

OMNIVISUM

literary magazine



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Land As a Weapon

Written by Liam Sheahan

In December of 1849 eviction finally reached Brian Connor of Kilrush, Ireland. He owed no debts and had farmed the sliver of land on his landlord's property for years, carving an existence from borrowed land in hopes of someday finding his own. But the Quarter-Acre Clause of Britain's Parliament gave his landlord incentive to act, forcing the tenant off his land to avoid giving aid to the starving man. Now homeless and jobless, Connor dug a hole into the ground for shelter, forming what came to be known as a scalp.¹ For many Irishmen, Connor's story was all too similar to their own. During the Irish Potato Famine, which lasted from 1845 to as late as 1850, innumerable evictions were made by British landlords in Ireland. They cost over a million Irish lives and sparked the exodus of over five-hundred thousand Irish refugees to America in search of livable conditions. Despite staggering amounts of starvation, the British refused to give up their arable lands in the country, choosing to let the Irish starve instead of relaxing their monopoly on the farmland of Ireland.

Much of the literature on the Irish famine consists of a broad two-sided argument about who is to blame for the mass deaths experienced by the Irish due to the Famine. Nationalist scholars such as Jeop Leerssen accuse the British of exoticist views and withholding of aid to solve the 'Irish Problem,' comparing their lack of aid to an attempted genocide. Others, like Brian Walker see the Irish at fault due to their ignorance of basic economic principles. Both arguments revolve around the economic method of the time, *laissez-faire* capitalism, a hands-off policy that discouraged any sort of government interference in the market. But the causes of such destruction are more complex. Using Parliamentary transcriptions and newspaper commentary of the time, this paper will explain how traditional British control over arable land in Ireland, coupled with a *laissez-faire* response to the issue, led to the deaths of thousands during the Irish Famine.

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To understand why the Famine was so devastating to the Irish population requires investigation into the pre-famine years of Irish society. For years the British had used Ireland as a bread basket. When the British Empire emerged, a sharecropping system was put in place in Ireland. This reserved crops like corn and wheat for British consumption; grains would be grown by the Irish tenants on British estates and sold in overseas markets, with the money returning to British landlords. In the 1840s it was rare to find an Irishman whose land measured larger than five acres, instead many were 'bound workers' or 'cottier tenantry,' meaning that they were bound to work for a certain number of days per year on a British landlord's estate in exchange for a small cabin and a small plot of land. Laborers who couldn't find bound work traveled between estates and were paid in food (almost assuredly potatoes) which made up their entire diet.ⁱ Irish who owned land grew corn and wheat, sold what they could, and used the little money they received to buy potatoes which they ate. The diet of almost purely potatoes, combined with the lack of means to grow their own food, had disastrous consequences for the Irish populace in 1845 and beyond.

September of 1845 brought famine to the shores of Ireland with a fungus, *phytophthora infestans*, commonly known as potato blight. This fungus spread rapidly throughout the country due to uncommonly poor weather and by the end of the potato season many marketers believed that even with the greatest care "the crop will be all out by the end of January,"ⁱⁱ resulting in the starvation of thousands while they waited for the next potato season. To understand the scope of the starvation James Donnelly's book *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, a highly regarded survey of the subject, states that "in 1845...4.7 million out of the 8.5 million people [in Ireland] depended on this [potato] as the predominant item in their diet...with milk and fish as the only other sources of nourishment."ⁱⁱⁱ With over fifty percent of the Irish population reliant on one crop to feed themselves, the failing crop presented the possibility of disaster.

