

Primary Sources: The Irish Potato Famine, Victims of the Great Hunger

By James Mahoney, Illustrated London News, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.15.17

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Called "At the Gates of the Workhouse," this drawing was done in 1846. Workhouses were places where poor people could go if they needed food. When the famine occurred in Ireland, and especially by 1847, the workhouses were overcrowded and could not keep all the poor people who came looking for help. From: Illustrated London News

Editor's Note: Famine means that many do not have enough food. In 1845, the Potato Famine spread across Ireland. A fungus turned potatoes dark brown, so they could not be eaten. In Ireland, a million people died because there was not enough food. Another 2 million left Ireland to find new homes around the world. Most went to the United States.

Many think that Sir Walter Raleigh brought the potato to Ireland from the Americas around 1570. The damp Irish climate made the potato easy to grow. From 1780 to 1845, this helped double the Irish population from 4 million to 8 million. The English owned wheat fields around the country. They hired Irish farmers to grow and harvest the wheat that was sent to England. But the Irish lived off potatoes on their small family farms. By the time of the Potato Famine, Ireland's people depended on the potato for most of its food.

The fungus was on ships coming to Ireland. In September 1845, it quickly spread to the potato fields. As the crops died, those on small farms had little food to eat. This led to more diseases that also caused death. This disaster was made worse because the English

government was slow to help. Ireland was part of the British Empire, but not enough was done to save the Irish people. By 1848, the famine ended. But over the next 60 years, Ireland's population fell from 8 million to 4 million.

In 1847, a newspaper asked James Mahoney, an artist, to tour the country. He was to report on what he saw. His stories and drawings explained what was happening. The following is about his journey in the south of Ireland:

"As We Moved West, We Saw More And More Misery"

I started from Cork for Skibbereen. Stopping for breakfast, I saw great numbers of starving poor surrounding our coach wagon begging for money. There was a woman carrying the body of her child who had died, who asked for pennies to buy a coffin for her dear little baby.

As we moved west, we saw more and more misery, as we either met a funeral or a coffin every hundred yards.

We next reached Skibbereen. We first went to the Bridgetown part of town. There I saw the dying, the living and the dead lying together on the dirt floors covered in rags.

We found one house, without door or window, where one fine, tall, young man had entered some hours before to escape the freezing cold. He now lay dead on the bare floor surrounded by many others. What was seen was truly heartbreaking. It so distressed Dr. Donovan that he begged me not to go into the house, for he feared I would become sick if I stood near the doorway.

"We Next Got To Skull, Where We Found More Horrors"

The next morning, I started for Ballidichob. We were told that we should come to a hut or cabin where four people lay dead for six days. We found this to be true. There lay the four bodies, and a fifth was soon to die. On hearing our voices, the dying man tried to reach the door. He asked for a drink or a fire to warm himself, but fell in the doorway near to death.

We next got to Skull, where we found more horrors. In the street, from 300 to 500 women with money in their hands were seeking to buy food. A few of the government officers gave some cornmeal to them. One of the women told me she had been standing there since daybreak.

This food was in small amounts, but cost a lot. Each person got about four pounds of grain. Those waiting for this small amount had feelings of great disappointment.

I certainly saw from 150 to 180 funerals for those that died because there was no food. The living had no more sympathy for the dead. I watched the men working to remove the dead from the workhouse. One of them, sitting on four coffins in a wagon, was smiling as he smoked his pipe. The people also say that whoever escapes the fever will soon be sick

because they must walk past the dead as they walk from three to six miles to work. They must walk back again in the evening without a bit of food. Add to this, many that stand working in bogs and wet places become sick, fall and die at their work.