in the 1320s. While the *Vita* only provided a cursory examination of the famine, as its main focus was the politics of Edward’s reign, Trokelowe authored a more

⁴¹ William Stubbs, ed., *Chronicles of the Reigns of Edward I and Edward II* (London: Longman & Co., 1882-83), 48.

⁴² *Rolls Series* (London: HM Stationery Office, 1893).

⁴³ Stubbs; John de Trokelowe, *Johannis de Trokelowe, et Henrici de Blaneфорde, monachorum S. Albani* (London: HMS Treasury, 1866); Wendy R. Childs and Noël Denholm-Young, *Vita Edwardi Secundi: The Life of Edward the Second* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

comprehensive look at the events, noting not only the devastation, but also recounting how Edward, Parliament, and the leaders of London reacted to the famine. Both chronicles were highly critical of Edward's reign and policies, politically and personally. Although these accounts were closest to the events they recounted, they were not objective and subject to the same bias as any other historical narrative.

Other chronicles were further removed from the events of the famine, but they were still helpful. They included the *Scalacronica*, the *Gesta Edwardi de Carnarvon*, the *Anonimalle Chronicle*, the *Annales de Bermundeseia* (Annals of Bermondsey Abbey), Grafton's Chronicle, and the Hollinshed Chronicle. The *Scalacronica*, the *Gesta*, and the *Anonimalle* were all written in the mid to late 14th century. The later chronicles, the *Annales de Bermundeseia*, Grafton's, and the Hollinshed, all date from the 1400-1500s. These did not reveal any new information, but they showed how narratives of the famine changed and developed over time. How history is recounted and remembered is at times as important as what actually happened, especially regarding dramatic events like the Great Famine. Later historical production informs how people view history.

Up until the late 1200s, Europe experienced mild weather, ideal for growing crops and raising livestock. Additionally, the advent and propagation of the three-field system in the 11th century, wherein fields would lie fallow and regenerate nutrients, allowed for increased output and more sustainable agriculture. This increase led to population rise, as more food could support more people. This population spike, as Malthus later discussed, had consequences for the English population. During this period of growth before the famine, more and more land was converted into farmland to keep up with the amount of people in England, some of which was not suitable

for farming.⁴⁴ Because of the amount of people engaged in farming and limited land resources, most peasants controlled very small pieces of land. Furthermore, peasant patrimony was broken up between children, leading each successive generation to hold less and less land. As Bailey wrote, “By c. 1300 smallholders dominated the landholding and social structure of England, especially in the southern and eastern regions. For example, in 1298, 74 percent of tenants at Shropham (Norfolk) held under 5 acres, as did 54 percent of the Archbishop of Canterbury's peasants in Sussex in 1285.”⁴⁵ Historian Harilaos Kitsikopoulos estimated that the minimum amount of land a peasant family needed to support themselves was 18 acres; about half the population failed to meet this requirement, and potentially a quarter of all tenant farmers held only three acres.⁴⁶

William Chester Jordan, cited land subdivision as an exacerbating factor of the Great Famine. Jordan argued the crisis of land management in 1315 and wrote, “But rural society was unable to maintain this fragile success any longer, given the extraordinary pressure on resources that was the legacy of two centuries of demographic expansion and the slowdown of assarting.”⁴⁷ Additionally, Campbell in 2016 provided even grimmer evidence for the lack of available land:

Especially ominous for living standards and labour productivity was the multiplication of holdings containing five hectares or less of land. By 1290 approximately 700,000 households (over three-quarters of the rural total) subsisted on such petty holdings, 400,000 of them on less than one hectare of land and 240,000 of those dependent upon augmenting their incomes by labouring on the land of others.⁴⁸

These small landholdings meant that much of the population produced only enough food for their families. Campbell in 2010 describes it as, “Without [the Great Famine], the prevailing

⁴⁴ Kershaw, 3.

⁴⁵ Bailey, 232.

⁴⁶ Kitsikopoulos, 37.

⁴⁷ Jordan, 107.

⁴⁸ Bruce Campbell, *The Great Transition: Climate, Disease, and Society in the Late-Medieval World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 478.

status quo of a maximum population subsisting with minimum living standards and associated with a growing involution of production methods could presumably have continued almost indefinitely.”⁴⁹ Malthusian principles hold true; the overpopulation and subdivision of land meant that agricultural practice in England by 1315 was poised on a knife’s edge, about to fall into disarray. The Great Famine merely shoved it past the point of no return. When the rains fell in 1315, the agricultural situation was not prepared to deal with a crisis of that magnitude.

Although exact demographic data for the famine does not exist, or is not available, some scholars have estimated that the population of Europe was around 78 million by 1300. During the famine, around 10% of the population died, around 7.8 million people, according to the *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*.⁵⁰ The population of England at this time was estimated to be 3 million, so approximately 300,000 would have died from the Great Famine. In comparison, the Black Death killed around 30% of Europe, around 100 million people. Despite not presenting exact figures, chroniclers paint a grim picture of events. Trokelowe wrote that, “Therefore, by the very famine which so oppressed the whole earth, the mortality of men followed. For so many needy people died that there are scarcely enough living to bury the dead.”⁵¹ Obviously, famine hit the poor the hardest, followed by the elderly and very young. The wealthy were able to withstand some of the famine, but the universal destruction wrought hardship for everyone.

During the summer of 1315, torrential rainfall swept England. The excessive rain, heavy flooding, and cold weather destroyed most of that season’s harvest. For a 21st century perspective, between 1991 and 2020, the average annual rainfall in England was about 45 inches,

⁴⁹ Campbell, “Nature as a Historical Protagonist,” 285

⁵⁰ Joseph R. Strayer, ed., *Dictionary of the Middle Ages, Volume 5* (New York: Scribner, 1985), 7.

⁵¹ Trokelowe, 94.

according to the Climate Change Knowledge Portal.⁵² Medieval sources did not record exact measurements for the rains of 1315, but it can be inferred that they far exceeded the normal range. The rains began in late summer, right before the harvest was supposed to start. Thus, the continuous rainfall not only caused crops in the field to be soaked, mildewed, and rotten, they also turned the fields to mud, ruining the ground for the next planting season. The *Anonimalle Chronicle*, an anonymous work from St. Mary's Abbey in York dating from the 1380s, reported the rain as falling "continually from Pentecost [in 1315] through to the next Easter following".⁵³ This rainfall would have lasted almost an entire year, as Pentecost generally falls in May and Easter in April, depending on the year. The rainy and cold summers lasted until 1318, which signaled the end of the worst parts of the famine. The rain destroyed crops across England; a royal manor at Milton, in the south of England, was flooded, and dikes were overcome with water in Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire, in the north.⁵⁴ The surviving chronicles of the famine report a general consensus of high mortality and high food prices.

The rains themselves spelled disaster for Europe, and England in particular. A little rain was good for plant growth, too much turned the land into a swamp, caused crops to rot in the fields, and did not allow for harvest. Even in a society with more safeguards to protect its population from famine, like technological or agricultural developments and welfare programs, three years of almost nonstop rain for 1315-16, and continuously cold and wet summers until 1318 would be crippling. The almost total destruction of agriculture was a cataclysmic problem. This was not a famine that could have been prevented by a new policy. The scale of the rains and

⁵² "United Kingdom," Climate Change Knowledge Portal, accessed October 12, 2023, <https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/country/united-kingdom/climate-data-historical>.

⁵³ Wendy R. Childs and John Taylor, trans., *Anonimalle Chronicle 1307-1334* (Leeds, UK: Leeds University Press, 1991), 91.

⁵⁴ Henry S. Lucas, "The Great European Famine of 1315, 1316, and 1317," *Speculum* 5, no. 4 (October 1930): 346.

agricultural issues meant this was going to be a famine not merely a food shortage. While medieval society was used to small, localized famines, Europe could not deal with the entirety of its crops being destroyed by rain. No European country in the 1300s could import sufficient food to feed its entire population if its agriculture was destroyed.

