Black Potatoes: The Story of the Great Irish Famine, 1845-1850 Study Guide

Black Potatoes: The Story of the Great Irish Famine, 1845-1850 by Susan Campbell Bartoletti

BOOKRAGS

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Overview

The Irish potato famine originated in a potato blight that struck in 1845. Potatoes were the dietary foundation for most Irish families. For five years, people hoped that the blight would end but were disappointed when crops continued to be ruined. Politicians did not offer effective relief. Queen Victoria was empathetic but powerless to force Parliament to aid the Irish farmers.

Landlords often acted cruelly to tenants, evicting them because they could not pay rent. As a result, many Irish died, emigrated, or participated in hostile actions against authorities. Relief groups provided some food, funds, and comfort to famine victims.

About the Author

Susan Campbell Bartoletti's sense of heritage has inspired her literary creations.

Bartoletti was born on November 18, 1958.

Sources do not indicate her birthplace or the names of her parents. In a lesson plan prepared for Scholastic, Bartoletti commented that she had "strong women in my family," noting that her mother was twenty-three when Bartoletti's father died and she raised her toddlers, Bartoletti and her sister, alone. Also, Bartoletti said that one of her grandmothers managed a boardinghouse. Bartoletti dedicated her second picture book, Dancing with Dziadziu, "for Mom and Dad, with love."

She married Joseph Bartoletti when she was eighteen years old. They later had a daughter and son. She loves books and decided to become a teacher. In 1979, Bartoletti earned a bachelor's degree in English and secondary education from Scranton's Marywood College where she also took graduate courses. Settling in nearby Moscow, Pennsylvania, that year, Bartoletti began teaching eighth-grade English at North Pocono Middle School.

While teaching, Bartoletti completed a master of arts in English at the University of Scranton in 1982. During the mid-1980s, Bartoletti was an adjunct faculty member at Keystone Junior College and worked as an educational consultant, co-authoring writing and study skills textbooks. She also wrote two screenplays, "Wooden Angel" and "The Seed," for the Children's Television Network in the late 1980s. Beginning in 1990, the International Correspondence School commissioned her to write and edit textbooks about various topics.

Bartoletti's husband, a history teacher, encouraged her creative interest in presenting history to young readers. Her first picture book, Silver at Night, was published in 1994. She based the story on Massimino Bartoletti, her husband's Italian immigrant grandfather. Bartoletti researched how Massimino arrived in the United States when he was nine years old and worked in anthracite coal mines. That topic also inspired another picture book about immigrants, Dancing with Dziadziu, published in 1997, and the nonfiction book, Growing Up in Coal Country in 1996. She penned a Dear America series book for Scholastic titled A Coal Miner's Bride: The Diary of Anetka Kaminska (2000).

Her talent for history and nonfiction resulted in two books in 1999. Kids on Strike!

focused on child labor, while No Man's Land: A Young Soldier's Story expanded a historical short story she published in Highlights for Children. Bartoletti continued creating picture books, including The Christmas Promise (2001) which depicted a girl and her hobo father during the Depression.

Since 1999, Bartoletti has taught creative writing in the graduate children's literature program at Hollins University in Roanoke, Virginia. After eighteen years in the classroom, she stopped teaching eighth grade to focus on writing. Throughout the United States, she frequently presents programs and workshops about her books and writing for both children and adults. An avid learner, by 2001 Bartoletti earned a Ph.D.

from the State University of New York at Binghamton. She submitted the manuscript of Black Potatoes: The Story of the Great Irish Famine, 1845-1850 as her dissertation.

Bartoletti's books are routinely selected for notable and best books lists and receive starred reviews. She has won many awards for children's literature. Bartoletti's short story "No Man's Land," about a Civil War baseball game, won the 1993 Highlights for Children fiction contest. Black Potatoes: The Story of the Great Irish Famine, 1845-1850 earned the 2002 Robert F. Sibert Award for best children's informational book, the Golden Kite for nonfiction, and the Orbis Pictus Award for outstanding children's nonfiction. Growing Up in Coal Country won the Jane Addams Children's Book Award and was a Golden Kite honor book for nonfiction. The Pennsylvania School Librarian's Association named Bartoletti Author of the Year in 2001.

Plot Summary

In 1844, Ireland's population was about eight million. The potato crop that year had been so abundant that there were more potatoes than buyers. The early crop of new potatoes was harvested in August and the second crop, the old potatoes, in October. Between August and May, potatoes were the dietary staple for most of Ireland's inhabitants. The greatest food insecurity occurred during summer, especially for those on the bottom rung of the economic ladder, farm laborers (Ireland's was primarily an agricultural economy). The landowners and larger farmers lived comfortably (the landlords from their rents and the larger farmers from their dairy herds). Farmers were stratified by the amount of land they rented. Even the farm laborers, however, provided they had shelter and enough potatoes, could survive. To pay their rent, some farmers grew cash crops and others kept animals like chickens and pigs. Tenants paid rent biannually, in May after the first grain harvest and in November, after the old potato harvest. Under the earlier Poor Law Act, both the landlords and large farmers paid taxes to one of 130 "Poor Law" unions. These taxes supported a local workhouse or shelter for the destitute.

The potato blight first hit during the 1845 old potato harvest. The winds blew east to west, carrying mold spores along with the rain into the soil, destroying entire fields within hours. One-third of the crop was lost. British Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel established a Scientific Commission and a Public Works Administration where the destitute could earn a small wage. Peel also secretly purchased Indian corn from the United States (to avoid the tariffs under the British Corn Laws). By December, Irish merchants had doubled the price of food in Ireland. In February 1846, Peel's corn was distributed--enough to feed half a million for three months. Throughout that spring, Peel lobbied to repeal the Corn Tax so that food prices in Ireland would go down. He lost the support of the Conservative Party and resigned in June, less than a year into the famine.

Peel was replaced by Lord John Russell, a staunch laissez-faire advocate--with a blind eye to exceptions like the Corn Laws--who was advised by the head of the British Treasury, Sir Charles Trevelyan, also a strong laissez-faire advocate (and religious man who believed the blight was a biblical plague which would inevitably improve Ireland). The public works and workhouse administrations were overwhelmed by the numbers of applicants. A coin shortage--which resulted in a long delay before laborers were paid--exacerbated the food crisis (and the price of food continued to escalate). In July, the potato crop looked healthy and so, a month before harvest, Trevelyan announced that the Public Works Administration was no longer needed and would be shut down mid-August. The blight reappeared, more virulently than before (three-fourths of the total crop was lost). The Public Works reopened (only to again be overwhelmed with applicants).

In November, an abnormally severe winter set in, and epidemics of fever and dysentery began.

In 1847, the Soup Kitchen Act was passed. In response to merchants complaining about the numbers of corpses they found outside their shop doors each morning, Parliament passed the Irish Fever Act. Parliament also passed, at the suggestion of the landlords, the Galway Act. Its "quarter-acre clause" limited Poor Union services to tenants renting a quarter-acre or less (and allowed tenants to be evicted at will without notice). A predictable wave of evictions followed. The August 1847 harvest was blight free--but one-fourth its normal yield. There were not enough potatoes to sustain the entire population. In October, nevertheless, the soup kitchens were closed. The winter of 1847 was particularly severe. Food prices continued to soar. The *Illustrated London News* commissioned artist James Mahony to depict conditions in Skibberdeen, Ireland.

The human suffering portrayed provoked a public outcry in Britain and throughout the world. Although most British newspapers were critical of the Irish, the *Illustrated London News* blamed the laissez-faire economic system as implemented by the British. The British provided armed escorts for grain and livestock shipments intended for foreign markets. More applied for relief. Those who weren't admitted disappeared, sometimes whole families at a time. Even those admitted to workhouses--like that at Skibberdeen--sometimes starved (and were buried in open pits). Landlords discovered it was more economical to deport their tenants to North America--passage to Canada was cheapest--than maintain them in a workhouse for a year (most decided, like the majority of merchants, that their right to profit was not dimmed by the food crisis). Nine landlords were lynched during the mass evictions following the Galway Act.

Parliament passed the Crime and Outrage Bill and sent in troops to maintain "order." By 1848, a pro-nationalism movement named "Young Ireland" had begun. Its leadership--laborers, farmers, merchants, and landlords--wanted a return to self-rule, the British out of Ireland, reforms that would grant their basic civil and humanitarian rights, and reform of Ireland's land system. In April 1848, the British passed the Treason Felony Act and arrested Young Ireland's leaders. They were convicted of high treason--and sentenced to being hung (and then drawn and quartered). These sentences were soon commuted to a life at hard labor.

Queen Victoria wrote that the Irish "needed to be taught a good lesson, or they will begin it again." Trevelyan raised the landowners' Poor Union rates, which bankrupted some of the large farmers and landowners. There were insufficient tenants left to pay the rents. Although the poor were most adversely impacted, no one was unaffected by the food crisis. Without customers, the merchants went out of business. Estimates are that about ten times as many died from infectious diseases as from actual starvation. In August, Queen Victoria's royal yacht sailed to visit Irish port cities. She sailed away ten days later with "real regret."