With Ireland sliding quickly into a crisis at the beginning of 1846, an Irish statesman named John O'Connell put forth a motion to "move for a committee of the whole House to consider the state of Ireland with a view to devise means to relieve the distress of the Irish people."^{iv} The Tory House, led by Sir Robert Peel, passed the humanitarian motion and doubled public works projects, which had been in place since late 1845. The idea behind the works was that the Irish, still landless and without work in the winter, could earn money to buy Indian meal (corn meal) from the British grain depots. The meal could be imported via southern Europe as regular trade, with the benefit of no need for government subsidizing. The plans worked miserably and had little effect on the issue of starvation. Soon food riots broke out in County Cork. In one letter to the editor of the *London Times*, J. Craig of Cork wrote "we ask for bread, and you give us a stone. Can you wonder if we put it in our sleeve and hurl it at you? [You] provided maize, but the[n] refuse to give it for the relief of the poor of Cork, even for cash!"^v This sentiment was shared by most of the Irish population who felt that Peel was letting the Irish starve. This assumption was wrong: Peel's government responded quickly to the calls of famine, but their approach involved "large elements of secrecy and delay."^{vi} Peel had sent multiple ships worth of blankets, corn meal and other goods for aid, but he did so without publicizing it for fear of British backlash over interfering with the economy. Peel's secrecy backfired, in 1846 Lord John Russell replaced him as Prime Minister, and the Tory party lost the House of Parliament to the Whigs.

With the Whigs in control of Parliament, the response to the Famine took a major turn. For over a year British sentiment had turned callous towards the plight of the Irish. An anonymous letter to the *London Times* read that "Ireland enjoyed all of the privileges England enjoyed... but to be told that *he* [the British] is to pay for the delinquencies of others! The impudence of Celtic agitators!"^{vii} The belief that Britain shouldn't pay for Irish mistakes was held not only by the masses but also in the Treasury

office where Charles Trevelyan had been appointed head of the Irish Relief Committee. Trevelyan was a staunch *laissez-faire* capitalist and unlike Peel, believed that the economy of Britain took priority over the welfare of Irish citizens. When it was suggested to him by Superintendent of Aid, Randolph Routh, that the British turn over 300,000 quarters of oats grown in Ireland to the Famine Relief Works Trevelyan “beg[ged] of [him] not to countenance in any way the idea of prohibiting exportation.”^{viii} He believed that interfering with British exports from Ireland in any form would severely damage the British economy. This included giving any form of farmland to the Irish to try and re-grow their crops. Trevelyan instead chose to increase public works efforts despite their dismal performance. It wouldn't be until spring of 1847 that Trevelyan would cave, ceasing the public works apparatus and allowing free food to be distributed conservatively. His delay would cost the Crown £4,850,000 in failed efforts.^{ix}

As Trevelyan allowed for the distribution of food into Ireland, Prime Minister Russell launched another proposal. He decided to advance £50,000 to “the proprietors of Ireland, to furnish seed for sowing their lands.”^x At first this seemed like a blessing to the Irish. At last they would be given seed to plant in their farms and begin to grow some sort of food to survive on. This vision was short lived as the *Times* reported that Russell “did not intend to advance any part of [the seed] to the small cottier tenantry,”^{xi} the seed would instead be sent to British landlords who would restrict the grain for growing in ‘controlled’ rates. The Irish papers received many letters in response to this report, including one from George Macartney of Dublin County. In his letter he claimed with disappointment that “£50,000 would supply turnip seed for 350,000 acres...it is a melancholy fact that there are not 20,000 acres of tenants’ land...fit to receive such a crop.”^{xii}

The letter was meant to impress upon the British the importance of releasing land to the Irish so that they could support themselves, instead of being worked to death on a British estate. But such letters would not be enough to convince British lawmakers that the Irish could be trusted to rebuild their country. This was due to the ingrained mistrust of the Irish who were seen by the British, relying on “previous descriptions rather than on first-hand observation...as restive, lazy, and untrustworthy.”^{xiii} Indeed, Alexander Somerville, a British journalist traveling in Ireland during the Famine remarked that seven farmers, skeletal from starvation were “doing less than one man's work...from sheer weakness and hunger. I concluded this to be the case from the frequency of such signs.”^{xiv} Only after watching the men for a long period did Somerville conclude that the men were in fact starving and not just working lazily. Depictions like these would come to shape policy in Parliament about how to recover the economy of Ireland and would forge one of the most controversial bills in Irish history.