Livestock devastation deepened the distress facing England. As fields flooded, the first to die were the cows, sheep, goats, and other farm animals as their primary food sources were washed away. Thus, people had even less to eat. The *Annales Londonienses* described the situation as, “Men were dying of great hunger, and they had no wherewithal to support themselves or the beasts, because the greatest want of all things born in the earth arose.”⁵⁵ After the crops failed and traditional meat was consumed, the starving population turned to horses and dogs, according to Trokelowe. He wrote, “The flesh of horses was precious to [the starving people], [they] stole the fat dogs.”⁵⁶ It was not just starvation and people that killed the animals, however. At the same time as the famine, a cattle plague swept England, decimating herds. The plague could have been a variety of viruses or infections, such as streptococcus, rinderpest, or foot-and-mouth disease. These could be spread through water or air, and led to diarrhea and fever and usually proved fatal. Trokelowe cited “corrupt food,” and “putrefaction of the grass,” because of the flooding as causes of this plague, however the exact origin of the disease cannot be known.⁵⁷ Regardless, the weakened, starving animals quickly fell prey to some virus or infection running rampant through England. Not only did the cattle die before an appropriate time to butcher them, as too many cattle dying at once meant that meat went to waste, but the meat from sick animals could not be consumed for fear of passing the illness along to the human

⁵⁵ Stubbs, 237.

⁵⁶ Trokelowe, 92.

⁵⁷ Trokelowe, 94.

population. This cattle disease remained until 1322, worsening the already perilous English agricultural situation. This was simply not a situation that a new policy could solve, even if the administrative machinery to do so had existed.

Associated with the high mortality was the inability to properly care for the dead, both humans and livestock alike. The *Gesta Edwardi* noted that funeral arrangements could not be made quickly enough for both human remains and animal carcasses due to excessive mortality, “Nor could they hold the bodies of the dead any longer because of the stench.”⁵⁸ Additionally, the *Annales Londonienses* echoed Trokelowe, and said that, “The living were not sufficient to bury the dead.”⁵⁹ Although these reports do not display exact data, they do exemplify how overwhelming the death toll felt to those living through the famine. Dealing with so many corpses would have proved an obstacle for English townsfolk. There were, however, some measures to expedite the burial process. In Medieval England, coroners were primarily responsible for ascertaining the cause of death. If someone died of unnatural causes, whether it be starvation, an accident, or even homicide, moving the body before the coroner had properly investigated the incident resulted in a fine, called an amercement. In order to deal with the amount of death in times of crisis, this policy had to be suspended. R. F Hunnisett describes how during the famine of 1257-8 that, “so many people died of hunger in the eastern counties that the coroners were unable to view them all; permission was therefore granted for the bodies to be viewed and buried by the men of the neighbourhood without the coroner, unless a wound was found or there was any suspicion of homicide.”⁶⁰ Although this practice was not reported during

⁵⁸ Stubbs, 48.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 236.

⁶⁰ R. F. Hunnisett, *The Medieval Coroner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 9.

the Great Famine, one can suppose that a similar method was adopted to deal with a national famine.

Because of the destruction of England's grain crops, the price of wheat skyrocketed. Most chroniclers put the average price of a quarter of wheat (8 bushels and approximately 500 pounds) somewhere between 20-40 shillings.⁶¹ Both Kershaw and Slavin in separate articles calculate that the pre-famine average for a quarter of wheat was approximately 5s. 6d.⁶² One shilling in 1310 was about five days' wages for a skilled tradesman, and roughly equivalent to £30 in 2017, according to the National Archives.⁶³ Thus, 40 shillings was about £1,200 or 200 days' wages. The *Anonimale Chronicle* put the high prices in perspective, "In one season of this price inflation a quarter of wheat badly cleaned and meanly weighed was sold for 40 shillings, and two small onions in Cheapside [a street in London] for one penny."⁶⁴ Throughout the 1200s, prices had been steadily rising. According to N. J. Mayhew in 2013, the average price for a quarter of wheat in the first half of the 13th century was 4.3 shillings, and by the end of the century it was up to 5.7 shillings.⁶⁵

Some chronicles even reported instances of cannibalism. The *Scalacronica* recounts this event happening in Northumberland, "it was a dear year for corn, and such scarcity of food that the mother devoured her son, wherefore nearly all the poor folk died."⁶⁶ The *Annales Bermundeseia*, although removed by a century from the famine, recored that, "For the poor ate

⁶¹ Stubbs, 91; Henry Richard Luards, ed., *Annales Monastici* (London: HMS Treasury, 1864), 344; Trokelowe, 92.

⁶² Kershaw, 8; Slavin, 16.

⁶³ "Currency Converter: 1270-2017," The National Archives, accessed July 3, 2023, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/#currency-result>.

⁶⁴ Childs, *Anonimale Chronicle*, 91.

⁶⁵ N. J. Mayhew, "Prices in England, 1170-1750," *Past & Present*, no. 219 (May 2013): 19.

⁶⁶ Thomas Gray, *Scalacronica* (Edinburgh: The Maitland Club, 1836), 65.

their children, dogs, mice, and the dung of pigeons.”⁶⁷ The Benedictine monk and chronicler, John of Trokelowe, wrote in the 1330s that cannibalism was not just limited to infants in some places; adults were eaten as well. He wrote, “As many asserted, both men and women secretly ate their own little ones, and even strangers in many places.”⁶⁸ Although these stories were probably just hearsay and rumor mongering, they point to the abject suffering and hunger people experienced.

Edward II did try to intervene in the English economy to alleviate the worst of the famine. Although Edward’s government was not as adept at widespread disaster relief like later societies, the king and Parliament attempted various measures to protect against famine. Namely, he limited the amount of grain that could be turned into beer, allowing for more wheat to be used for food. Trokelowe praised Edward for this measure, saying, “And if such a command had not been speedily promulgated, the greater part of the people would have perished in that year, as they had done in other previous years, by hunger and starvation.”⁶⁹ The *Anonimale Chronicle*, however, heavily criticized Edward for his interference in the English economy. According to the chronicle, Edward drastically lowered the prices of pork, mutton, and fowl in 1315 to the detriment of England’s merchant class. The incredibly low prices were unsustainable, though, leaving many merchants impoverished.⁷⁰ The *Annales Londonienses* corroborated this account, adding that by February of 1316 Edward had realized the gravity of his mistake and reversed his decision.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Luards, 470.

⁶⁸ Trokelowe, 95.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 96.

⁷⁰ Childs, *Anonimale Chronicle*, 91.

⁷¹ Stubbs, 237.

Edward tried other relief measures, however. As Buchanan Sharp notes, in 1315 and 1316, the king and Parliament prohibited grain exportation, placed price ceilings on animal products (but not grain), urged the nobles to limit grain hoarding, prohibited the use of wheat in brewing beer, and contacted the King of France and the Duke of Brittany to purchase grain.⁷² None of these efforts proved effective, however, they do demonstrate that Edward tried to provide some measure of relief.

Unfortunately, England was embroiled in its decades' long conflict with the Scots who were led by Robert the Bruce. A military conflict was not going to help England recover in the midst of famine. Not only did the Scots raid the north of England, destroying crops, farms, and villages, but Edward was forced to commit troops to defend England's northern border, who required a great deal of grain and provisions to fight. The *Calendar of the Close Rolls, Fine Rolls, and Patent Rolls*, Parliamentary documents of Edward's decrees, record significant diversion of grain to the northern town of Berwick, where the English troops were garrisoned. The *Close Rolls* in particular recount hundreds of quarters of wheat being sent for the munition of Berwick throughout the fall of 1315 to the summer of 1316.⁷³ Although the provision of Berwick was necessary for defense of the north, it pulled resources from a country on the brink of starvation.

