

Historical Overview and PDF Images

Link to PDF Images

http://www.irishfamine.ca/images/ireland/environmental/before_and_after.pdf

Pictures 1-4:

Before the famine struck Ireland, the Irish were generally a healthy people. They were largely an agrarian society, as opposed to an urban society. They lived off the land, largely growing crops and rearing livestock that were exported to England, which was, at that time, the richest country in the world, and they grew potatoes to feed themselves. Most of Ireland was in the hands of land-owners, many of whom lived in England, and the large majority of the Irish rented their land. Rents were collected by "bailiffs", who were Irish themselves, and the police, Irish too, maintained law and order. At this time, Ireland was considered to be the most over-populated county in Europe. While Ireland was a democracy and people could vote for members of parliament who lived and worked in London, the majority of the Irish could not vote, as you had to own land which they did not. Most were very poor and there was no social assistance (free health care, welfare, or unemployment insurance) like we have in Canada today. Most of the Irish were Roman Catholics, unlike the rest of the British Isles (England, Scotland and Wales) who were Protestant. The land-owners were also mainly Protestant.

Pictures 5-10

Potatoes did not originate in Europe, but were first grown in South America. But they were easy to grow and were filling for those who had little else to eat. It is now believed that the Potato Blight probably originated in South America and then came to Ireland. It caused the potatoes to either rot in the ground or covered them in spots and they were inedible. It started slowly, but by the mid 1840's it was widespread and many of the Irish were starving.

Pictures 11-12

But not only were the Irish people starving, but they also had to pay the rent for their land. They, of course, were unable to do this and many were evicted and their homes were destroyed. Many of the land-owners argued that this was better for the farmers, as the size of their plots was inefficient and they were better off in "workhouses" that the Government was setting up as a form of relief. Also, diseases like Typhus and Cholera had broken out and it was felt that the closely packed conditions found in the average cottage helped spread disease.

Pictures 13-18

Many of the pictures in this file appeared in magazines and papers published in England and tell us that the British public were very aware of conditions in Ireland. Many charitable organizations raised money to send to Ireland. The Government, though, was less inclined to use taxpayers' money to help. They believed in free enterprise and that every person was responsible for their own destiny. They did send money though and public works projects were set up, where unemployed men could work on roads, etc. to earn money. They were very badly run, though, and the men were either not paid, or worse, died on the job. They also set up workhouses, which would take in people who were made homeless. They could work and earn food. They, too, were poorly managed and over-crowded. They also became breeding grounds for disease, because of the crowded conditions. As noted in Picture #18, some of the workhouses were run by groups with religious affiliations (charity groups generally were, e.g. the Quakers), and people who received charity had to give up their Catholic beliefs in order to receive help.

Pictures 19-22

Many of the descendants of those who suffered in the Irish Famine say that it was a 'genocide', a planned extermination of the Irish by the British Government. But most discount that opinion today. At that time, governments generally did not get involved in relief efforts and private charity groups took on this role. This is one of the first instances where a government did try to help, but most of their efforts failed. They did decrease the amount of food that was imported from Ireland, so there would be more available for the people, but prices remained high and most could not afford it. The government also imported maize/corn from America for the Irish to eat, but many did not know how to prepare it and ate it raw, which caused many digestive problems.

Pictures 23-25

While many Irish made the decision themselves to leave Ireland for "The New World", many others were encouraged to do so to relieve over-crowding and inadequate supplies in Ireland. Britain depended on timber from North America and the ships would often return to Canada and America with empty holds after they unloaded their cargo. It seemed to make sense that they be used to transport the Irish on the return journey. Conditions on the boats were not very good, though. There was overcrowding (10 square feet for the average man) and poor sanitation. Disease and starvation were real problems, and these ships were nick-named "coffin ships", because many died on the voyage over.