Potato Famine Forever Changed Both Ireland and America: "Black '47" Was the Worst Year of All

by Tom Emery
March 10 2024 11:00 AM

Though the people of Ireland are known for their engaging manner, the history of the nation is rife with sadness. The infamous potato famine, however, stands alone in its misery.

The worst year of the famine, 1847, was so stark that it was dubbed "Black '47" for its horror. The famine was the most severe in Europe in the nineteenth century and decimated the Irish population and economy, forever changing the demographic of both Ireland and the United States.

"At least one and a half million died as a result of the famine, and roughly the same number left for the U.S., Canada, and England," said Dr. Natasha Casey, a native of Ireland and professor of communication at Lincoln Land Community College. "Even these estimates are staggering."

The potato famine is traced to a blight that arrived from North America in 1845 and, coupled with an unusually wet year in Ireland, had devastating consequences.

In that era, many rural Irish were subsistence farmers, and the potato had long been a staple crop of the nation. Easy to grow, nutritious, and inexpensive, around half of the people of Ireland depended on potatoes for survival by the 1840s.

The blight caused a third of the potato crop to rot in the fields in 1845, and the coming years were no better. Succeeding crops were largely wiped out by 1849, and the resulting hunger was worsened by outbreaks of typhus and cholera.

Many poor Irish were faced with the choice of starvation or flight, and left the country in droves. Thousands scraped together money to buy passage on overcrowded ships to America that were rife with disease and filth. Many Irish never reached their new homeland on these "coffin ships."

. . . .

Still, the immigrants kept coming, and Ireland's population dipped from nearly 8.4 million in 1844 to 6.6 million by 1851. Many came to America, settling in large cities like New York, Chicago, and Boston, where the established Irish-American community contributed over $150,000 to help their ancestral homeland.

In addition to the influx of immigrants, Casey notes the demographic shifts among the Irish in America that were caused by the catastrophe.

"The famine changed the types of Irish people that came to the States," she remarked. "Before, the Irish that came to the U.S. were mostly middle- and upper middle-class Protestants. After, they were mostly working-class Catholics."

A prevailing anti-Catholic bias in the United States in the era added to the perception of Irish immigrants as hard-drinking, lazy, and shiftless. Many Americans in the mid-1800s considered the Irish to be among the lowest of social classes, and some stores and factories were adorned with signs reading "No Irish Need Apply."

Casey adds that the flow of Irish immigrants also caused a political shift in some regions of America. "The Irish voting bloc made significant differences in various electoral districts, particularly on the East Coast," she said. "It was just one impact of the famine in America."

In all, some 1.7 million Irish came to the United States between 1840-1860. By 1901, the population of Ireland was four million — less than half the number before the famine.

The population never fully rebounded, and there are just under five million in Ireland today. One source adds that the famine caused "the near extinction of the traditional Gaelic culture."

Across the Atlantic, Irish remains one of the leading ethnic groups in the U.S., as over 10 percent of Americans claim some level of Irish descent. According to the 2010 census, the 34 million Irish-Americans are seven times the population of the nation of Ireland itself.

. . . .

Ireland did not achieve independence from Great Britain until 1922, and historians continue to debate the British response to the famine. Many have charged that the British government continued to export badly-needed food from Ireland, adding to the calamity.

In 1997, then-British Prime Minister Tony Blair ignited a controversy by indicating that the British government had failed the people of Ireland in the famine. However, Casey points out the difference in the British government and people during the disaster.

"When I lived in England in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was striking how little the English people knew about Ireland," continued Casey. "That, of course, has changed today. But I can only imagine that the average person in England in the 1840s and 1850s, during the famine, knew even less."

Over 170 years later, the magnitude of the famine continues to haunt Ireland. "I think the famine, as many notable historians have argued, left a massive scar on the psyche of

the Irish people," said Casey. "It changed the trajectory of Ireland culturally, economically, and even linguistically, and took decades to recover. Some have suggested the country and its people never really did."

Tom Emery is a freelance writer and historical researcher from Carlinville. He may be reached at 217-710-8392 or ilcivilwar@yahoo.com.

This story originally printed in the March 2024 issue of The Prairie Land Buzz Magazine, http://www.thebuzzmonthly.com.