While the Scottish wars were obviously disastrous for England, both militarily and economically, it is not fair to lay the entirety of the blame at Edward II's feet. The Scottish wars began under his father, Edward I, and he merely inherited the conflict and animosity, as J. R. S. Phillips notes.⁷⁴ Edward did not begin a war with Scotland in the middle of a famine knowing it

⁷² Sharp, 631, 635, 636, 638, 639.

⁷³ *Calendar of the Close Rolls*, 247, 251, 260, 271, 292, 341, 355, 364.

⁷⁴ J. R. S. Phillips, *Edward II* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 6.

would drain resources from his starving population. Nonetheless, the war was a humiliating defeat for both Edward and England. Pulling food for the provision of the North, only to be forced into retreat by the Scots did not endear the king to his people.

Although famine was a fact of life in 1315, Europe had not seen a catastrophe like the great famine in living memory. The rains that swept England destroyed crops and flooded fields. Agriculture could not recover. By itself, the almost ubiquitous crop destruction would have caused a major famine, but several factors contributed to the great famine's cataclysmic nature. The agricultural and economic situations, the land management system, and governmental ineffectiveness all exacerbated the effects of famine. As opposed to the Irish Famine, this famine was not preventable. No medieval government or the Catholic Church had the ability to mitigate famine on this scale. Edward II's government was still a very personal one – centered around the king, with Parliament barely twenty years old. While this famine was far more devastating in terms of geographic reach and death toll, the Irish Famine had a far larger impact on Ireland's cultural identity.

Potato Famine

Five hundred years after the Great Famine, the situation of the Irish peasant in the first half of the 19th century was not much better than that of his English counterpart in the 14th century. Ireland was primarily a rural society, and only a few cities such as Dublin or Belfast had any industry to speak of. The industrial revolution steamrolling through England had not yet transformed Ireland. The majority of the population was spread out across the island on small family farms. Similar to 1315 England, the Irish population had grown almost beyond what the land could sustain. Many farmers cultivated small parcels of land, growing potatoes for their family and selling whatever wheat they could grow for cash.

Introduced in the British Isles at the end of the 16th century from South America, the potato became the staple crop in Ireland by 1775.⁷⁵ By 1845, Ireland depended on the potato because of its high nutritional value and relatively small land requirement. Half an acre of land under potato cultivation produced the equivalent of 10,000 calories daily.⁷⁶ So, poor Irish farmers, which were the majority of the population, relied almost exclusively on the potato for food while they sold more expensive crops for revenue. This agricultural system was functional for the Irish. Throughout the early 1800s, the Irish population increased steadily. From 1821 onwards, the population increased at a rate of 0.9 percent annually.⁷⁷ The 1841 census put the Irish population at around 8.2 million.⁷⁸

Unfortunately, while the potato had helped increase the population, such population growth also had a deleterious impact on the fertile land of Ireland. In 1841, 40% of Irish houses were one room mud shacks. Around one million people had access to less than 15 acres of land, with half of that being landless laborers.⁷⁹ As the population increased, already small farms became more and more fractured, as land was portioned off among children. Before 1829 and the Catholic Emancipation Act, Irish Catholics were not allowed to vote, hold office in the House of Commons, nor could they practice primogeniture; they had to divide their property amongst their children, eliminating generational wealth. In 1828, Daniel O'Connell, an Irish Catholic and forceful politician, won the Parliamentary seat for County Clare in Ireland, forcing Parliament to amend the law and allow Irish Catholics into Parliament, as well as be able to practice

⁷⁵ K. H. Connell, "The History of the Potato." *The Economic History Review* 3, no. 3 (1951): 388, 92.

⁷⁶ Nathan Nunn and Nancy Qian, "The Potato's Contribution to Population and Urbanization: Evidence From a Historical Experiment," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 126, no. 2 (2011): 600.

⁷⁷ Joel Mokyr and Cormac Ó Gráda. "New Developments in Irish Population History, 1700-1850." *The Economic History Review* 37, no. 4 (1984): 476.

⁷⁸ *Abstract of Census of Ireland, 1841*, (Dublin: HM Stationery Office, 1843), 1.

⁷⁹ Michael J. Winstanley, *Ireland and the Land Question 1800-1922* (New York: Meuthen & Co., 2003), 12-13.

primogeniture. However, Irish land was already incredibly subdivided. In a report to Parliament in 1838 on the status of poverty in Ireland, Sir George Nicholls, a prominent poor relief reformer and Liberal politician, wrote:

In the country evidence of the extreme subdivision of land everywhere appears and, as a consequence, the soil, fertile as it naturally is, becomes exhausted by continual cropping; for the cottier tenant too often reduced to a level little above that of the mendicant is unable to provide manure for his land, and has no other mode of restoring its vigour but by subjecting it to a long and profitless fallow... in some instances the [landlord] himself has subdivided his land into small holdings of five, ten, or fifteen acres.⁸⁰

These small landholdings meant that the Irish peasant could not afford to leave any of his fields fallow, as that cut into either his family's food source or revenue. Additionally, most Irish landlords practiced a system known as *rundale*, where each tenant received the same amount and same quality of land: each farmer received the same amount of good, mediocre, and poor quality fields.⁸¹ This practice led to each tenant's holding to be scattered around their landlord's land. Having access to farmable land was the only method for survival in Ireland outside of the few industrial centers. Without land, one could not sustain one's family.

While Ireland was primarily rural, England was not, and the nature of poverty had changed. These changes necessitated Parliamentary action to change relief offered to the Poor. In 1834, Parliament passed a law which standardized poor relief across the country. England had actually had a poor law since 1601, when Queen Elizabeth, acting through Parliament, passed the Poor Relief Act, which required each parish to raise taxes to support paupers within the parish. The pauper could receive one of two forms of relief: indoor and outdoor. In indoor relief, the pauper had to enroll in and reside in an institution in order to receive relief, while in the outdoor relief method the pauper received food, clothes, and money to support himself and his family,

⁸⁰ George Nicholls, *Poor Laws - Ireland, Three Reports* (London: W. Clowes and Sons, 1838), 7.

⁸¹ Woodham-Smith, 33.

while maintaining an independent residence. This law was designed to provide charity at the local level after the main sources of poor relief, monasteries, were dissolved under Henry VIII. The 1834 Poor Law restructured the existing system to adapt to the changes in English society since 1601, namely the expansion of major urban and industrial centers, like Birmingham and Manchester. Additionally, the Elizabethan Poor Law had become too expensive to maintain. The Poor Law of 1834 divided the country into different unions which would administer relief, such as more food and wages, on a local level. The law stipulated that in order to receive relief, the applicant and their family had to enroll in a workhouse where they were forced to do heavy labor. This harsh relief system reflected one of the primary views in England: that the poor were at fault for their destitution. There was a large amount of debate in English government and society about whether it was the role of the state, the church, or the individual to help the poor.⁸² Kinealy, describing a prominent view in England at the time, wrote, “Poverty was regarded as the fault of the individual, and the experience of receiving relief was made as unpleasant as possible.”⁸³

Although a welfare system had existed for over two hundred years in England, no such government administered relief scheme existed in Ireland. While various private charity organizations existed, mainly through the Catholic Church and different Protestant denominations, these charities were localized and often fell prey to divisive denominational

⁸² Such debates were explored by economists such as Jeremy Bentham, Malthus, and David Ricardo who worried about overpopulation and enabling the poor to have an overreliance on government funded relief. Some argued directly against these views, like the author of the propaganda pamphlet *Book of Murder*, which exposed the plight of the impoverished worker and criticized Malthus’s theory. See Marcus, *Book of Murder* (London, Black Horse Court, 1834).

