

Irish Peasants Are Evicted From Their Home

From the early 1800's on, British political leaders worked to improve the conditions of the poor working class in England. They were less concerned about conditions in Ireland, however. Although part of the 19th-century Great Britain, Ireland might well have been a conquered country. The majority of the Irish were Roman Catholic peasants. They worked the land on great estates owned by Protestant landlords, many of whom lived in England.

Irish peasants were given tiny plots of land in exchange for their work. Potatoes were the best crop to grow on these small fields. A family of four could eat well for a year on the potatoes harvested from one acre.

Unfortunately, the Irish became almost completely dependent on the potato. In 1845, a fungus ruined the potato crop. The potato blight lasted for four long years. Starvation and illness caused by malnutrition killed over a million people. Thousands more emigrated to the United States.

Although the failure of the potato crop affected other parts of Great Britain, it devastated only Ireland. In 1846, England's prime minister, Robert Peel, averted famine in England by repealing the corn laws. These laws had put a high tariff on imported grain. With their repeal, most English people could afford to buy foreign-grown grain. The Irish, however, had been so dependent on the potato that the crop failure wiped out all their financial resources. They were unable to afford even the cheapest grain.

By 1847, the English government had established soup kitchens and emergency work relief for the Irish. In that year, however, a banking crisis in England halted these efforts. The Irish Poor Law system took over famine relief. This system provided workhouses, where the starving and mortally ill had to work to support themselves. Many died in the attempt. Ireland was crippled economically for decades after the famine ended.

The British government not only did not provide effective aid for the starving Irish peasants, it persecuted them as well. When landlords evicted tenant farmers who could not pay their rent, the government sent soldiers to enforce the evictions.

Review Questions

1. Why did the ruined potato crop cause massive illness and starvation in Ireland?
2. Why were the Irish unable to benefit from the repeal of the corn laws?
3. Why did the British fail to provide more help for the Irish?
4. Would the Irish situation be considered a push or pull factor for immigration? Explain.
5. Should the government provide programs to help citizens when they fall on hard times? Explain.