One of the darkest moments of the Famine arrived with the Quarter-Acre clause, included in amendments to the Poor Laws in 1847. Increasing costs of famine relief caused Parliament to explore different routes to regain control in Ireland. Many believed that the Irish were incapable of turning the situation around and believed the best way to end the Famine was to free British landlords of their tenantry so they could focus on growing food. The clause declared that starting in November of 1847, all famine relief “would be limited to those with a quarter acre or less of land.”^{xv} This meant that any Irishman, tenant or otherwise, who had more than a quarter-acre of land would need to surrender it to the British government before receiving any sort of relief. When those who surrendered their land came off the relief programs, they didn't have enough land to grow crops to feed themselves, resulting in further starvation. Within the same amendment as the Quarter-Acre clause was another unnamed clause that increased the price landlords had to pay for any tenant holdings worth under £4. Landlords now found that “many tenants were unable to pay rents, while the landlords remained responsible for their rates.”^{xvi} The result was that many landlords became determined to evict their tenants to avoid the rates.

Due to this price bump, landlords encouraged their tenants to take advantage of the Quarter-Acre clause. When tenants surrendered their holdings to their landlords in the hopes of better relief, the landlords would knock down the stone cottages to make room for more British crops. When tenants returned from the relief houses, they had no land or homes and found the landlords refused to let them return to the estates. Now homeless, jobless, and without aid, thousands dug scalps for shelter, others got on a boat for America and left their world behind. The Quarter-Acre clause triggered a mass eviction across the country. Reports of the devastation began to pour in from newspapers. The *Times* reported that "Sixteen thousand...persons [were] unhoused in...Kilrush before the month of June [1848]."^{xvii} The avalanche of evictions continued until 1850, but the severity of the Famine had abated by that time. In 1847 the worst had yet to come and the evictions, combined with lack of food and relief led to 1847 being given the moniker of Black '47 in the annals of Irish history.

When talking about the Famine today, much of the imagery conjured in the mind is of immigrants searching for a new life in America. Only after asking why those immigrants chose to leave their homeland behind is the true horror of the Famine exposed. The Famine was not just a failure of crops but the failure of a government. British policy tied itself up with more concern over profit than human life, and tradition kept them from adapting for the sake of the masses. Their marriage to *laissez-faire* economics was a contributing factor to their decision making, but it was the lure of profit from Irish farmland that guided the hand of Parliament. The British ultimately chose profits over people and as a result, left thousands of Irish to die.



ⁱ Peter Gray, "Economic Orthodoxy and its Critics," in *Famine, Land, and Politics: British Government and Irish Society, 1843-1850* (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 1999), 9.

ⁱⁱ James S. Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2001), 44.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 1.

^{iv} "The State of Famine and Disease in Ireland," *Interpreting the Irish Famine*, Liz Szabo, accessed March 24, 2019, <http://web.archive.org/web/20000301093324/http://www.people.virginia.edu/~eas5e/Irish/Parliament1.html>.

^v "Letter to the Editor," *Interpreting the Irish Famine*, Liz Szabo, accessed March 24, 2019, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/sadlier/irish/Corn.htm>.

^{vi} Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, 49.

^{vii} "Lead Editorial." *Interpreting the Irish Famine*, Liz Szabo, accessed March 24, 2019, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/sadlier/irish/Stale.htm>.

^{viii} Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, 69.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, 72.

^x "From Our Correspondent," *Interpreting the Irish Famine*, Liz Szabo, accessed March 24, 2019, <http://web.archive.org/web/20000619054027/http://www.people.virginia.edu/~eas5e/Irish/Mistrust.html>.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, 1.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, 1.

^{xiii} Jeop Leerssen, "From Whiskey to Famine: Food and Intercultural Encounters in Irish History," in: *Food, Drink and Identity in Europe*, ed. Thomas M. Wilson (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 50. <http://libgateway.susqu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2006298506&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

^{xiv} Alexander Somerville. *Letters from Ireland during the Famine of 1847*. <http://web.archive.org/web/20000408175412/http://www.people.virginia.edu/~eas5e/Irish/somerville.html>.

^{xv} Brian Walker, "Villain, Victim, or Prophet? William Gregory and the Great Famine," *Irish Historical Studies* 38, no. 152, (2013): 585.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, 587.

^{xvii} "Conditions of Ireland. Illustrations of the New Poor Law." *Interpreting the Irish Famine*, 1.

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