⁸³ Kinealy, *A Death Dealing Famine*, 40.

differences, as Maria Luddy noted.⁸⁴ Realizing that Ireland, which had newly joined the United Kingdom in 1801, needed a system of poor relief, William IV appointed a Royal Commission in 1833 to investigate the best course of action. The Whately Commission, chaired by the Church of Ireland's Archbishop of Dublin Dr. Richard Whately, spent three years amassing research, and found that the best way to implement poor relief was a vast system of outdoor public works, like road construction and building fisheries along the coast.⁸⁵ Unfortunately, the Whately Commission was largely ignored by Parliament.

The most prominent parties during the 1830s and 40s were the Whigs and Tories. The Whigs, or Liberals, promoted free trade and opposed government intervention both in the free market and private enterprise. They advocated for both laissez-faire economics and public policy. In opposition to the Whigs were the Tories, who opted for a more protectionist approach to government and wanted to uphold traditional institutions. The Prime Ministers for the years surrounding the Potato Famine were William Lamb, Lord Melbourne (1834-41) a Whig, Sir Robert Peel (1841-46) a Tory, and Lord John Russell (1846-52) a Whig.

Lord Melbourne's government in 1836 thought that such an extensive public works solution would be too expensive. Furthermore, such a program was contrary to the Whig ideology of laissez-faire and non-interventionist policy. Instead, Parliament sent Sir George Nicholls, the commissioner behind the English Poor Law, to investigate Irish poverty. After two short trips to Ireland in 1836 and 1838, Nicholls sent his findings to Parliament. Nicholls suggested simply to move the English workhouse system to Ireland, "The discipline, mode of employment in, and general management of, the workhouses in Ireland should, I think, be as

⁸⁴ Catholic and Protestant charities often felt intense rivalry for one another, especially regarding the care and education of orphans. See Maria Luddy, "Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Ireland." *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 7, no. 4 (1996): 351.

⁸⁵ Kinealy, *A Death Dealing Famine*, 39.

nearly as possible assimilated to the practice in England.”⁸⁶ He also stipulated that the only relief offered would be through the workhouse, i.e. no outdoor relief, such as public works, contrary to the Whately Commission suggestions, and that there was no right to relief, meaning that if the workhouse was full it was not the government’s responsibility to expand relief measures. This provision of “no right to relief” eventually meant disaster when Ireland was in the grips of famine. The law was designed to support about 100,000 people, those in the worst situations of poverty. However, it ended up supporting around 1.5 million.⁸⁷ Failing to grasp the differences between the more industrialized English economy and the primarily rural Irish, Nicholls’ recommendations sought to reform and ‘civilize’ Ireland; relief for the poor was merely a secondary objective.

Parliament, acting under Nicholls’ report, passed the Irish Poor Law in 1838. Of course, not every British person at this time believed in the deficiency of the Irish people. Robert Stewart, Viscount Castlereagh believed that the workhouse system would be wholly ineffectual in Ireland.⁸⁸ Daniel O’Connell, the preeminent Irish politician during the 1830s and 40s, expressed to the House of Commons on April 28, 1837 that an experiment in Irish poverty needed to be tried, even if it exacerbated the situation.⁸⁹ However, upon the second reading of the bill a year later, O’Connell changed his mind. On February 9, 1838, O’Connell moved to block the bill due to the harm it would cause Ireland.⁹⁰ This measure was defeated by a vote of 227 to 25, and after a third successful reading it moved to the House of Lords.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Nicholls, 25.

⁸⁷ Kinealy, *A Death Dealing Famine*, 41.

⁸⁸ “Poor-Law (Ireland),” *Hansard* HC Deb, 30 April 1838, vol 42 cc678

⁸⁹ Daniel O’Connell, “Poor Law—Ireland; Date, April 28, 1837,” in M. F. Cusack *The Speeches and Public Letters of the Liberator*, v. 1. (Dublin: McGlashan & Gill, 1875). <https://glc.yale.edu/poor-law-ireland-date-april-28-1837>.

⁹⁰ “Poor Laws (Ireland),” *Hansard* HC Deb 9 February, 1838, vol 40 cc948.

⁹¹ George Nicholls, *A History of the Irish Poor Law* (London: Knight & Co., 1856), 218.

There were also British politicians with a dim view of Irish productivity and agriculture like Sir Charles Trevelyan, the assistant Treasury Secretary and the man in charge of Irish relief efforts from 1845-48. Trevelyan wrote in his 1848 account of the famine that, “It was owing that agriculture of every description [in Ireland] was carried on in a negligent, imperfect manner. The domestic habits arising out of this mode of subsistence were of the lowest and most degrading kind.”⁹² It was this type of view that motivated many MPs to listen to Nicholls’ report. The Poor Law was designed to make life in the workhouse as intolerable as possible so as to dissuade the poor from taking advantage of it, “[The experience of the workhouse] warrants the fullest assurance that nothing short of destitution and of absolute necessity...will induce the able bodied labourers to seek refuge therein.”⁹³ The Irish Poor Law passed the House of Lords on July 11, 1838, mostly due to the Duke of Wellington’s, a native of Dublin, support.⁹⁴

The blight struck Ireland with unprecedented speed and devastation. Known scientifically as *Phytophthora infestans*, the fungus caused potatoes to rot and die in the fields. Eating them induced illness. The summer of 1845 promised a bountiful harvest for Britain and Ireland. The grain crops looked promising and by all accounts the potato harvest was going to be the best it had been in several years. The last few years in Ireland had produced above average crop yields. According to Joel Mokyr in 1981, there were approximately two million acres of farmland cultivating potatoes by 1845.⁹⁵ That data, combined with Austin Bourke’s returns on potato acreage showing that one acre yielded 6 ¼ tons of potatoes, implied that the average Irish potato

⁹² Charles Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1848), 7, accessed via Project Gutenberg.

⁹³ Nicholls, *Poor Laws - Ireland - Three Reports*, 23.

⁹⁴ Nicholls, *A History of the Irish Poor Law*, 221.

⁹⁵ Mokyr, 20.

crop would have been a little over 13 ½ million tons.⁹⁶ In July 1845, newspapers like the *Belfast News-Letter* and the *Bath Chronicle* both reported on healthy, abundant potato crops in Ireland.⁹⁷ The reports showed plenty of blight free potatoes. Furthermore, oral history records from University College Dublin revealed the abundance of potatoes at that time. Julia Smyth recorded a story in 1928 from an unnamed source in County Meath, most likely the child of someone who lived through the famine. “The year of the famine was a year of abundance. The potatoes were so plentiful that the people threw them in the dykes. There were men who went to Drogheda to sell their potatoes... They could not get anyone to buy them and when they were coming home they threw them in the [river] Boyne.”⁹⁸

However, by the first and second week of August, reports of blight and rot in the south of England began to appear in various papers. On the 9th of August The *Leeds Times* reported that:

Serious apprehensions are beginning to be entertained about the state of the crops... In the southern districts of England, we regret to learn that the crops, which, as elsewhere, are very heavy, are much laid and injured. In Essex and Kent, the blight has got among the wheat, and many of the ears are deficient in corns... The crops in Ireland are very luxuriant and promising... The crop of potatoes being the heaviest for many years past.⁹⁹

At this point, the blight was mostly contained to England and had not spread to Ireland. The *Cork Examiner* wrote on August 15 that the potato fields looked “most luxuriant.”¹⁰⁰ By the third week of August, there were reports of widespread potato rot across the south of England.¹⁰¹ By

⁹⁶ Austin Bourke, 'The Extent of the Potato Crop in Ireland at the Time of the Famine', *Journal of the Statistic and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, 20, no. 3 (1959/60): 1

⁹⁷ “The Weather and The Crops,” *Belfast News-Letter*, 25 July, 1845: 4 cc3; “Ireland,” *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 31 July, 1845, 4 cc3.

⁹⁸ Julia Smyth, “The Famine Time,” in “The Schools’ Manuscript Collection,” held by University College Dublin, National Folklore Collection UCD.