The famine ended in 1850. In 1871, census data reported the population of Ireland was about four and a half million, a little over half what it was in 1844. Estimates are that over one million died and over two million emigrated. That the famine could have been avoided led to great resentment against the British. In his old age--after he'd founded an Irish nationalism movement, been arrested for treason, and elected to Parliament while in jail--Diarmuid O'Donovan Rossa said that, before the famine, "There were fairies in

Ireland. ... English tyranny killed out the 'good people' as well as the living people." His granddaughter later wrote in her own memoirs that Tom Flynn, who emigrated from County Mayo and became a U.S. citizen in 1856 (and voted for Abraham Lincoln in 1860), couldn't, even in his old age, say "England" without spitting out "God damn her" immediately after.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

The summer of 1845 was particularly fickle. July began much hotter than even the oldest people could remember. The heat spell only lasted a few days (and was followed by cool, gloomy, and damp weather). Heavy rains fell daily for the first three weeks of August. Some, having heard rumors of blackened potato fields, were uneasy. Although they couldn't see the potatoes growing underground, they hoped for the best. Between August and May, potatoes were the dietary staple for Ireland's six million inhabitants. Not everyone, however, was nervous. The newspapers predicted a bumper crop on the two millions acres on which potatoes had been planted. Indeed, the previous year's crop had been so abundant that there were more potatoes than buyers. It was customary to harvest potatoes twice each fall. The early crop of new potatoes was harvested in August. The second crop of old potatoes was harvested in October.

In County Cork, when it came time to harvest the new potatoes, Diarmuid O'Donovan Rossa helped his father (who was relieved by the good-sized healthy looking tubers). With his sister and two brothers, he helped divide the potatoes by size, large and small, and placed them in wicker baskets. Some were taken inside for the evening meal. Most of the potatoes were placed in a deep outdoor pit and covered with clay and rushes. The new potatoes were thin skinned and did not keep as well as the old potatoes. The weather that fall was fickle, with some days beginning warm and pleasant but ending with heavy rain. On windy days that fall, some noticed a strange odor on the air--and watched their still healthy looking plants carefully. On one October day, soon before the old potato harvest began, the sun darkened midday, and that night, a thick blue fog covered the land.

None of the old people had seen such a color in the past. They were fearful, and the next morning, they woke to a stench. Rushing to their fields, they saw their plants covered with black spots. People burned fires to clear the air. They tried cutting away the black spots. They could not save the plants. They dug and, to their horror, found that the potatoes were black and slimy dead in the ground. It was a calamity, but people reasoned that, with rationing, they could make it through the winter on the new potatoes.

Then another disaster struck. The new potatoes were rotting in their storage pits. Diarmuid and his family rushed to their pit. Some of the big potatoes were already half rotten. Some blamed the disaster on the weather. Others blamed the darkened skies on fairies (whose tribes were evidently battling over the potatoes). Some even took precautions to protect their stored potatoes from the fairies--especially the Grey Man (Fear Liath)--by sprinkling them with holy water. Others blamed the blight on divine providence. It was punishment for having discarded some of last year's potatoes. A few blamed the landlords.

Diarmuid's family had a small wheat crop, which they used to pay the rent. As soon as their wheat was harvested, the landlord's agents came to guard the crop. Once the wheat was threshed and bagged, Diarmuid's mother accompanied the landlord's agent to the mill. She returned with no money. After the potato crop failed, many landlords, fearing their tenants could not pay subsequent rent, confiscated all their grain and livestock. The author notes that the bitterness between the Irish and British dated centuries before potatoes were first planted in Ireland. Between 1169 and 1530, England tried, repeatedly, to conquer Ireland. Each new invasion increased the bitterness, which was further exacerbated by religious differences.

In 1690, Protestant King William of Orange defeated the Irish at the bloody Battle of Boyne River. The king and his parliament passed the "Penal Laws," which precluded the Irish from owning firearms, land, and horses worth more than five pounds. They were also prohibited from engaging in certain occupations--and giving their children a Catholic education. Nevertheless, by 1800, Ireland was 80 percent Catholic. That same year, British Prime Minister William Pitt convinced the Irish elite to agree to the "Act of Union," which formally created the United Kingdom. The Irish Catholics had expected, incorrectly, that their political rights were being returned.

This chapter, ironically, begins with a traditional Irish toast, "Health and a long life to you, Land without rent to you, A child every year to you, And if you can't go to heaven, May you at least die in Ireland." The author uses, whenever possible, the individual voices of historical characters to describe the famine's effects. In this chapter, Diarmuid's family has paid its rent, in advance. Potatoes, their sole food source, were blight stricken, leaving them with no food. The previous year's harvest had been bountiful and this year's, destroyed.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

Ireland was fertile--its rivers and lakes, plentiful--and its vegetation, lush and green. By 1845, Ireland's population was about eight million. Population density was about one house per four acres (although many had much less). About a third worked as farm laborers, living in abject poverty. Visitors were amazed that such raggedly clad men and women--and nearly naked children--could exist in the United Kingdom. Ireland's land system was blamed for the poverty of three-eighths of its population. The Industrial Revolution with its factory and mill jobs had not reached Ireland as it had Britain and the United States. Most of Ireland's economy was agricultural. The Irish fell into three classes: landowners, farmers, and farm laborers. Most landlords, who lived in Britain, hired agents to manage their property. Management consisted of collecting rent. There was no land improvement. The landlords rented parcels of land to the farmers, who were stratified by the amount of land they rented. The landlords had the most status and after them, the large farmers. The large farmers made a decent living, primarily from their dairy herds. The landlords as well as the large and middling farmers paid taxes to support the local workhouse, which sheltered the destitute.

Even the farm laborers, provided they had shelter and enough potatoes, could survive. (The amount of land needed to grow enough potatoes is small). Some farmers grew cash crops--grains like wheat, barley, and oats--which they used to pay their rent. Laborers were expected to work for their landlords at the expense of their own crops since most worked about eighty days a year for their landlords. The laborers lived in one- or two-room cabins, which they sometimes shared. They built the cabins themselves. Strong walls made of clay and straw were covered with a thatched roof. They slept on beds of straw or rags. Their animals, chickens and pigs, often lived with them. It was not uncommon to refer to a pig sitting contentedly on a mattress as "the gentlemen who paid the rent." Tenants paid rent biannually, in May after the first grain harvest, and in November, after the old potato harvest. Although the potato provided them with food, most struggled to pay their rent.

Those who could not pay rent were evicted. Even those who paid their rent could--since they had no property rights--be evicted at any time. Laborers usually found work only during the planting and harvest seasons (about five months a year). The laborers also had their own small plots for growing their own potatoes and erecting some kind of shelter. One commonly used shelter was the "scalp," whose side walls were formed by a ravine or ditch. Other shelters were built on the swampy bogs. Peat--cut into bricks from the bogs, dried, and stacked outside--was used to heat these shelters. Although their living conditions were harsh, the laborers were free to travel to attend markets, weddings, funerals, and mass on Sundays. In the rural areas, Irish was usually the only language spoken. It was, said Diarmuid O'Donovan Rossa, the "language of honor."

Although some landlords built houses for their tenants' children's schooling, most children attended "hedge schools" (on nice days, school was conducted on the shady side. School was held six days a week, Monday through Saturday. More boys attended school than girls. More attended in summer than in winter (because they lacked warm clothing). Because textbooks were scarce, they were shared. (In a typical hedge school, thirty children might share eight spelling books). Parents paid tuition to the schoolmaster quarterly (sometimes in butter and eggs, sometimes in money). The amount of tuition varied with the subject. It was two shillings and two pence (about forty-six cents) for reading and spelling, four shillings and four pence for arithmetic. A National School system had been established in 1831. It provided free primary education but prohibited use of the Irish language--and replaced Irish with British history, but many hedge school headmasters simply didn't follow the rules set by the Board of Education.

The laborers married at a young age, with girls wedding as young as sixteen. Newlyweds moved into hastily erected structures furnished with a pot, a stool, and, perhaps, a mattress. The Irish were accustomed to caring for family members and being hospitable to strangers, whether travelers or beggars. The Irish were Catholic but also believed in fairies, which they pacified in a variety of ways. The first planting season began in February. Women sold butter and eggs to buy oats to cover the period between when the last of the old potatoes had been eaten and before the new potatoes were ready to harvest.

The potato thus provided food for nine months of the year. Summer was the time of scarcity. During the "hungry months," the men of some families traveled as far as England for work. Their wives and children stayed at home, tending the garden, eating cabbage and nettles. The laborers often begged during the summer months (although typically, out of pride, not near their own homes). The workhouse or poorhouse was the place of last resort.

Under the Poor Law Act of 1838, Ireland's thirty-two counties were divided into "130 Poor Law unions." These unions were administered by a locally elected Board of Guardians (often the landlords or their agents). The Irish feared the hard and degrading conditions within the workhouses. Upon entry, family members were separated, issued uniforms and a place to sleep. They were fed twice a day with whatever was available. Rules were strict. Everyone had to eat their meals, as well as sleep and wake, at the prescribed times. Everyone worked. Although people entered the workhouses voluntarily, they had to have permission to leave. The workhouses were financed by taxes paid by the landlords and larger farmers.

Most of Ireland's economy was agricultural. The Irish fell into three classes, landowners, farmers, and farm laborers. Tenants paid rent biannually, in May after the first grain harvest and in November, after the old potato harvest. Although the potato provided them with food, most struggled to pay their rent. Those who could not were evicted. Even those who paid their rent could--since they had no property rights--be evicted at any time. These laborers usually found work only during planting and harvest (about five months a year). Summer--the time between potato harvests--was a time of food uncertainty.

