

# Irish farmers sacrificed on t

Exactly 150 years ago the Irish famine began. At least a million people died. Clairen Ennis tells the story after reading "This Great Calamity" by Christine Kinealy (Gill and Macmillan)

"GOD MADE the (potato) blight, but England made the famine." That idea has been etched into the minds of Irish people and people of Irish descent for six generations since Ireland's "Great Hunger" began with a partial failure of the potato crop late in the summer of 1845, exactly one hundred and fifty years ago. The potato crop would fail, completely or in part, for four terrible successive years — '45, '46, '47 and '48 — during which, over a million people — citizens of the UK, then the richest state on earth — starved to death or died of cholera.

The potato crop failed all over Europe and in England too. Everywhere it caused distress to the very poor. But nowhere except in Ireland did that failure result in mass starvation.

Why? Nowhere else but Ireland did so many people depend on the potato for their staple diet and as the sole barrier between themselves and starvation.

Ireland was a land ruled by the descendants of conquering landlords and

populated mainly by those whose ancestors they had conquered and forced for centuries into something like serfdom.

The landlords were often absentees who lived in London on the proceeds of robbing those who worked their land. Their vast estates were run by agents.

They were sub-let in large expanses to men who would sub-let them in smaller parcels. These in turn were sub-let, and so on down to hundreds of thousands of families who leased an acre, half an acre, or a quarter acre of land on which to grow potatoes. They would add to their resources by seasonal work in England or Scotland and by begging. They had no reserves, no prospects. Outside of north east Ulster, there was little industry to employ those who could not live off the land.

From 1800 to the famine, the population doubled, from 4 to 8 million. Then in 1845 "God" sent the blight, and famine came because of the way society was organised.

People were allowed to starve to death because all the puny institutions of charity and succour could not cope with the great sea of uprooted, starving people. Only the resources of the UK government could have saved that mass of people from starvation. But the mid-19th century British government was slow to recognise any responsibility and slower still to act on it.

Some relief was given in return for work digging roads — or digging for no useful purpose — by starved and sometimes dying people. The viable areas of Irish society — those who held sizeable amounts of land — shut out the starving and the dying. Diminishing charity excepted, they could not have what they could not pay for, even to save their lives. Famine prices were charged. The starving, as a rule, could pay for nothing.

Government was in the grip of the dogma that nothing should be done to relieve the starving that would interfere with the normal workings of markets, or undercut "normal trade", or encourage the poor to "expect something for nothing." Better that people should starve to death!

The British official in charge, Trevelyan,

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**While immense numbers of people were going out of the country!**

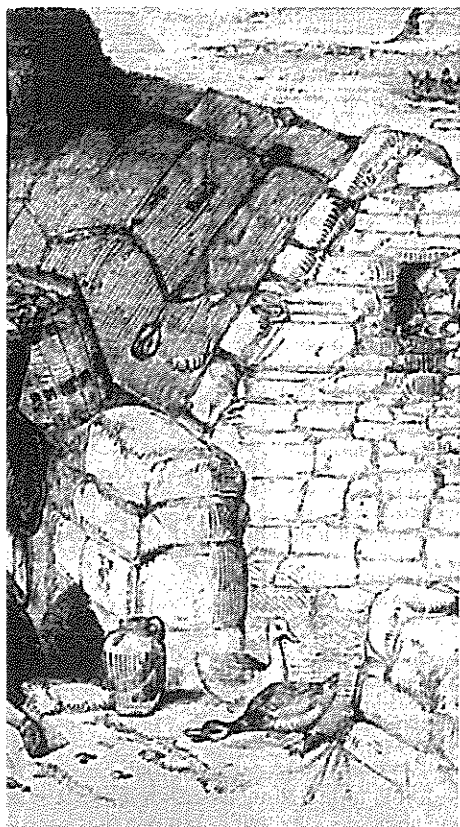
— one of the most hated names in Irish history — later expressed the view that he had *done too much* to relieve the famine-stricken people.

While immense numbers of people were starving, food they could not pay for was going out of the country!