⁹⁹ “The Weather, Crops, &tc,” *Leeds Times*, 9 August, 1845, 4 cc3.

¹⁰⁰ “The Markets,” *Cork Examiner*, 15 August, 1845, 2 cc3, .

¹⁰¹ “The Weather and The Crops,” *Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, 16 August 1845, 2 cc4 ; “The Weather and The Crops,” *Morning Advertiser*, 19 August 1845, 4, cc5; “East Hoathly,” *Sussex Advertiser*, 19 August, 1845.

the end of August, almost the entire British potato crop had failed, according to newspaper reports. Ireland by this point had not reported massive potato rot as was seen in England. During the first week of September, newspapers in Ireland noted the spread of blight across England, but did not say that it had spread to Ireland.¹⁰² The first Irish reports appeared around September 10, when the *Cork Examiner* described reports of blight in the south of Ireland, noting though, that it had not yet spread to the north.¹⁰³ Additionally, the *Examiner* reported how potato crops had failed in the Netherlands and Belgium, and that European markets would be increasing imports of Irish grain and potatoes. The blight first appeared in the Low Countries, then spread to the south of England, gradually making its way north, before finally moving to Ireland. Around 53,000 people died over the course of the famine from 1845-47 in the Netherlands.¹⁰⁴ In some respects, the initial failures of potato crops elsewhere were good news for Ireland, promising increased prices and markets. By September 15, though, that hope of good exports began to fizzle out. The *Sligo Journal* and the *Northern Standard* reported that the blight had ruined potatoes in the counties of Sligo and Monaghan, in the north of Ireland, which would signal the across-island failure of potatoes and usher in the famine.¹⁰⁵

The difference in scale created an interesting discussion between the Potato Famine and the Great Famine. Although potatoes fell prey to blight in England and the Low Countries, these countries were not going through famine. The Potato Famine was a uniquely Irish concern. In contrast to the Great Famine, the Irish Famine was a regional disaster created by monocultural

¹⁰² "The Markets," *Cork Examiner*, 2, col 2, 5 September, 1845, 3 cc1.

¹⁰³ "Review of the British Corn Trade During the Past Week," *Cork Examiner*, 10 September, 1845, 3 cc2.

¹⁰⁴ L. E. Jensen, *The 1845–1848 Famine in Flanders and the Netherlands* (Nijmegen, Netherlands: Radboud Universiteit, 2020).

¹⁰⁵ "The Potato Crop in Ireland," *Cork Examiner*, 15 September, 1845, 2 cc7.

agriculture and underlying systemic issues in British law and how poor relief was viewed in the 19th century.

Government sponsored relief programs mobilized very quickly. By October 1845, the situation in Ireland was already looking dire. On October 14, the *Times* reported that there would be a famine if the entire potato crop failed as reports were indicating.¹⁰⁶ In an effort to provide a modicum of relief, Prime Minister Robert Peel (Tory) authorized the importation of £100,000 worth of corn (maize) from the United States that October.¹⁰⁷ This sum was equal to roughly six million pounds in 2017, according to the National Archives' currency converter.¹⁰⁸ The British imported 1,192,000 bushels of corn and 50,164 barrels of corn meal.¹⁰⁹ By November 1845, a temporary organization known as the Relief Commission was established to oversee aid for Ireland. Peel chose to import maize as it was the cheapest staple crop, importing an expensive grain like wheat would have decreased the amount of aid available. Although the maize had been imported as a replacement to the potato, it was unfamiliar to the Irish, and as such, they did not know how to cook it, nor did they have the equipment to properly mill and prepare it.¹¹⁰ People in workhouses thought they were being given poison, leading to riots; mothers thought it would turn their children yellow.¹¹¹ The maize was physically too hard for Irish mills to sufficiently grind it. The maize also could not support the Irish peasant the way the vitamin, nutrient, and calorie rich potato could; one 213 gram potato produces 81 more calories than an ear of corn,

¹⁰⁶ "The Potato Pestilence," *The Times*, 14 October, 1845, 7 cc6.

¹⁰⁷ It should be noted that the usage of the word 'corn' in Britain refers to all cereal grains, whereas 'corn' in the Americas only refers to maize.

¹⁰⁸ Currency Converter. <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/#currency-result>.

¹⁰⁹ Frederick Merk, "The British Corn Crisis of 1845-46 and the Oregon Treaty," *Agricultural History* 8, no. 3 (July 1934): 100.

¹¹⁰ Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-49* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 73.

¹¹¹ Merk, 99-100.

according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.¹¹² The imported corn was so disliked that it became known as “Peel’s brimstone.” In a speech to the House of Commons on March 9, 1846, Prime Minister Peel said,

I am told there is a prejudice against the use of maize; but I apprehend that in the United States it is employed very generally for the purpose of food, and there are modes of dressing and preparing it by which the bread made from it is as palatable as that composed of wheat. Government has taken pains to ascertain in what mode Indian corn is employed to the best advantage, so as to render it perfectly palatable.¹¹³

The government did try to educate the populace on how best to cook corn. Stanley Brandes narrated how, “Only massive efforts by the government, especially the finance minister, who gave public demonstrations in which he ate corn porridge and cakes, and who arranged for wide distribution of an inexpensive pamphlet of corn recipes, convinced the people to eat cornmeal.”¹¹⁴ This effort came too late, however, as many had already become adverse to the maize.

In a critical decision, the House of Commons voted to repeal the Corn Laws on January 27, 1846. The Corn Laws were import tariffs protecting British grain farmers that kept grain prices artificially high. The Corn Laws did not enjoy universal support; an Anti-Corn Law League formed in London in 1838. The Corn Laws were highly politicized; Peel’s own party, the conservative Tory party, rejected repeal, as they wanted to protect English farmers and grain merchants from cheaper foreign grain, and also wealthy, aristocratic English landlords, whom the Tories represented. However, the bill was passed with support of the Whigs, who were proponents of free trade. In an impassioned speech on May 15, 1846, Robert Peel called for

¹¹² “Corn, Sweet, Yellow, Raw,” USDA, accessed November 10, 2023, <https://fdc.nal.usda.gov/fdc-app.html#/food-details/169998/nutrients>; “Potatoes, russet, flesh and skin, raw,” USDA, accessed November 10, 2023, <https://fdc.nal.usda.gov/fdc-app.html#/food-details/170027/nutrients>.

¹¹³ “Famine And Disease In Ireland,” *Hansard*, HC Deb, 9 March 1846, 84 cc783.

¹¹⁴ Stanley Brandes, “Maize as a Culinary Mystery,” *Ethnology* 31, no. 4 (Oct. 1992): 332.

repeal, and put the matter to the House of Commons. Repeal was passed by a vote of 327 for and 229 against.¹¹⁵ By repealing the Corn Laws, Parliament allowed cheaper grain to enter the Irish and British markets, hoping to alleviate the high food prices caused by the famine. Peel described a 3-year plan of gradually loosening the import restrictions around corn in an effort to, "Take precautions against the contingency of the people suffering from the effects of the present scarcity."¹¹⁶

After this decision, the Tory party split over ideological issues regarding the repeal of the Corn Laws. Those who followed Peel supported repeal, of course, while another faction rejected repeal. The Tories were historically proponents of interventionist policies, such as the Corn Laws which regulated the grain market to make it more favorable for British farmers. Peel's advocacy for repeal aligned him more closely with the Whig party, who supported free trade and non-interventionist policies. This split in the Tory party destabilized Peel's government, and opened the door for the Whigs to take control. In June 1846, the Whigs formed a minority government under Lord John Russell, shifting oversight of the Irish Famine to a laissez-faire, non-interventionist approach.