Parents paid the headmasters of the hedge schools quarterly, according to subject matter (more for math than reading). The National Schools established in 1831 theoretically provided a way to a free primary school education, but such establishments prohibited the speaking of Irish and the teaching of Irish history. The Poor Law Act of 1838 divided Ireland's 32 counties into "130 Poor Law unions." These unions were administered by a locally elected Board of Guardians (often the landlords of their agents). Conditions within the workhouses were harsh and degrading. During hard times, some landlords found work for their tenants. Others believed that paying their "Poor Law" taxes satisfied their civic responsibility.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

The famine hit the millions of farm laborers hardest. The hungry days of summer turned into fall. People scavenged whenever and however they could, parents feeling great shame at being unable to provide for their families. As they grew hungrier, the men banded together, walking many miles to find cattle. They would surround a cow, cut a vein in its neck, drain off a quart or two of blood, carry it--rich in iron and protein--home to cook with cabbage leaves or whatever was available. The merchants bought up the available supplies of oats and flour, selling them in small amounts for at least double the price. The Irish poor sold all they had to buy food. When they had nothing left to sell, they borrowed from moneylenders who often charged between 20 and 50 percent interest. Parents began panicking that they would not be able to feed their children over the winter. Priests said masses. Parishioners wrote entities. Parents felt shamed.

British Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel planned to set up government soup kitchens and public works where the destitute could earn a nominal wage crushing stones and building roads. Peel knew that hungry, desperate people were more inclined to crime, that the situation would get worse before becoming better, that outbreaks of famine were usually followed by outbreaks of contagious diseases like cholera--and that the Irish needed immediate relief. A cautious man, in October 1845, Peel established a Scientific Commission to get to the facts of the famine hoping that most of the crop could be saved).

Today we know that a fungus--Pythopthora infestans--destroyed the potato crop. The fungus was inadvertently imported, possibly guano from South America bought by a farmer to fertilize his field. The fungus could destroy entire potato fields within hours. Its spores spread rapidly in Ireland's wet windy climate "at a rate of about fifty miles a day." The spores landed on the leaves and spread into the soil. The three scientists on Peel's Scientific Commission concluded the problem was "dry rot," that most of the crop could be saved, and distributed complicated instructions for doing so. The laborers followed the instructions--drying the potatoes, digging new pits with ventilation shafts--and the potatoes still rotted. The Scientific Commission also insisted that the blighted potatoes were still partially edible, blanketing Ireland with more complicated directions on how to salvage food from the crop. The laborers dutifully followed their instructions, but the post-consumption abdominal cramps and diarrhea were sometimes fatal to the very young and the very old.

While his committee was at work, Peel secretly negotiated with bankers to import to import enough corn to feed half a million people for three months. He was secretive, because importing the corn was against the prevailing British laissez-faire philosophy of the government doing nothing that might influence prices on "free" markets. In actuality, while they attributed the success of their empire--and their own personal fortunes--to this philosophy, the British government put a high tariff on grain imports (so that British

farmers and merchants would more easily prosper). Although technically not a grain, the British Corn Laws made it so. Peel had at one time been in favor of such laws, but he later realized that the more the country could import, the more it could feed, and its economy would prosper by keeping more people off of government charity.

The Scientific Committee reported to the Prime Minister that half the total crop had been lost, but in fact, about a third was lost. Many individual laborers and farmers had, however, lost their entire crops). Despite his Commission's report, Peel knew that the Irish who lived on potatoes were in eminent danger of starvation unless something was done. Peel explained the dire circumstances to Queen Victoria. He pointed out that other European countries hit by the blight--Holland, Sweden, Belgium--had reduced their tariffs to import grain people could afford. Victoria, then 26, was sympathetic but informed him that she left law-making to Parliament, and Parliament refused to repeal the Corn Laws. Peel found a loophole insofar as the British had no formal agreement about North American maize (Indian corn)--and interpreted that lack of formal agreement to mean the Corn Laws didn't apply. The corn that arrived was to be stored until spring in the Irish counties of Cork and Limerick when the food crisis would be greatest.

Many criticize Peel for not having distributed the corn immediately. (One criticism was that he only did what he did because he wanted the Corn Laws repealed). Peel appointed a Relief Commission to establish local relief committees who were to sell the corn at cost, about two cents a pound. The corn proved a poor substitute for the potato. It required special milling and work to make the resulting cornmeal digestible. It was not agreeable to the systems of those who had been starving all winter long.

By the time spring 1846 arrived, the poorest people, having scavenged all winter and sold off all their belongings, had no money. The local relief commissioner in Cork called the police to disperse an angry crowd of starving people. The corn came to be called "Peel's brimstone" because of how it cooked up and how it effected the digestive system. Peel also realized that the starving could construct public works like bridges and roads in exchange for money to buy the corn. Conditions were grim on such projects. The workers, initially men, were controlled by overseers with whips who would quarter their pay or fire them for the least infraction. When the men died, their wives or children took their place. Many landlords eschewed the British Parliament's eventual partial funding of Irish public works, preferring to hire laborers to drain fields, build roads, and the like independently. There was also the grossly understaffed--relative to the number of applicants--Irish Board of Works. Crowds became angry as their applications sat unprocessed. By the summer of 1846, over 100,000 people had been put to work.

There was also a coin shortage and a subsequent long delay before the laborers were paid. The wages were still insufficient to maintain a family as food prices soared. Throughout the spring of 1846, Peel lobbied hard to repeal the Corn Tax so that food prices would go down. He had, however, lost the support of the Conservative Party and so resigned.

This chapter takes the reader through the beginning of the famine. In August 1845 none would have predicted such a thing, but, by October 1845, the blight was spreading over Ireland at about 50 miles per hour. Parents were panic-stricken about food supply realizing they could not feed their children. Peel attempted to remedy the famine although his efforts went awry. Part of the tardy and lackluster British response was due to unspoken assumption of the British laissez-faire economists that no government regulation is beneficial when it comes to protecting the economic interests of those ruling the government. Having lost the support of his political party, Peel resigned as Prime Minister before the end of the first year of the famine.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

Many suffered during the famine's first year, but few died, thanks to Peel's importation of corn. None believed the blight could survive the winter. Farmers and laborers planted their new potatoes somewhat anxiously nonetheless. They knew the total harvest that year would be smaller because some had been forced to eat their seed potatoes. They watched the broad flat leaves of the potato plants, saw their purple flowers bloom, and thought of the harvest to come. In the meantime, Peel was replaced by a staunch laissez-faire advocate, Lord John Russell, who, in the face of continued starvation, refused to import more corn, saying the Irish were accustomed to doing with less during the lean summer months between harvests. The poorest families, when the harvest came, had their potatoes boiled right out of the pot. Family members peeled off the skin and dipped their potatoes into a communal salt bowl in the center of the table (called a "dip-at-the-stool" meal).

The new Prime Minister Russell relied heavily on the advice of Sir Charles Trevelyan, who was head of the British Treasury. Trevelyan was a religious man who believed the blight had been a biblical plague whose inevitable effect would be to improve Ireland. Trevelyan also believed that individuals should never depend on government (with exceptions like the Corn Laws). Trevelyan announced that the Public Works Administration was no longer needed and would be shut down mid-August 1846, in time for the new potato harvest. In early August, the summer's heat gave way to dark clouds. The winds blew east to west, a soft mist turning into a heavy downpour, as the mold spores were carried on the wind at about 50 miles per hour and fell, along with the rain, into the soil containing the 1846 new potato harvest. Some thought surely warring tribes of fairies must be fighting over the potatoes. This year's blight began in August 1846.

This time nearly three-quarters of the entire crop was lost, compared to a third the year before. Many lost their entire crop. Diarmuid O'Donovan Rossa described the new potato crop. He could not find enough potatoes to fill a skillet. People were stunned. A traveling priest reported nearly universal devastation. It is one of the ironies of economies that while the laborers had nothing left to sell and nothing to eat, the grain harvest was bountiful that year. The grains were milled, bagged, and shipped to be sold in London and foreign capitals.

This famine was not about a lack of food but about people who lacked adequate access to food. Some historians argue that Ireland's grain and livestock exports would have been enough to avert what happened. While the British did not want the Irish to starve, they also did not want to pass laws that would interfere with the rights of the landowners and merchants to profit financially. In Dungarvan, County Waterford, riots broke out during the winter of 1846, the second year of the famine, as starving people watched landlord grain and livestock be exported for profits to London and other foreign capitals. The rioters demanded only that the merchants charge reasonable prices and not export

their food. The merchants called the police, who the crowd greeted with rocks, and several protesters were killed when the police fired, mostly in the air. Wagons containing grain or livestock received military escorts. Disturbances of property law continued elsewhere. Papers announcing meetings to discuss the food crisis were publicly tacked to poles and buildings.

With three quarters of the potato harvest decimated, Prime Minister Russell had to admit that there was a famine and agreed to import more corn, but his delay mean it would not arrive until December. Trevelyan agreed the Irish needed money--but did not want to spend British money. He decided to tax the landowners and farmers. The Labor Rate Act was passed. Its effect was opposite that intended. As before, the understaffed public works offices were deluged with thousands of applications. At Skibberdeen, the laborers protested they couldn't earn enough to feed their families. The shopkeepers boarded up their windows and called the militia. This time, when the British arrived, they distributed the corn instead of storing it. Snow is infrequent in Ireland, but now laborers staggered through snow drifts to the public works projects, the strongest skeletal in appearance. Food prices, meanwhile, continued to soar. And, of course, laborers failing to pay rent faced eviction. Later, popular magistrate Nicholas Cummins, who investigated what was happening in Skibberdeen himself, saw that the Irish weren't starving because there was no food but because they had no money to buy food.

Cummins wrote a letter to the Duke of Wellington begging him to bring the plight of the Irish poor to Queen Victoria's attention. He also sent a copy of his letter to the London Times. Some wealthy businessmen formed the British Relief Association to help the Irish. In February 1847, another newspaper, the *Illustrated London News* commissioned artist James Mahony to depict conditions in Skibberdeen. Publication provoked a public outcry. Although most British papers were critical of the Irish, the *Illustrated London News* was not, blaming instead the laissez-faire system.