Priests preached submission to the will of God to bewildered, hungry people for whom their accustomed world had turned into a place as murderously hostile, as bare of nourishment as the Sahara Desert or the icy wastes of the North Pole. They submitted — a submission that would to subsequent Irish generations be as hard to understand, and as hard to come to terms with emotionally, as is for Israeli today, the docility with which the trapped Jews of Hitler's Europe submitted to their fate a century later.

Whole villages starved to death. Travellers would come upon the bodies of starved children and adults with mouths stained green from eating grass in a country that was exporting corn and cattle.

# the altar of private property



starving, food they could not pay for

In the wake of famine came fever — cholera. And that was not confined to the very poor.

And there was then a panic-stricken exodus from the fertile country made into a desert for so many of its inhabitants by those who monopolised the means of life and used soldiers and armed policemen to keep "the thin hands of the poor" off the means of life. Those who could raise the fare fled to England, or the US, or Canada.

Packed as tight as possible by profiteering shipowners, they brought cholera with them, infecting the uninfected so that the ships hurrying across the Atlantic would turn in weeks from ships full of those who had survived and thought they had escaped with their lives, into coffin-ships full of belated victims of the famine. Unknowingly, they had carried their fate on board ship with them.

Then came mass evictions. In its callous bourgeois sluggishness and its dogmatic worship of a free market which could not be interfered with, no matter what the

human cost, the government had committed sins of omission. It had failed to act humanely. Now it became an active force that deliberately worsened the awful situation in Ireland.

The government decided to make landlords responsible for the taxes (rates) their starving or half-starving tenants could not pay. So far some landlords had tried to live by the ideal of *noblesse oblige*. Some had responded as human beings and put themselves out of pocket to help their tenants. Now the government faced them with ruinous taxes if they did not evict impetunious tenants.

To avoid ruin, they began to evict tenants who might otherwise have kept a roof over their heads. Now the roofs and the walls were put in by crow-bar wielding bailiffs guarded by armed policemen, and starving men, women and children added their abused bodies to the throngs on the roads or congregating outside the workhouses.

Thus it went on through '45, '46, '47 and '48 until edible potatoes grew in 1949. Abandoned cabins (homes) dotted the countryside. Old Irish slums swelled and grew in towns like Liverpool and Manchester; new Irish slums dotted the cities on the eastern seaboard of the USA.

In the next generation and the ones after that they would work their way up in American society to become a great power in American politics. They would make Irish nationalism in the USA a force. They would always be a force "against England."

The idea that "God made the blight, but England made the famine" was given that formulation by John Mitchell, an emigré Irish journalist living in the USA. It is true. Yet it is only part of the truth.

The bourgeois British government was callous and brutal; it did not scruple to use the famine to bankrupt and clear out moribund debt-ridden Irish landlords. But in most of what it did it was governed not by national feeling against the Irish, but by the dominant bourgeois ideas and economic superstitions of the day.

They sincerely believed that ruin would come from too much government interference with the economy. There is evidence that at the time the British government administered the workhouse system in Ireland more liberally and humanely than in Britain.

Maybe, a native Irish government would have done better for its own people. But



Modern famines are also made by the defenders of private property

maybe it would not. The Irish bourgeoisie too shared in the then common superstitions, the *phishorogues*, of the bourgeois economists. Many of those who exploited the famine and those stricken by it, and who benefited from it, were the Irish Catholic Gombeenmen.

At best, the explanation of it in nationalist, nation against nation, terms was a tendentious part-truth. James Connolly, the Irish socialist leader shot by the British in 1916, expressed the main truth.

He said that *only those who rejected the profit system, only those who rejected capitalism, only those who condemned the system of private property that allowed the haves in Irish society to exclude the have nots, assigning a million of them to death, only they had a right to condemn the British who so callously presided over and administered that system during the famine.*

The generations of Irish people driven out since independence, could testify from their own less terrible experience that Connolly understood the heart of the question.

"God" made the blight, but private property and those who put the rights and prerogatives of the owners of property above the right to life of their starving fellow citizens, made the famine. ■