Realizing the gravity of the situation, Peel formed a plan to provide more relief for Ireland in early 1846. The plan consisted of constructing roads throughout Ireland and building fisheries along the coast, as the Whately Commission had originally indicated, and on the 9th of March 1846, the bills were given Royal Assent. Parliament allocated £400,000 for these relief measures. These funds employed Irish paupers and provided them with wages. As magnanimous as these relief measures appear, however, members of Parliament still disagreed on how relief

¹¹⁵ "Corn Importation Bill—Adjourned Debate—(Third Night)," *Hansard* HC Deb, 15 May 1846, 86 cc721.

¹¹⁶ "Commercial Policy — Customs — Corn Laws," *Hansard*, HC Deb, 27 January, 1846, vol 83 cc261.

should be administered. Some, like O’Connell and those more sympathetic to Ireland, obviously advocated for the Irish cause. There were those in Parliament, like Ralph Bernal Osborne, who proposed more interventionist policies in poor relief. However, there were also people who opted for a laissez-faire approach. These politicians did not want to be the sole providers of relief. This difference reflected the ideological debate in England over the nature of charity and poor relief. Was it the responsibility of the government, the private individual, or the church to provide aid? In the House of Commons on the 9th of March, Sir Robert Peel said, “The great dependence must, of course, be upon the spontaneous charity of the landed proprietors and others.”¹¹⁷ On March 13th, 1846, George Poulett Scrope voiced concerns in the House of Commons that Poor Law was hindering Poor Law Guardians to do what they must, “Ministers had volunteered a responsibility [outdoor relief] that in fact belonged to the owners of land and property in Ireland. [Mr. Scrope] thought that the first right to the food grown in Ireland lay in the people of Ireland.”¹¹⁸ Scrope, an advocate for Ireland, was frustrated because the Poor Law forbade Poor Law Guardians from providing outdoor relief. The Relief Commission thought the Irish situation too dire and did start providing outdoor relief. The Relief Commission was a coalition of prominent bureaucrats formed in 1845 to report the extent of the failure of the potato crop to Parliament and to oversee the distribution of the recently imported maize. The use of outdoor relief revealed a significant shift in Poor Law administration; the crisis was dire enough to convince relief administrators their original system was flawed. This was an effective measure in the short term; it provided the Irish with funds to buy food and developed Ireland economically. However, the system was already so flawed that ultimately these measures proved ineffective.

¹¹⁷ “Famine And Disease In Ireland” cc782.

¹¹⁸ “Famine in Ireland.” *Hansard*, HC Deb, 13 March 1846, vol 84 cc980.

Had poor relief or Irish agriculture been administered effectively prior to the famine, perhaps the situation could have been avoided.

The man principally in charge of administering relief in Ireland was Charles Trevelyan. He served as the assistant secretary to Her Majesty's Treasury from 1840-59. Operating from London, he oversaw all the expenditure on Irish relief efforts. Much of the blame for British governmental inaction was placed on his shoulders due to his staunch opposition to most Irish relief efforts. Not only a strict adherent of laissez-faire economics, meaning he wanted to let the free market run its course, he also believed that Irish poverty was the fault of Irish character. Trevelyan came under fire in later historians' analyses of the famine, most notably Kinealy and Woodham-Smith, due to his tight-fisted handling of aid funds during the famine. Additionally, he took a very pejorative view of the Irish, writing that "[after the planting season, the Irish peasant] is at leisure to follow his own inclinations, without even the safeguard of those intellectual tastes and legitimate objects of ambition which only imperfectly obviate the evils of leisure in the higher ranks of society."¹¹⁹

A charge historically lobbed at the British government during the famine was that England exported food, mainly wheat and other cereal grains, from Ireland while the Irish people starved. One thinks of Sinead O'Connor's 1994 song "Famine," wherein she accuses the English of artificially manufacturing famine by shipping out every form of food except potatoes, "OK, I want to talk about Ireland / Specifically I want to talk about the "famine" / About the fact that there never really was one."¹²⁰ As catchy as the song was, however, O'Connor failed to grasp the historical consensus on food exportation. While it was certainly true that England continued to

¹¹⁹ Trevelyan, 5.

¹²⁰ Sinead O'Connor, "Famine," from the album *Universal Mother* (London: Chrysalis Records Limited, 1994).

export produce, grain, and livestock from Ireland during the worst of the famine years, it was not certain how much these exports would have helped the average Irish peasant. Firstly, Kinealy was one of the few in the past 30 years who still placed the blame on Britain for exacerbating the famine due to food exportation.¹²¹ Daly and Ó Gráda, on the other hand, acknowledged that the exports were negligible in the overwhelming amount of potatoes lost during the famine.¹²² P.M.A. Bourke in 1976 presented data showing how crop exportation would not have alleviated the famine, “Grain exports in 1846 totalled 285,000 tons, which is the approximate food equivalent of a little over one million tons of potatoes; the shortfall in the potato crop of that year was well over ten times that figure.”¹²³ After the importation of maize and the repeal of the Corn Laws, the Relief Administration had been able to import other grains for Irish aid because it was now cheaper due to the lower import tariffs. Even Woodham-Smith, the premier Nationalist historian, wrote that four times as much grain was imported as exported during peak famine, 1846-47. She also noted that the counties where starvation was worst really only produced potatoes; there was not any produce to keep.¹²⁴

In June 1846, Peel lost support of Parliament and resigned as Prime Minister. The new Whig government, led by Lord John Russell, in July 1846 sought to reform relief measures. Many politicians, such as Trevelyan and Charles Wood, closely aligned with Whig ideology, saw the extensive outdoor public works campaign enacted by Peel as wasteful and enabling the Irish pauper’s perceived indolence. Trevelyan, the man in charge of relief administration, wrote in his 1848 account of the famine, “The pains taken to prevent the people from suffering want, led to

¹²¹ Kinealy, *A Death Dealing Famine*, 79.

¹²² Daly, 595; Cormac Ó Gráda, *Eating People Is Wrong, and Other Essays on Famine, Its Past, and Its Future* (New Haven: Princeton University Press, 2015), 114.

¹²³ P. M. Austin Bourke, “The Irish Grain Trade, 1839-48.” *Irish Historical Studies* 20, no. 78 (1976): 165.

¹²⁴ Woodham-Smith, 76.

their being better off than in ordinary years.”¹²⁵ When Lord Russell became Prime Minister, local relief committees were already applying some measures, specifically distributing the maize purchased by Peel.

Despite Ireland being admitted into the United Kingdom in 1801, many in England still saw it as a separate dependency, not on an equal playing field as Britain. The government thought that the Irish should support Irish famine relief, and passed the Labour Rate Act, a corollary to the Irish Poor Law. The new act placed the brunt of financing poor relief on the Irish landlord, instead of the central government. The landlords would pay taxes to support local relief measures based on how many tenants they had leasing their land. Unfortunately, this caused many landlords to drive off excess tenants so that their taxes would not be too high.

The plight of the Irish peasant only worsened after the passing of the Labour Rate Act. Now, not only did the people not have any food, but they were being thrown out of their homes. The evictions began in 1846, when hundreds of people were thrown out of their homes, specifically in Galway County.¹²⁶ A series of essays published in the *London Illustrated News* between December 1849 and January 1850 paint a grim picture of tenant-landlord relationships in Ireland. After evicting the tenants from their land, most paupers dug holes in the ground in order to find shelter. These holes were known as *Scalpeens*, and whole families dwelt inside their meager protection. As the essay describes, “In such, or still more wretched abodes, burrowing as they can, the remnant of the population is hastening to an end, and after a few years will be as scarce nearly as the exterminated Indians, except the specimens that are carefully preserved in

¹²⁵ Trevelyan, 49.