The Irish began dying in droves during the second year of the famine. The blight had destroyed the potato crop for the second year in a row. Peel's successor and his advisors were slow to acknowledge and react to the famine, and the price of food within Ireland - particularly in places like Skibberdeen--kept rising. There was rioting as desperate people turned on whatever and whoever they could. The British escorted grain and livestock shipments out of the country. Since there were no shortages outside of Ireland, food prices continuing to soar inside Ireland meant that the price increases were strictly a function of demand. The more people who were starving, the higher the prices were. The British government protected both the landlords' and the merchants' rights to make profits, as needed. The riot season did not last long as people soon weakened from hunger.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

Some of the saddest stories coming out of the famine years were those of parents unable to feed their children, and of mothers, dead, their still-living infants trying to nurse. There were many difficult decisions. Should a mother feed her infant or her older children who could work and perhaps bring in more food than they consumed? Mortality rates were highest for the young and old. There were stories of infanticide and suicide, the many things parents tried to do to prevent their children's suffering. Some turned to crime. Some abandoned their Catholic religion. The most frequent crime was parents stealing food for their starving children. Sine priests told their parishioners that--although they should always ask first--stealing food to save their children was not a sin. Many thieves carried spoons in their pockets so that, if fortunate enough to find an untended pot of gruel, they were prepared.

One man with a starving family found an untended leg of mutton boiling in a pot in someone else's kitchen. He scalded his hands retrieving the meat for his family. Children helped, stealing from "under cocks of hay or stooks of oat and rye." When the farmers planted their seed potatoes in the spring of 1847, starving people would come armed with long sticks to steal the seed potatoes. Farmers protected their crops in different ways. Some guarded their fields. Others dug traps in which would-be thieves drowned or were captured and then beaten to death.

In County Mayo, one 16-year-old, Tom Flynn, was caught fishing and arrested. After he was released, he retaliated by returning to the river where he'd be arrested for fishing--and dumping lye into the water which killed the fish which "floated bellies up, to greet the gentry." Tom escaped on a ship destined for Canada. Sentences for even small crimes were severe--like a three-day jail sentence for trespassing through someone else's cabbage patch. One man caught trying to steal a sheep was given a two-year sentence, and his wife and youngest daughter died of starvation before he was released. Some offenders were given "transportation," which meant being transported to the British penal colony in Australia. Few returned.

As the food crisis intensified, newspaper coverage increased. Wealthy and middle-class readers were alarmed that harsh sentences and transportation were insufficient to deter crime in Ireland. Sir Charles Trevelyan was also disturbed about the mass starvation and decided the Irish needed food, soup. In 1847, Parliament passed a relief act known as The Soup Kitchen Act. The first soup kitchen opened in June. For its grand opening, a well-known chef prepared a soup for the well-to-do.

The soup kitchens benefited the laborers because they gave them access to food without having to commit themselves to the workhouses. They could remain at home and tend their own potato patches which would produce food for the coming year. The soup kitchens were set up to be run in an orderly manner. Each time a bell rang, a new

group of people with ration tickets were admitted to the dining area, which consisted of long tables on which sat individual bowls of soup--the spoons were chained to the tables--and a slice of bread. All ate quickly and exited through a back door after which the dishes were rinsed and refilled, upon which the bell rang again, and the next hundred were admitted. There were, nonetheless, disorderly incidents, as when people were so desperate that they plunged their hands into boiling kettles to obtain food. Each food kitchen had someone in charge of maintaining order.

Many walked for miles to reach the soup kitchens. Some died along the way. Others died waiting in line. Some died immediately after eating, their bodies being so malnourished that the sudden intake of nutrients put their bodies in shock. Physicians pointed out the nutritional shortcomings of the soup diet. As predicted, there were outbreaks of scurvy and diarrhea. Many others set up their own food kitchens. Some evangelical Protestants tried to convert the Irish Catholics to Protestantism for food. Some converted. Others died. The merchants who kept raising the price of food in Ireland included both Catholics and Protestants.

Some landlords fed the poor on their estates as best they could. The Quakers provided the most relief of any of the charitable groups. Irish families already in Canada or the United States, however, gave ten times as much as any other group (often in the form of passage tickets). By August 1847, the government soup kitchens were feeding three million people a day. Fortunately, the new potatoes showed no evidence of blight, so Sir Charles Trevelyan closed the soup kitchens. Although blight-free, the crop was small, not enough. Laborers had two choices. They could either enter the workhouses or starve.

The author notes that none living during that period ever forgot what they saw, one of the saddest sights of all being what famine did to families, the decisions that were forced on both parents and children. Is theft a sin? Some of the Irish parish priests' Sunday sermons said no, not when it was food to feed your family who would otherwise starve. Although Sir Trevelyan did propose and Parliament did approve the Soup Kitchen Act in February 1847--the first opened in June 1847--governmental relief was paltry compared to that of the Quakers and, in particular, individuals already living in Canada or the United States. Although the U.S. government never officially offered aid, it did allow two shiploads of donated food and clothing free passage.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

In 1847, the workhouses contained about half a million inmates. The workhouse system fell into chaos. Many workhouses turned people away because they were already overcrowded. Others turned them away because, although they had space, they could not feed them. Feeding the workers was especially problematic in areas where the already heavily indebted absentee landlords were also facing bankruptcy. Workhouses like that in Skibberdeen had too little to adequately feed even their own women inmates. Those, of course, who did not gain admission to the workhouses simply "disappeared" or starved to death. It is possible to live for months on a small amount of food because the body cannibalizes itself for vitamins and minerals. The final causes of death by starvation include "dehydration, hypothermia, arrhythmia, and infections." It is estimated that probably ten times as many people died from infections as actually starved to death during the famine years. One side effect of starvation is a compromised immune system.

"Entire families disappeared," and thousands were buried in unmarked graves where they fell. One inspector noted the absence of food in south and west Ireland. The only things that remained were the corpses, which were eaten by ravenous dogs, which were consumed by starving people. Disease--primarily cholera, typhoid, and dysentery--spread rapidly. Epidemics typically started amongst the poor and then fanned out to middle- and upper-class society. The very young and very old were, of course, the first to die. The typhus was spread by lice, which jumped from person to person whenever someone practiced the traditional Irish custom of offering any passerby a room for the night, or whenever people waited in food lines - whenever and wherever they congregated.

Typhus was even more dreaded than starvation. There was no cure. The duration between symptom onset and death was about two weeks. Dysentery and cholera were spread by flies and using contaminated water. Both diseases killed more children than adults causing extreme diarrhea leading to extreme dehydration. Children most visibly showed the signs of vitamin and mineral deficiencies. Their bones became so weak they could not walk. Their hair fell out. They "rarely cried or moaned, not even while dying."

As the infections spread, the newspapers offered advice. Since the physicians of the times had no cures--and some of their treatments were actually harmful--the best advice was prevention: bathe often, wear clean clothes, whitewash your house, and move the manure pile away from the door. Such advice, of course, did not help the Irish poor who, having already sold everything, had only the rags in which they were clad and were too weak from hunger to move anything. The Irish custom of welcoming strangers disappeared. Those knowing they were infected went to the woods to die to spare their families. The greatest numbers of deaths occurred in the slums where the poor lived.

Each morning shopkeepers were shocked by the number of dead they found propped against their doors. Funeral traditions like the wake were also abandoned as fear of contagion grew. People used whatever wood they could find to carve crude coffins for their relatives. Overwhelmed by the numbers dying, the British called the disaster an "epidemic" and passed the Irish Fever Act which provided funds for special fever hospitals to be built by the workhouses, whitewashing and fumigating houses for sanitary purposes, and providing coffins to those who could not otherwise afford them. Some, thinking themselves near death, checked into the workhouses, only to discover that the workhouses buried the dead in open pits, covering each new layer of corpses with lime. "Bottomless coffins" were constructed to allow the illusion of traditional burial. When a worker pressed a lever, a hinge would open, the bottom of the coffin would fall open, and the body would fall into the pit, and the coffin was ready for another burial.

The government relief effort collapsed under the scale of the famine. (Had it acted proactively, as Peel had done, much could have been avoided). In this chapter, the author describes how traditional Irish social customs like welcoming strangers, wakes, and even burial also collapsed against the scale of the famine. The Irish thought burial in a wooden coffin was the minimal requirement for death with dignity. That custom gave way to open pits--and bodies in the slums of towns like Skibberdeen piled in front of merchants' front doors. It was in response to these merchants' clamor that the Irish Fever Act was passed. Although there were pits containing as many as a hundred bodies, many were buried in makeshift coffins--made from the wood in cupboards, furniture, and carts. Many others were buried where they fell.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

One story carried in the *Illustrated London News*--from whose pages many of this book's illustrations are taken--occurred in November, 1847. Bridget O'Donnel, a mother who was pregnant with her fourth child, sick with fever, was evicted from her bed, the walls of her home torn down around her. Two weeks later, she gave birth to a stillborn infant and her eldest, her 13-year-old son, died of fever. She and her remaining two daughters were admitted to the Kilrush union workhouse in County Claire. Since wave after wave of laborers and small farmers could not pay their rent, the landlords found themselves suddenly destitute. At the time, landlord expenses were skyrocketing since they were taxed to pay for the workhouses and public works. The burden was, of course, greatest in counties where the food crisis was greatest. The landlords resisted paying the taxes, and the British government insisted they must. The matter was resolved by the Galway Act--named after the location of the landlord who proposed it--which denied government services to anyone renting more than a quarter acre and gave landlords permission to evict them at will.

