

# 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: The Irish famine, or Great Famine, was the result of a devastating outbreak of potato blight (a fungus) which began in Europe in 1845. It led to widespread starvation, the ruin of the Irish economy and the Irish Diaspora that scattered the Irish people around the globe. Of Ireland's population of 8 million, more than 1 million died of starvation and 2 million emigrated between 1845 and 1855, mostly to the United States.*

*The potato was not native to Ireland. It is believed that Sir Walter Raleigh brought the potato to Ireland from the Americas around 1570. At first, the potato seemed heaven-sent. It thrived in the damp Irish climate, was easy to grow and produced a larger amount of food per acre. In the period from 1780 to 1845, it helped double the Irish population from 4 million to 8 million. With this population*

*explosion came an increased demand for land. The only solution was to divide family farmland into smaller plots of land, making potatoes the only crop that could produce the larger amount of food that was needed. However, Ireland was England's breadbasket. It grew and exported huge amounts of grain to England. The English owned the wheat fields and hired Irish farmers to grow and harvest the wheat. The Irish lived off potatoes on their family lands. By the time of the potato famine, Ireland's population was dangerously dependent on the potato for 60 percent of its nourishment.*

*In September 1845, the potato blight was brought ashore from the cargo holds of ships. It quickly spread to the potato fields. One-third of the crop was lost that year. Three-quarters of the crop was ruined in the next two years. The small farmers suffered immediately. Starvation also led to an increase in diseases such as typhus, dysentery and cholera. This natural disaster was made worse by the inadequate reaction of the English government. Ireland was part of the British Empire, but England didn't want to pay the high price needed to save the Irish people. By 1848, the worst was over, but its effects lasted for many years. By 1911, Ireland's population fell to 4 million.*

*In 1847, James Mahoney, an artist living in Cork, Ireland, was asked by the Illustrated London News to tour the surrounding countryside. He was to report on what he saw. The resulting articles and illustrations alerted the English public to the crisis. Here is Mahoney's account as he journeys to the town of Skibbereen and nearby villages in the south of Ireland:*

### **"The Horrors Of Poverty Became Visible"**

I started from Cork, by coach, for Skibbereen. Stopping for breakfast in Clonakilty, the horrors of the poverty became visible to me. Vast numbers of starving poor flocked around our wagon coach begging for money. There was a woman carrying in her arms the corpse of a fine child. She asked for pennies to buy a coffin in which to bury her dear little baby. I learned from the people of the hotel that dozens, like this woman, come into the town each day.

After leaving Clonakilty, each step that we took westward brought fresh evidence of this misery. We either met a funeral or a coffin at every hundred yards. We approached the country of the Shepperton Lakes, where the distress became more striking, because there were fewer and fewer numbers of people attending these funerals.

We next reached Skibbereen. We first proceeded to the Bridgetown section and there I saw the dying, the living and the dead lying upon the same floor with only a few miserable rags upon them. Not a single house out of 500 could boast of being free from death and fever as the dead lay close to the living for even six days without any effort being made to remove the bodies to a final resting place.

### **"What Was Seen Was Truly Heartbreaking"**

After leaving this house of death, we proceeded to High-street, or Old Chapel-lane and there found one house, without door or window, where one, fine, tall, country lad had entered some hours before to escape the freezing cold but now lay dead on the bare floor surrounded by many others. What was seen was truly heartbreaking and so distressed Dr. Donovan that he begged me not to go into the house and to avoid coming into contact with the people surrounding the doorway.

The next morning, I started for Ballidichob, and learned upon the road that we should come to a hut or cabin where four people had lain dead for six days. And upon arriving at the hut, the abode of Tim Harrington, we found this to be true; for there lay the four bodies and a fifth was soon to die. On hearing our voices, the sinking man made an effort to reach the door, and ask for drink or a fire to warm him. He fell in the doorway near death, but could not be helped for fear of taking the fever and becoming sick, too.

We next got to Skull where, by the attention of Dr. Traill, vicar of the church parish (and whose humanity is beyond all praise), we witnessed almost indescribable indoor horrors. In the street, from 300 to 500 women, with money in their hands, were seeking to buy food, whilst a few of the government officers doled out cornmeal to them. One of the women told me she had been standing there since daybreak, seeking to get food for her family at home.

### **"The Living Have Lost All Sympathy For The Dead"**

This food, it appeared, was being doled out in small amounts at high prices from a stock of just 50 tons for a population of 27,000, which is less than four pounds per person; so that you may calculate what were the feelings of the disappointed mass.

I certainly saw from 150 to 180 funerals for victims of starvation, where the living have lost all sympathy for the dead. So hardened are the men regularly employed in the removal of the dead from the workhouse that I saw one of them sitting on four coffins in a wagon, smoking with enjoyment. 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, and back again in the evening, without a morsel of food. Added to this they are, in a great number of instances, standing in bogs and wet places, which so affects them that many of the poor fellows have been known to drop down at their work.

## Quiz

- 1 Which idea is BEST supported by the third paragraph of the section "What Was Seen Was Truly Heartbreaking"?
  - (A) The government responded to the needs of the Irish people.
  - (B) Dr. Traill was active in providing food to the people in his church.
  - (C) Cornmeal was the only food available to Irish women.
  - (D) Many people in Ireland were desperate to purchase any food.
- 2 Read the following statement.

*Death and disease were widespread during the famine.*

Which selection from the article BEST supports the statement above?

- (A) There was a woman carrying in her arms the corpse of a fine child. She asked for pennies to buy a coffin in which to bury her dear little baby.
- (B) Not a single house out of 500 could boast of being free from death and fever as the dead lay close to the living for even six days without any effort being made to remove the bodies to a final resting place.
- (C) What was seen was truly heartbreakingly distressing Dr. Donovan that he begged me not to go into the house and to avoid coming into contact with the people surrounding the doorway.
- (D) Added to this they are, in a great number of instances, standing in bogs and wet places, which so affects them that many of the poor fellows have been known to drop down at their work.

- 3 Read the selection from the section "The Horrors Of Poverty Became Visible."

*Stopping for breakfast in Clonakilty, the horrors of the poverty became visible to me. Vast numbers of starving poor flocked around our wagon coach begging for money.*

Which words from the selection MOST help explain what the word "flocked" conveys?

- (A) horrors of poverty
- (B) vast numbers
- (C) starving poor
- (D) begging for money

- 4 Read the third paragraph of the section "What Was Seen Was Truly Heartbreaking."

Adding which of these sentences to the text would help explain the meaning of the verb "doled out" in the context of the article?

- (A) They rolled barrels of cornmeal through the streets.
- (B) They threw sacks of cornmeal into the crowd.
- (C) They were given small amounts of cornmeal one at a time.
- (D) They had to trade potatoes for cornmeal because the potatoes were rotten.