¹²⁶ Tim P. O’Neill “Doing Local History.” *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society* 53 (2001): 52.

the workhouse.”¹²⁷ Additionally, the *Illustrated News* provides some numbers for the amount of people evicted during the famine. According to the newspaper, 71,130 holdings were destroyed across Ireland in 1848 alone.¹²⁸ In giving a report to the House of Commons in 1886, George Howell asserted that 216,000 families were evicted between 1847-51.¹²⁹ Of course, not every landlord was heartless. The same essay provides a profile of Colonel George Wyndham, who possessed some property outside of Kilmurry, in County Clare. Colonel Wyndham, the natural son of George Wyndham, 3rd Earl of Egremont, treated his tenants well, not exploiting them or evicting them, and even constructing a school on his property. The newspaper reported it as such, “The whole face of the country is altered, and all the people you meet, whether men, women, or children, seem cheerful, as if they had plenty of the means of subsistence.”¹³⁰ Unfortunately, the situation of Colonel Wyndham seemed to be the exception, not the rule. Many landlords contributed to the worsening of conditions for the Irish peasant, if not their outright demise.

The worst season of famine was the winter of 1846-47. Known as Black ‘47, it was the coldest in living memory and the people were already weakened to the point of starvation by a year of famine. Because of the public works scheme, like the construction of roads and fisheries, in the spring and early summer of 1846, much of the planting for that year's potato crop had been neglected. While these works ultimately improved Irish infrastructure, it actually hurt the Irish situation at that moment. All the men were working in the relief measures to get food and money for their families and very few had the time to plant another potato crop. When harvest rolled

¹²⁷ “Condition of Ireland: Illustrations of the New Poor Law,” *London Illustrated News*, 15 December, 1849, 393 cc1.

¹²⁸ “Condition of Ireland: Illustrations of the New Poor Law,” *London Illustrated News*, 22 December, 1849, 404 cc1.

¹²⁹ “Tenant Farmers (Ireland) - Evictions From Inability to Pay Rent,” *Hansard* HC Deb 25 August 1886 vol 308 cc498.

¹³⁰ “Condition of Ireland: Illustrations of the New Poor Law,” *London Illustrated News*, 29 December, 1849, 444 cc1.

around in September, there was an even more diminished potato crop beyond what the blight had destroyed. This was an issue noted at the time, or shortly thereafter, as Trevelyan described in his account of the famine.¹³¹ Additionally, it was too cold to work, driving many paupers deeper into desperation. The abject misery of the Irish during this time cannot be understated. Much of the population was left starving to death and freezing either in holes in the ground or in squalid workhouses. While demographic data for mortality across Ireland does not exist for the exact Black '47 period, Ó Gráda reports that in six parishes in County Cork 7,332 people died out of a population of 45,000 from September 1846 to September 1847. Adjusted for deaths not related to the famine, this would represent over a tenth of the population dying during this time.¹³²

During Black '47, two situations illustrated the utter destitution the Irish people faced: workhouses and soup kitchens. These two facets of the famine exemplified some of the worst conditions in Ireland, and have historically been seared into the collective Irish memory as the injustice of the famine. These views of Black '47 represent how the Irish perceived the famine, which at times over-emphasized English culpability, especially in light of later Anglo-Irish relations, or lack thereof.

Due to the freezing temperatures that winter, many families were forced to enroll in workhouses as the only form of relief available. The conditions in the workhouses were utterly atrocious. The days were long and consisted of heavy labor with meager rations. Although many Irish were used to heavy farm labor, adults were only fed two meals of a thin porridge with milk and potatoes and expected to work 10 hours a day. There was not enough bedding, clothes, or blankets to go around. Children were separated from their parents and kept from seeing them.

¹³¹ Trevelyan, 49.

¹³² Cormac Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond: The Great Famine in History, Economy, and Memory* (New Haven: Princeton University Press, 1999), 86.

Furthermore, the Irish pauper had to relinquish ownership of whatever small parcel of land he possessed upon admittance to the workhouse. The architects of the Poor Law designed workhouses to be the absolute last resort for the Irish poor, and the conditions were designed to be as intolerable as possible. However, far more people than the workhouses were designed to accommodate were sheltered under their inadequate provisions. Adult men and women were separated into wards each measuring about 900 square feet, wherein upwards of 500 people lived.¹³³ 163 workhouses were spread out amongst the different Poor Law Unions, which over the course of the famine had to sustain around one million. The correspondent for the *London Illustrated News* provided accounts of how many people died in the workhouse. He reported that in the Kilrush workhouse in County Clare, 1,075 people died inside the workhouse in 1847.¹³⁴ That was just one singular workhouse in one Poor Law Union. It did not even represent the situation of the entirety of County Clare, much less the entirety of Ireland. Most of these deaths were most likely not due to outright starvation, however. The close living conditions and weakened immune systems due to malnutrition provided the perfect breeding ground for disease. There were 7,000 fever patients in workhouses only during the week of Christmas in 1847, of whom 1,200 died.¹³⁵

The prevalence of soup kitchens also added to the degradation and destitution of the Irish. By February 1847, the outdoor public works became too expensive to maintain and ineffective during the harsh winter. In 1846, public works had cost the government £4,848,000, and did not

¹³³ "Mallow Union Workhouse," held by Irish Architectural Archive, published by UCD Library, University College Dublin.

¹³⁴ "Condition of Ireland: Illustrations of the New Poor Law," 443 cc3.

¹³⁵ Malachy Powell, "The Workhouses of Ireland," *University Review* 3, no. 7 (1965): 11.

really mitigate the effects of the famine.¹³⁶ To provide further relief, Parliament passed the Temporary Relief Act, known popularly as the Soup Kitchen Act.

As any 19th century government was not expected to be heavily involved in the everyday lives of its citizens, numerous private charities sent funds and aid to Ireland, especially during 1846 and 47. Word of the famine and Ireland's plight traveled incredibly quickly around the world, and people from six different continents gave money to the Irish.¹³⁷ Presidents, Sultans, and Prime Ministers from across the globe gave money; Queen Victoria herself contributed £2,000. Most famously, the Choctaw Nation contributed \$710. This constitutes one of the greatest sacrifices on behalf of the Irish during the famine, as the Choctaw raised this money towards the end of the Trail of Tears. The most prevalent relief efforts were administered by the Society of Friends, or Quakers, and the British Relief Association led by Lionel de Rothschild, a prominent British textile magnate. These two groups opened soup kitchens across the country, as soup was the cheapest and most effective way to feed people.

Following the examples of private relief efforts, most notably the Quakers, the government opened soup kitchens throughout Ireland that distributed food to the starving population. Although the soup kitchens provided a modicum of relief to the Irish, they further humiliated them and spread animosity between the English and the Irish. Many protestant denominations, like the Quakers, saw the famine as a means to evangelize and convert Ireland to protestantism. Many churches sponsored soup kitchens, with the stipulation that those who took advantage of this relief would convert to protestantism. Those who took this relief at the expense of their faith were known as "souters," or "jumpers." They were ridiculed and socially

¹³⁶ Gillissen, "A United Kingdom? Ireland, the Union, and Government Responses to the Great Famine," *Études Anglaises* 67, no. 3 (2014): 341.

¹³⁷ Christine Kinealy, "Private Donations to Ireland during An Gorta Mór," *Seanchas Ardmhacha: Journal of the Armagh Diocesan Historical Society* 17, no. 2 (1998): 109.

ostracized for their betrayal of the Catholic faith. However, some people “took the soup” only to immediately reconvert back to Catholicism once aid was acquired. E. Moore Quinn, in her study of women and food narratives during the potato famine, noted that many women took advantage of this system in order to feed their families, “One narrative showcases a woman “playing two ends against the middle,” so to speak, by strategizing her brief conversion to the Protestant faith in order to avail herself of the benefits it offered. Once her gains were realized, she converted back to Catholicism.”¹³⁸ While the soup kitchens provided relief for the starving populace, they did so at the expense of the people’s dignity, and sometimes their faith. They sowed tension and discord among the Irish people at a time when peace and unity was paramount.