Evicting such tenants meant, for these landlords, both lower taxes and being able to convert their previously inhabited land into pasture. In County Claire, nearly the entire town of Moveen was evicted just before Christmas. Although some landlords reduced or eliminated rents, most decided that their right to make a profit wasn't dimmed by the circumstances. The priests tried to shame them for evicting their tenants. On eviction days, the sheriff and his men would arrive with crowbars, determined, as happened with Bridget O'Donnel, to pry the door open if necessary. Typically, the walls of the individual cabins were pulled down and their thatched roofs set on fire. Police records indicate that the number of evictions increased dramatically after passage of the Galway Act. One such man, after seeing his home destroyed, cut down a few trees to make a lean-to where his garden had been. He was arrested and given a two-month sentence for damaging the landlord's trees.

The landlords discovered that it was cheaper to export--pay the passage to North America--their former tenants than to evict them and then maintain them for a year in a workhouse. In one evening, one landlord evicted over 800 people and offered to pay their way to Canada. All accepted, but only three-fourths survived the voyage to Quebec. Other tenants rebelled. Nine of the ten landlords attacked that year died. Bonfires burned on neighboring hilltops nine times in celebration. The British Parliament, convinced that the nine murders meant an organized tenants' rebellion, passed the Crime and Outrage Bill in 1847 and sent in armed troops. They needn't have worried. Laborers with money weren't buying guns. They were either buying food or passage out of Ireland.

As evidenced by the *Illustrated London News*' recounting of the sad story of Bridget O'Donnel being evicted, there was public coverage of the Irish famine--and some

compassion for the victims. The British government's actions, however, made matters far worse for the destitute. Parliament passed the Galway Act, which limited access to workhouses to those who rented less than a quarter acre of land and made it easy to evict them, whether they paid their rent or not. Evicting tenants--entire towns at a time--meant lower taxes for the landlords, who also discovered it was cheaper to pay passage to North America than to house their newly evicted tenants in a workhouse for a year (less if they died). Compared to the number of indigent Irish who died from famine and disease, a trivial number of landlords were lynched. Although bonfires did burn nine times on the ridges in celebration, those who had money were either buying food or passage out of Ireland, not guns.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis

The Irish had been emigrating for years but did not do so in large numbers until the blight and the years immediately following. Passage was paid for mostly by family members already living in North America. The British government funded some passages and landlords and private and religious charities, others. Packing was a simple affair. The emigrants just brought any kind of food and bedding they had, plus the clothes on their back. More emigrants left in spring or early summer to avoid storms over the Atlantic. Most left as quickly and quietly as they could once they'd made the decision or gained the wherewithal to emigrate. Many emigrants took along a chunk of the "auld sod," turf they'd dug from the ground of Ireland.

A new custom was born, the "American wake," a party held by friends the night before a new emigrant set sail. In 1848, 17-year-old Diarmuid O'Donovan Rossa and his family scattered. He'd found work in Skibberdeen, and the rest were emigrating. None thought they'd see each other again. His father had died the spring before, after which his mother and siblings had been evicted. Diarmuid had found work in Skibberdeen and walked with them before they joined their ship on the shore of County Cork. The new emigrants included many who had never traveled far from their homes before and had never seen ships and oceans. All--not just those who had come from a single room with a thatched roof and dirt floor--were astounded at the amount of food on the docks destined for English markets.

Before boarding, each emigrant was given a cursory medical exam. Although many appeared too ill for such a voyage, medical approval was granted. When rations grew short, the ship's crew would add more vinegar to the water barrels. Both the American and British governments passed various laws to protect the passengers, ensuring that they should be given food and water. These laws worked against the interests of the landlords, who wanted the cheapest fares possible, and the ship owners, who wanted to make as much money off each passenger as possible. American law limited ships to two, and British law to three, passengers for every five tons. Ships containing twice as many passengers--without adequate food and medical facilities--sailed regularly. Hygiene, if it had been possible before, was impossible in steerage, where most booked passage because it was cheaper. Lice spread quickly.

The bodies of those who died were sewn into canvas shrouds and thrown overboard. Some emigrants reported sharks following their ships. Conditions were harshest on the ships bound for Canada. The death rate was so high that they were called "coffin ships." Those surviving passage found conditions little improved on arrival. The normal system of quarantine was overwhelmed by the number of arriving Irish emigrants. Disease spread as passengers were quarantined together. Tom Flynn, who had earlier poisoned his landlord's fish, had emigrated to Canada and found work. He had sent for his mother

and siblings. When they were trapped in quarantine, he took a rowboat, located them, hid them under a tarp, and rowed them to safety.

Those who booked passage to America found that Americans were more sympathetic to the Irish starving in Ireland than having the Irish come to starve in America. Many ships were refused entry or the Irish prohibited from working. The Irish came to constitute the lowest rank of the U.S. workforce The British, observing a revolution in France and rebellions in Austria, were troubled by, as Queen Victoria put it, such "inflammable matter all around us as to make one tremble." Tom Flynn, one of those who emigrated from Canada to America, became a citizen in 1856 and voted for Abraham Lincoln in 1860.

This chapter describes the famine in its second winter. The Irish emigrated in droves, facing further famine and swindlers en route. Almost a quarter perished. Although both the American and British governments did pass laws ostensibly protecting emigrants, they were not enforced. In Ireland, when the blight destroyed its first potato crop, those at the bottom of the economic ladder--who were the first to experience the famine --suffered but made it through the winter largely because of British Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel's corn. As food became scarcer in Ireland, Irish merchants raised the price of food in local markets, making it unaffordable for most. The next year, when to everyone's surprise, the harvest was healthy--but miniscule--the new Prime Minister, Lord John Russell--and his economic advisor, Sir Charles Trevelyan--reacted to a crisis they could have anticipated. They passed the Soup Kitchen Act, and the first kitchen opened in June 1847. A strong laissez-faire economist, Trevelyan reasoned that the only tax that should be imposed be imposed on the landowners, who he taxed to pay for soup kitchens and public workhouses.

Parliament next passed the Galway Act, which limited access to the workhouses to those who rented less than a quarter acre of land and made them easy to evict at will, whether they paid their rent or not. Evicting tenants, sometimes entire towns at a time, meant lower taxes for the landlords, who also discovered it was cheaper to pay passage to North America than to house their newly evicted tenants in a workhouse for a year. Compared to the number of indigent Irish who died from famine and disease, a trivial number of landlords were lynched. Bonfires did burn nine times on the ridges in celebration, but those who had money were either buying food or passage out of Ireland, not guns.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary and Analysis

There were many rumors of an uprising. That spring had been particularly cold, and there having been little sign of blight on the last crop, people hoped, planting three times more potatoes than in the previous year. May and June were sunny, and the new potato crop flourished. Small farmers looked forward to having enough to eat for the first time in three years. Larger farmers and landlords looked forward to paying off their debts. While the potatoes grew, a revolutionary spirit was spreading in a group calling itself Young Ireland (inspired by the recent European rebellions). Young Ireland wanted a return to self-rule, the British out of Ireland, and reforms that would return their rights and freedoms. Their leadership was diverse and included landlords, merchants, small farmers, both Protestants and Catholics.

Young Ireland founded revolutionary clubs throughout Ireland. Their members were as diverse as their leaders. Like them, they believed that most problems could be solved through reason. All agreed the Irish land system must change. Some argued that this must be done cooperatively since landlords and tenants needed each other, and others advocated force. In March 1848, some of Young Ireland's leaders arrived in Paris, but the new French president would not support them, the British having already convinced him not to meddle in British internal affairs. The British had persuaded the Pope to order the parish priests to eschew becoming involved in political matters. In April 1848, the British passed the Treason Felony Act, sent more troops into Dublin, and arrested three of Young Ireland's leaders. Young Ireland knew it had to begin its revolution soon, before all its leaders were deported to Australian penal colonies.

Young Ireland had no military strategy, internal organization, and little in the way of munitions and communication channels. They determined to begin immediately after the new potato harvest. In Ballingarry, County Tipperary, on Saturday July 29th of 1848, about 200 rebels--who had hewn trees for spear shafts, forged blades at the blacksmith's, and drilled on the city streets--waited behind a hastily assembled barricade for the police column advancing their way. Widow McCormack heard the news and decided her two oldest sons would be safer at home. Putting her 10-year-old in charge of the four younger ones, she headed for the national school. Shortly after she left, the police scrambled over the garden walls, the rebels on their heels, through the family cabbage patch and then inside the Widow McCormack's home, where they barricaded doors and punched holes through the walls for gun mounts during the brief battle.

This chapter describes Young Ireland's leaders. They were sentenced for high treason and their punishment was to be hung and then drawn and quartered. Not wanting to create martyrs, the British commuted their sentences to lifelong hard labor in the prison colony in Australia. Queen Victoria wrote that the Irish "needed to be taught a good lesson, or they will begin it again." Young Ireland's leadership included laborers and

small farmers, as well as merchants and landlords. They wanted real reform for Ireland and cessation of British imperialism. The British tried them for treason and sentenced them to be drawn and quartered, a punishment they quickly, in a rare show of good sense, commuted to a lifetime of hard labor, fearing their original sentence would create martyrs.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary and Analysis

The potato crop failed for the third time--the blight was as bad as it had ever been. Heavy August rains caused it to spread rapidly. The oat crop was decimated by smut. There were many more emigrations and evictions. The British Prime Minister was furious with the Irish rebellion and determined that there would be no assistance for the Irish. Trevelyan raised the landowners' rates. The large farmers and landowners faced the same problem. No one to pay rents out of which they paid rates. More than one farmer and landowner abandoned what they had and emigrated. No one was unaffected by the emigration. Without customers, the merchants closed their doors. Although the landowners and large farmers were adversely impacted, the greatest harm was experienced by the small farmers and laborers. They could no longer emigrate since the new laws increased the cost of passage. Many children committed crimes to get themselves arrested and deported (where they would have at least one meal a day). The British government became embarrassed by the horde of juvenile inmates.

Also problematic was that about seventy of Ireland's unions were either bankrupt or nearly so. The British government passed the Rate-in-Aid Act in 1849, which required the more prosperous Irish unions to contribute to the maintenance of those more destitute. All protests fell on deaf ears. The government knew the landowners did not have the money and hoped that wealthy British speculators would purchase the Irish land. Parliament next passed an amended Encumbered Estates Act. This permitted landowners to sell their land without settling their debts first, so more land was sold. It also allowed the government to sell encumbered estates regardless of the desires of the owners so that more tenants were evicted.

Land prices were cheap. To the British government's dismay, most buyers were wealthy Irish businessmen or landowners, not British. These new owners wanted large swaths on which to expand their dairy herds. New waves of evictions followed. In 1849, charitable organizations deemed Ireland too devastated for relief.

Lord Clarendon proposed that Queen Victoria visit Ireland to rally the Irish. Then 30, Victoria was popular with the British and devoted to her husband and six children. Most Irish thought British economic policies were as responsible for the famine as the blight. Royal plans were made for a ten-day visit to Ireland in August of 1849. Mayors across Ireland made preparations, "scrubbing and beautifying." Some newspapers reported on commerce (the busy shops in Dublin and its full hotels). Other newspapers criticized the royal visit both because it was designed to avoid the overcrowded workhouses, roofless, torn down houses, and the slums where thousands were still dying from famine and disease. One editorial observed that nearly every Dublin household had lost a parent to the famine. Others remembered the hundreds of dead in Skibberdeen. The Queen's arrival in Cork Harbor on August 2nd was met with great fireworks and fanfare,

a pattern repeated in Kingston Harbor and Dublin. On August 12th, she wrote that she was "touched" by the ragged misery of the Irish people and sailed off with "real regret."

As the 1849 new potato harvest approached, the blight struck again in the west and south of Ireland. By 1850, the blight was over. Over the next 50 years, the blight returned occasionally but never as ferociously as during the famine. The famine changed Ireland forever, with many families split apart and entire villages leveled. The Irish language itself was threatened. In his old age--after he'd founded a pro-nationalism movement, been arrested for treason, and elected to Parliament while in jail--Diarmuid O'Donovan Rossa said that, before the famine, "There were fairies in Ireland. ... English tyranny killed out the 'good people' as well as the living people."

In addition to up to one million dead and two million emigrated--out of a total population, just before the famine, of eight million--the legacy of the Irish potato famine was, for the Irish, great bitterness. Emigration at the rate of about half of each generation continued for the next 60 years. By 1910, the number of emigrants surpassed five million. A 1916 rebellion failed, but, in 1921, all of Ireland--except six counties in the north--gained independence from Britain.

Objects/Places

Boyne River

Between 1169 and 1530, England tried, repeatedly, to conquer Ireland. In 1690 Protestant King William of Orange defeated the Irish at a bloody Battle on this river. King William and his Parliament passed draconian "Penal Laws" which contained clauses precluding the Irish from owning firearms and giving their children a Catholic education. By 1800, however, Ireland was 80 percent Catholic.

London, England

From inside their London offices, the British Prime Minister, his advisors, and Parliament passed the laws which turned the potato blight into the potato famine.

Fergus River

After the famine began, the merchants raised prices because of the local need or demand for food. The British military escorted ships loaded with grain and livestock down the Fergus River for export to London and other foreign markets. Many emigrants, before sailing away, expressed astonishment at the amount of food they saw in the port cities.

The Potato

The potato was not native to Ireland, but by 1800, between August and May, was the dietary staple for most of Ireland's inhabitants. The poorest families ate their potatoes boiled right out of the pot, each peeling the skin off their potato and dipping it into a communal salt bowl (called a "dip-at-the-stool" meal). Potatoes were harvested twice each fall. The early crop of new potatoes was harvested in August. The later crop of old potatoes was harvested in October. Most of the potatoes were stored in a deep, outdoor pit covered with clay and rushes. Tenants paid rent biannually, in November, after the old potato harvest, and in May after the first grain harvest.

In 1844, the potato crop was so bountiful that there were more potatoes than buyers. In 1845, the blight, known today as the fungus, Pythopthora infestans, destroyed one-third of the potato crop. It first hit during the old potato harvest, drifting over Ireland at a rate of about 50 miles per hour. (It could wipe out entire fields within an hour). The grain harvest that year was, however, bountiful, and sold in London and foreign capitals. In August 1846, to everyone's amazement, the blight returned, even more virulently, this time destroying nearly three-quarters of the entire crop. In August 1847, the potato harvest was blight free--but the yield was too small to feed everyone. A month earlier,

soup kitchens had been feeding three million people a day, but, in July, Trevelyan had ordered them closed.

The closure of the soup kitchens gave laborers two choices. They could enter the Poor Law union workhouses or starve. In August 1848, the blight again destroyed about a third of the potato crop. In 1849, the blight struck only in the south and west of Ireland. By 1850 the famine was over. The potato blight periodically reappeared over the next 50 years, but never as virulently as it had during the Irish Potato Famine.

The Corn Laws

A botanist would not call corn a grain. Corn was, however, treated as such under the British Corn Laws, protectionist tariffs subsidizing British farmers and those whose fortunes depended on them. Although he had previously supported the Corn Laws when he was Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel secretly imported 100,000 pounds of Indian corn to feed those starving in Ireland. He avoided paying the tariff on the technicality that the British did not have an explicit trade agreement with the U.S. The corn was stored in Cork and Limerick Counties and distributed in February 1846. Throughout that spring, Peel lobbied Parliament to repeal the Corn Laws. He lost the support of the Conservative Party and resigned. The Irish called his imported corn "Peel's brimstone," both because of its effect on the digestive system and because it popped and spat when boiled. In July 1847, Peel's replacement, Lord John Russell, vetoed importing more corn, only to change his mind a month later when the blight struck again, more virulently than before. Many died before the new shipment of maize arrived in December.

Poor Law Union Workhouses

The workhouses were established under the British Poor Law, which divided Ireland's 32 counties into 130 unions or taxable entities. Taxes on the individual Poor Law unions funded the individual workhouses which cared for the destitute. One result of Ireland's agricultural land system was that, at any given time, some farm laborers were expected to be destitute. These unions were administered by a locally elected Board of Guardians, often the landlords or their agents. The workhouse or poorhouse was the place of last resort. Upon entry, family members were separated, issued uniforms and a place to stay. They were fed twice a day with whatever was available. Rules were strict. Everyone had to work, eat, sleep, and wake at the prescribed times. Although anyone could admit themselves, they had to have permission to leave.

The landlords and the large farmers paid the union taxes to support the 130 workhouses. As the food crisis grew, the unions in countries where the crisis was greatest were taxed the most. As their taxes grew, the landlords resisted and sometimes could not pay them. Parliament insisted they must pay. A compromise was reached in 1848 with passage of the Galway Act. It denied government services, notably the workhouses, to anyone renting more than a quarter acre, and gave landlords the legal

right to evict anyone renting less than a quarter acre, without notice and whether they paid their rent or not. Evicting tenants meant, for these landlords, both lower taxes and being able to convert their previously inhabited land into pastures or fields for other crops. By Christmas, within a month of the Galway Act's passage, in County Claire alone, nearly the entire town of Moveen was evicted. While some landlords reduced or eliminated rents in response to the food crisis, most, like the merchants, decided that their right to make a profit wasn't dimmed by the humanitarian crisis. The priests tried unsuccessfully to shame them.

The landlords soon discovered that it was cheaper to export their tenants--pay their passage to North America--than to, after eviction, maintain them for a year in a Poor Law union workhouse at 16 cents a day plus overhead. The workhouse system fell into chaos almost immediately. There was no staff to deal with the sheer numbers of applicants. Also, many turned people away because they were already overcrowded. Others turned them away because, although they had space, they could not afford to feed them (as happened in Skibberdeen). After Trevelyan closed the soup kitchens, those who did not gain admission to the workhouses simply "disappeared" or starved to death.

Soup Kitchens

As the food crisis intensified during the winter of 1846-1847, newspaper coverage increased. Wealthy and middle-class family readers were alarmed that harsh sentences and transportation were insufficient to deter crime in Ireland. Sir Charles Trevelyan was also disturbed and decided to establish soup kitchens which, while not providing all basic nutrients, did ward off immediate starvation. In February 1847, Parliament passed a relief act known as The Soup Kitchen Act. (A strong laissez-faire economist, Trevelyan reasoned that only the Irish landowners should be taxed to pay for soup kitchens and public workhouses). The first soup kitchen had a gala grand opening in June 1847 with a well-known chef preparing the first soup for government ministers. Within a month, the soup kitchens were feeding over three million daily. These soup kitchens were set up to be run efficiently.