In contrast to the 1841 census of Ireland, which estimated the population to be just over 8 million, the census of 1851 showed that the population had fallen to 6.5 million.¹³⁹ In 1841 the population had reached maximum capacity, as Malthus argued, and after the famine it fell back to a sustainable level. It is estimated that about half a million died, most from famine related diseases, such as typhus and cholera, and not outright starvation, while the rest emigrated away from Ireland. Over 500,000 went to the United States, with others emigrating to Canada and then Britain. Most emigrants arrived in these new countries penniless, having used all their meager resources to book transportation. Some landlords even sponsored their tenants’ emigration. Lord Palmerston, the British foreign secretary and absentee landlord of almost the entirety of the land of Ahamlish parish in County Sligo, financed the emigration for almost 2,000 of his tenants.¹⁴⁰ As of 2021, the Irish population was only 7 million (including both the Republic of Ireland and

¹³⁸ E. Moore Quinn and Cara Delay, “Bounty, Moderation, and Miracles: Women and Food in Narratives of the Great Famine,” *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua* 21, no. 2 (2017): 122.

¹³⁹ *Abstract of Census of Ireland, 1841 and 1851*, HM Stationery Office, (Dublin: G. & J. Grierson, 1851), 2.

¹⁴⁰ Tyler Anbinder, “Lord Palmerston and the Irish Famine Emigration,” *The Historical Journal* 44, no. 2 (2001): 443.

Northern Ireland).¹⁴¹ Even in the 21st century, Ireland never recovered its population from before the famine.

After 1848, the famine slowly petered out, most likely due to Irish potatoes developing an immunity to *P. infestans*. The worst was over; only the vestiges of devastation and deprivation remained. In 1849, Queen Victoria visited Dublin, Cork, and Belfast in order to show her support for the Irish people after all they had been through. It was difficult to crystalize the change the famine wrought on Irish society. Subsequent generations would be marked by the famine, especially in light of the Troubles which used the famine as a rallying point against the British. The Potato Famine was one of the most consequential and disastrous times in Irish history. It changed the character and trajectory of the Irish people. The fungus that destroyed Ireland's potatoes demonstrated the precariousness of Irish agriculture in 1845. Similar to England in 1315, a catastrophic event along with several factors operating in the background pushed this teetering society past what it could handle.

Was all of this devastation preventable? Had the British government realized how dependent the Irish were on the potato, they could have helped Irish infrastructure, or possibly introduced new industries into Ireland to provide jobs and free up farmland. Additionally, a more sympathetic Poor Law could have better mitigated the famine than one that saw poverty as the fault of the individual. The Great Famine caused universal destruction, but the potato famine only hurt Ireland, despite both England and the Low Countries also having a potato blight.

¹⁴¹ "Ireland," United States Census Bureau, last modified July 1, 2023, <https://www.census.gov/popclock/world/ei>; "2021 Census," Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, last modified March 21, 2021, <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/census/2021-census#:~:text=The%20population%20of%20Northern%20Ireland,in%20Northern%20Ireland%20was%20768%2C900>.

Conclusion

While both the Great Famine and the Irish famine have similar underlying themes, they present differently in each context. Both had systemic problems, like overpopulation and land management, combined with environmental catastrophes, but the governmental response to each shows how famine can be prevented, if the destruction is regional. There was not much anyone could have done in 1315 to stop the famine; the entire agricultural system was destroyed. In Ireland, on the other hand, the regional crisis could have been mitigated by a better response from the British government. Additionally, Malthus's arguments shed light on the reality of the population during both events. The maximum number of people were living at the lowest standard of subsistence until a crisis forced the population in check.

The scale of each famine is one of the most striking differences. All of Europe was affected by the Great Famine, while only Ireland suffered during the potato blight, despite it destroying potatoes in England, America, and the Low Countries. Around 10% of the population across Europe died during the Great Famine, while only 6% of Ireland died. Additionally, the response of the government in 1845 was a stark contrast to that in 1315. Edward did what he could to help his people, although he was hindered by the widespread devastation of the famine, the resources at his disposal, and the relative weakness of his monarchy. The British government, however, potentially could have done more in relief efforts, or could have seen the monoculture that was Irish agriculture and instituted reform in Ireland before the famine.

It begs the question of was the Irish famine preventable? Even by 1830, Ireland's agricultural system was not diversified enough to withstand a failure of the potato crop, and only through an entire overhaul of Irish society could the Famine be prevented. However, had England begun in the late 1700s, some of Ireland's problems could have been solved. Industry

also could have been created in Ireland to diversify the economy, as well as free up farmland. Furthermore, Westminster could have lifted the laws barring Catholics from participating in government. Had Britain realized what was going on in Ireland in the 50 years before the Potato Famine, it could have been prevented. Hindsight is, however, far clearer than reality.

All of these differences, especially that of scale, become especially prominent when put in comparison with how much more of an impact the Potato Famine had on the Irish populace and later culture than the Great Famine. The Great Famine was objectively larger, more catastrophic, but the Irish famine received more visibility and attention. This awareness is partly because the Potato Famine is far more recent than the Great Famine, but also because it had a far greater effect on the Irish identity. During the Great Famine, everyone across Europe was suffering. However, it was only the Irish who were going through this extreme crisis. The Potato Famine created a narrative for the Irish people of oppression and persecution by the English. This story formed the Irish identity and informed much of later Anglo-Irish relations and tensions. If Britain had intervened in Irish society in the 1790s, it might have helped Irish agriculture, but it also could have exacerbated the English persecution narrative.

These famines teach the importance of ideology in times of crisis. How one reacts to disasters reveals motivations, desires, and worldview. Although this point is not readily apparent during the Great Famine, it is played out in the historiography. Historians and other scholars used the famine to prove their own points and demonstrate their own claims about economics, politics, and climate. People in 1845 approached the Potato Famine with their own views on Ireland. Whether promoting Irish issues or seeking to enforce political and economic policies, those in power applied famine relief following their own ideology. Disaster breaks up the status quo. As such, it opens the door to new ideas and traditions. Those working in and formulating

responses to crises do so according to their ideology, both in terms of how they think the world is and how it should be.

Another factor is the role of economics and international trade in relief efforts. Both Parliament in 1845 and Edward II used international trade to acquire food for their starving people: Peel bought corn (maize) from the United States and Edward purchased grain from countries in Western Europe. Obviously, these measures were not the most effective; the corn was basically unusable by the Irish and Edward could not obtain sufficient cereals from countries that were also in the grips of famine. Purchasing food from abroad was too expensive and logistically problematic to be a feasible solution for each famine situation. It is unrealistic to expect England in 1315 to be able to import Egyptian wheat or cereal crops from Eastern Europe and the Central Asian steppes. Additionally, globalization allowed for aid to be sent from abroad. During the Potato Famine, the interconnectedness of different countries became apparent, both through the aid sent to Ireland from across oceans and Irish emigration to North America and elsewhere. Globalized relief campaigns expand the scope of aid and raise awareness and funds for famines, as well as other humanitarian crises. Whether this relief reaches its intended subjects or is even sent in the first place is another matter, however. While globalization facilitates easier relief efforts, human nature has unfortunately stayed the same throughout history, and just because someone can send aid, does not mean they will.

Overall, these famines revealed the fragility of each society. It is difficult to track the changes wrought by the extreme devastation, as twenty years after the Great Famine the Black Death would decimate Europe, and Ireland still was not recovered in terms of population to what it was before the famine. Each famine forever changed the people that lived through them and marred society for subsequent generations. Ireland remembered the Potato Famine, and

incorporated it into national history, especially during the Troubles. Both the Great Famine and the Black Death greatly restructured English society, and in part prepared the way for the Renaissance and modern England. Out of the destruction came a new people, born of deprivation and want, but hoping to rebuild their lives and protect themselves and their loved ones from anything like that happening again.

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