Each time a bell rang, a new group of people with ration tickets were admitted to the dining area, which consisted of long tables on which individual bowls of soup and a slice of bread were placed. The spoons were chained to the tables. People ate quickly and exited through a back door, after which the dishes were rinsed and refilled, upon which the bell rang again and the next group was admitted. There were, nonetheless, disorderly incidents, as when people desperate for food plunged their hands into boiling kettles to get at it. Trevelyan closed the soup kitchens in October 1847, despite the new potato crop, while blight free, being too small to feed everyone. Many had only two options, enter the workhouse or starve.

Skibberdeen

Skibberdeen was an isolated hamlet in County Cork. Its merchants--like others across Ireland--raised the price of food as the famine intensified. In Skibberdeen and across Ireland, the laborers protested they couldn't earn enough to feed their families, only asking the merchants to charge reasonable prices and not export food. The merchants responded by boarding up their windows and calling the militia. In the second year of the famine, the Skibberdeen workhouse could not feed even its inmates. Outside the workhouse, the bodies of those newly dead in the slums were, each night, placed in front of the merchants' shop doors. It was the merchants' complaints that forced Russell to publicly acknowledge there was an epidemic and prompted passage of the Irish Fever Act. On the occasion of Queen Victoria's planned ten-day royal visit in August 1849, some sang, "Arise ye dead of Skibberdeen/And come to Cork to see the Queen."

Setting

Bartoletti depicts Ireland as a magical and beloved land, which suffered and withstood a calamity. Before the 1840s potato blight, Ireland was a country where people delighted in stories about mythical characters. They praised the lush green island for its beautiful lakes and mountains and fertile fields. The bleak Ireland described during the famine sharply contrasted with this plentiful wonderland. Even a rare snowfall was not received with wonder and joy but as one more obstacle the Irish had to bear.

Barren potato fields are the main setting for the famine. Prior to the blight, the Irish built potato ridges, also called laze-beds, in fields. After the blight caused potatoes to decay into black rotting tubers, these fields became vacant areas where people urgently looked for anything that they could eat.

Ironically, fields planted in grains prospered, but those yields were designated for exports, not indigenous use. The empty potato fields paralleled the people's empty stomachs and loss of purpose when they no longer had potatoes to tend and harvest.

Fields also represented danger when some farmers dug holes to trap thieves.

Housing aids in characterization and plot development as the famine worsens. While landlords have elaborate country homes that are often vacant, farmers and laborers live in small cottages and huts. Cottages usually consist of several rooms, although many cabins were not divided into areas and only had a loft above the common living space. These dwellings were made of mud, stones, wood, or thatch. People often kept hogs and poultry inside their homes and stockpiled potatoes in lofts. Some Irish were bog squatters, building huts in bogs where they felt secure from hostile authorities.

Cottage tumblings resulted when officials tore down structures by pulling out supporting beams to evict people who had not paid their rent. Evicted Irish resorted to finding shelter with friends or at workhouses. Many laborers survived by living in scalps, which were temporary crude homes created by placing a thatch roof over a ditch. Entire communities seemed to vanish due to starvation and eviction. The skeletal laborers at Skibbereen in County Cork struggled to stay alive. They were occasionally seen in town markets looking at food they were unable to buy.

Urban areas were more prosperous settings. Food and supplies were abundant to customers who could afford them. Queen Victoria's visit to Cork in 1849 emphasized the disparity between the country and city.

Exorbitant amounts of money were spent to create a lavish setting for Victoria to view.

This money could have been used to help famine victims buy food instead of entertaining Victoria for several days. Lord Clarendon, Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland, stressed that Victoria's trip had been sanitized in that she had not been exposed to

areas where the famine had struck. The queen's elaborate tour was designed to amuse and please, not upset her with reality.

Most settings Bartoletti describes are unpleasant. Irish laborers tried to avoid workhouses where conditions were extreme.

Admission was voluntary, but fences enclosed workhouses and their outdoor areas so that inmates could not leave unless authorities said they could. Inside the workhouses, Irish were expected to comply with rules and work at grueling tasks for extended time periods. Although they were fed, the meals were small and unappetizing. Many inmates experienced abuse from unkind officials. Workhouses overflowed with famine victims and refused to admit many people. The death rates were high, and corpses were dumped into mass burial pits. Thousands of Irish simply disappeared.

Public relief work projects also were despairing settings where laborers encountered harsh conditions such as rocky or muddy areas to clear for road construction.

Soup kitchens rushed the Irish through meals in order to serve more people. Jails were uncomfortable and often sources of parasites and diseases. Many criminals were exiled to penal colonies as far away as Australia and never saw Ireland again. Some exiles were relieved because they felt betrayed by the land to which they had devoted their lives.

Towns also emptied during the 1848 rebellion which culminated in the British seizure of the Widow McCormack's house at Ballingarry in County Tipperary to fight against Irish forces. McCormack worried about the fate of her children inside, and rebel troops conceded that battle in order to protect that family.

Immigrants voluntarily left Ireland and hoped that one day their country's vigor would be restored. Ironically, they faced similar dire settings on the appropriately dubbed coffin ships in which the Irish risked deadly conditions because of poor sanitation and overcrowding. In their foreign communities, the Irish often endured ostracism such as employers posting signs that declared "No Irish Need Apply."

Social Sensitivity

The social horror of the famine is that it could have been prevented. The divide between rich and poor in Ireland was great.

The Irish potato famine was not caused by the lack of food but by the farm laborers' poverty. Plenty of food was available. Unfortunately, most people could not afford to buy it. The famine was the catalyst for both good and negative behavior by the people enduring starvation, well-meaning relief workers, and usually self-serving British landowners and politicians. The Irish population was divided into rigid categories of property owners and laborers, which caused many social injustices. While the Irish provided profitable crops for their landlords, they subsisted on a potato diet.

Bartoletti depicts the Irish as a generous, hardworking, devout people who feel responsible to nurture and take care of the young and elderly. The Irish willingly help others and share what they have with family, friends, and strangers. Irish homes welcome guests and, before the famine, kept extra food in case visitors arrived. The Irish even distributed food in fields to please the fairies.

Religious strife and socioeconomic and political conditions exacerbated the Irish potato famine. The famine victims did not passively accept their fate. They lawfully sought ways to secure nutrients by searching for vegetables, berries, nuts, and weeds.

People worked on public relief projects in an attempt to earn money for food and rent even though wages were so low that this was difficult. Family and self-sacrifice were central to the Irish potato famine. Many parents gave their food to children. Mothers and children performed arduous labor after husbands and fathers died. People often sold their clothing in order to buy food.

Although they strive to retain their dignity and morality, many Irish succumbed to committing petty theft to survive. To preserve their pride, most Irish took food from fields or bled cattle for protein during the night to conceal their actions. If caught by neighbors, they admitted their shame at being poor and hungry. Some Irish responded criminally to the famine so they would be arrested and have access to food in jail. Others acted in retaliation for unfair accusations. After Tom Flynn was arrested for fishing, he poisoned fish in that stream.

Officials often had no mercy for famine victims, even sending babies to jail with mothers who were arrested. A few desperate parents committed suicide or killed their children.

Relief efforts varied. Sir Charles Trevelyan suggested establishing soup kitchens for famine victims, but bureaucracy slowed their implementation. Unfortunately, the rations often caused health woes such as dysentery. At some soup kitchens, Catholics were forced to convert to Protestantism in order to receive food. Occasionally, the Irish also endured being shamed by relief workers who denounced them for marrying at young

ages and producing too many children. In soup schools, children also faced pressure to abandon their family's faith.

Many Irish preferred starving to religious conversion.

More tolerable forms of charity included the distribution of milk and butter to the hungry Irish by the wives of landlords and officials. Nine-year-old "Little Miss" Kennedy gave warm clothes to people, and some victims knitted to earn money to feed the Irish. The Quakers donated rice, seed for alternative crops, and fishery supplies.

Americans attended famine fundraisers.

Queen Victoria provided substantial funds to the British Relief Association. None of these relief workers expected the Irish to reject their social traditions or religious beliefs in exchange for help.

The statistics reveal the social catastrophe during the famine. Approximately one million Irish died because of starvation or famine-related diseases. Many of these casualties were victims of eviction and workhouse deficiencies, which could have been prevented or alleviated if officials had acted responsibly. An additional two million Irish emigrated to foreign countries. Many of these emigrants suffered abuses such as being cheated by swindlers on the docks or being crowded into unsanitary conditions on the coffin ships. People in other countries frequently discriminated against the Irish, who faced further poverty and social ostracism. Despite such obstacles, Irish emigrants recognized that their condition had improved and saved money to help their relatives also escape Ireland during the famine.

Bartoletti emphasizes the legacy of the 1840s potato famine to modern concerns.

Famine and starvation still occur because of political, social, and economic issues. Ireland continues to be shaped by the collective memory of the nineteenth-century famine and the reasons which prevented people from having access to food.

Literary Qualities

Bartoletti's writing style makes the complex information she presents to readers accessible without being didactic or sensational. She traveled to Ireland and studied the Irish language to research this book.

Although not academically educated as a historian, Bartoletti has a credible methodology to address the potato famine. She consulted significant archival sources, public records, and primary and secondary sources about this topic. Bartoletti combines fact with folklore to show readers the many dimensions of the people and events she features.

In her annotated bibliography, Bartoletti assesses the resources she found available and advises future researchers about the merits of each source, noting which memoir keepers are reliable or not. She comments that, because of illiteracy and poverty, much of Irish famine history relies on oral traditions recorded by representatives of the Irish Folklore Commission who interviewed descendants. She read a variety of secondary materials, ranging from histories to medical texts and fairy tales. This broad approach enriches her text and makes what could be dry material intriguing and lively.

By presenting her information chronologically, Bartoletti remains true to how the potato famine developed during the 1840s.

She includes a timeline to clarify when events happened. A topical organization might have limited repetition of some material, but such reiteration stresses how the famine seemed never ending to its victims.

Chapter titles are derived from participants' quotes, which prepare readers for what will be discussed. Bartoletti introduces each chapter with an Irish poem, blessing, toast, or lyric that sets the mood. Readers feel as if they are in Ireland seeing the legendary fairies, smelling the rotting potatoes, or dancing a jig. By including Irish words in dialogue and descriptive passages, Bartoletti further enhances the book's tone. Although Bartoletti uses Anglicized versions of Irish names in her text, she provides the Irish spelling and punctuation in her bibliography.

During her research, Bartoletti identified illustrations that provide visual scenes that supplement her vivid textual images. Her use of black and gray as symbols in her writing and simple illustrations further set the mood. She carefully selects her narrators and uses quotes to give voice to the famine victims. Bartoletti chooses individuals that represent various aspects of the famine, from farmers to landlords. Her examples tend to emphasize the plight of the poor and cast the Protestant British and landlords as victimizers, although she does provide examples of how people from each group acted contrary to standard depictions.

Bartoletti is most effective at conveying the despair ordinary people felt. She urges readers to empathize with these historical figures and help modern people who are

suffering from forms of deprivation or victimization. Through her descriptions and often macabre details, readers can feel the hunger pangs, outrage, and suffering of the poor Irish. They also can sense their unity and optimism. Bartoletti emphasizes that her history differs from other books because she portrays the Irish as hardworking, resourceful people with hope who fought not to be victims.

Themes

Culture in Chaos

In 1690, Protestant King William of Orange defeated the Irish at the Boyne River and enacted "Penal Laws," which contained a clause that prohibited the Irish from giving their children a Catholic education. Nevertheless, by 1800, Ireland was 80 percent Catholic. The British established a National School system in 1831. It provided free primary education but prohibited use of the Irish language--and replaced Irish with British history. Most children attended "hedge schools," named so because on nice days, school was conducted on the shady side of hedges. A number of the National Schools had headmasters who followed the hedge school curriculum and didn't bother informing the Board of Education.

In less than five years, during the famine, Ireland lost over a quarter of its population, but probably twice as many emigrated as died from starvation and disease. During a single eight-day period in County Cork in 1851, eleven ships sailed for North America with slightly over 1500 Irish passengers each. During the famine years, emigration was called the great "going away." A new custom was born, the "American wake," a party held by friends the night before a new emigrant set sail. On the day of departure, they'd walk together as close to the ship as possible, entire families broken and certain they'd never again see each other. The landlords having realized it was more economical to deport their tenants than support them in a workhouse, hastened emigration. Many emigrants took along a chunk of the "auld sod," turf they'd dug from the ground of Ireland. Other than that, packing was a simple affair of wearing their clothes and filling them with as much food as possible, and bringing bedding (if any). There is no culture that wouldn't be affected by losing so much of its population in so short a period of time. There were times when the viability of even the Irish language itself was in doubt.

Specific customs also changed within Ireland as the food crisis intensified. Funeral traditions like the wake were abandoned as fear of contagion grew. Traditional Irish social customs like burial collapsed against the scale of the famine. As infections and cholera outbreaks grew, old traditions--like always making room for a stranger for a night--were abandoned. At that time, many Irish believed burial in a wooden coffin was the minimal requirement for death with dignity. People used whatever wood was available to carve crude coffins for their relatives. Some, thinking themselves near death, checked into the workhouses, only to discover that the workhouses buried the dead in open pits, covering each new layer of corpses with lime. "Bottomless coffins" were constructed to allow the illusion of traditional burial. When the worker pressed a lever, a hinge opened, and the bottom of the coffin dropped and the body fell into the pit. The coffin was then made ready for another "burial."

The bodies of those who died in the slums of towns like Skibberdeen were piled in front of merchants' shop doors. Although there were pits containing as many as a hundred bodies, many were buried unceremoniously where they fell. In April 1847, overwhelmed

by the numbers dying, the British called the disaster an "epidemic" and passed the Irish Fever Act, which increased taxes on the Poor Law unions to pay for special fever hospitals, whitewashing and fumigating, and providing coffins to those who could not otherwise afford them.

Inconsistent Enforcement of Law and Order

The prevailing British economic philosophy was "laissez-faire," the belief that markets regulate themselves, and the best course of action for government is to not interfere. This policy was interpreted in some cases as actually not interfering: Let the Irish merchants raise the price of grain as the food crisis intensified. Demand had escalated, and they had a right to make a profit). Let the Corn Laws stand since they protected the British farmer, although they increased the cost of food for the Irish. The hands-off policy, however, stopped when it came to "law and order" issues. Food prices sky rocketed in Ireland because of "demand." (Food prices in London and other markets did not increase during Ireland's famine). The poor began dying in droves during the second winter. There was rioting as desperate people turned on what and whom they could. Starving people do not passively watch as grain and livestock--whose prices had increased so much as to make them unaffordable--were being exported.

By winter 1846, fourteen pounds of cornmeal--enough to feed a family of six for three days-- cost over five days' wages. The rioters demanded that merchants charge only reasonable prices and that they not export food. The merchants had earlier bought up the available supplies of oats and flour and sold them in small amounts for at least double the price. To buy food, the Irish poor sold all they had. When they had nothing left to sell, they borrowed from moneylenders who often charged between twenty and fifty percent interest. When the starving people threatened the merchants exporting their crops to foreign markets, the British sent in 10,000 armed troops to escort the crops to port.

The prison sentences handed out during the food crisis are another example of inconsistent enforcement of British law. Throughout the food crisis, sentences for even small crimes were severe. One man who was caught trying to steal a sheep was given a two-year sentence. His wife and youngest daughter died of starvation before he was released. Tom Flynn was jailed for fishing in a river that crossed an estate. Young Ireland's leaders were initially sentenced to being drawn and quartered. Another inconsistency was the Galway Act, which allowed landowners to evict their tenants at will and without notice. The economic argument was that fewer tenants meant fewer taxes. One man who had paid his rent and was then unceremoniously evicted, after seeing his home destroyed, cut down a few trees to make a lean-to where his garden had been. He was arrested and given a two-month sentence for damaging the landlord's trees.

Additionally, the "hands off" policy did not apply to diplomatic relations. In March 1848 a delegation of Young Ireland's leaders arrived in Paris. The new French president would not support them, the British having already convinced him not to meddle in British

internal affairs. (They'd also convinced the Pope to order the parish priests not to meddle in political matters).

Contrasting the numbers of poor Irish dead (one million) with the number of wealthy landlords--who were lynched while in the process of evicting their tenants--dead (nine) shows another inconsistency. About the former, Russell was willing to do little. About the latter, however, Russell responded with the Crime and Outrage Act and sent troops into Dublin to maintain order. Bonfires did burn in the hills in celebration on nine nights--but those Irish with money were either buying food or passage out of Ireland, not guns.

Britain also had laws that it didn't enforce, for example, those protecting emigrants. These laws were not enforced because they worked against the interests of the landlords who wanted the cheapest fares possible, and the ship owners, who wanted to make as much money off each passage as possible, and the "dishonest ticket brokers and greedy ship owners," who cheated starving emigrants whenever and however they could. The law required a medical examination before boarding, but everyone passed. Ships containing twice as many passengers--without adequate food and medical facilities--sailed regularly. Hygiene was impossible in steerage, where most booked passage. Lice spread rapidly. It is estimated that three-fourths of the emigrants survived the voyage. In summary, for the British, law and order meant that when it came to protecting merchants', landowners', and large farmers' "right" to make profits--armed British troops maintained order. When it came to enforcing emigration safety laws, they were short-staffed.

The Cause of the Potato Famine

Today we know that a fungus--Pythopthora infestans--destroyed much of the potato crop between 1845 and 1850. After that, it returned periodically--but never with its earlier virulence. The fungus had been inadvertently imported from the Americas, possibly guano from South America bought by a farmer to fertilize his field. The fungus that invaded Ireland traveled east to west on the prevailing winds. The fungus spores spread rapidly in Ireland's wet windy climate--"at a rate of about fifty miles a day." The spores landed on the leaves and spread into the soil. The fungus contributed to the famine since potatoes were the staple in most diets, especially those of the poor. However, the Irish Potato Famine of 1845-1850 was not caused by lack of food. Rather, it was caused by lack of access to food.

That the famine could have been avoided led to a most bitter resentment against the British. The granddaughter of one famine survivor, Tom Flynn, wrote that he could not say "England" without next spitting out "God damn her." Some historians maintain that what Ireland produced during the famine years--livestock and other crops--would have been enough to have averted the famine. Instead, food prices actually skyrocketed in relation to demand. At the beginning of the famine, the merchants bought up the available supplies of oats and flour, selling them in small portions for at least double the price. The Irish laborers sold all they had to buy food. When they had nothing left to sell, they borrowed from moneylenders who often charged between twenty and fifty percent

interest. British Prime Minister Russell was loathe to interfere with the merchants' right to make a profit and so sent in troops to protect their grain and livestock exports. While the laborers had nothing to eat and nothing left to sell, the grain harvest--rye, wheat, oats--was bountiful, particularly during the second year of the famine

Inefficiency and poor judgment also exacerbated the famine. In June 1846, there was a coin shortage. Some died waiting to be paid. In July of 1846, the month before the new potato harvest, Trevelyan announced that the public works administrations would be closed. When the blight struck again, one month later, before any relief measures were approved, he had Parliament pass the Labor Rate Act, which taxed the Irish Poor Law unions to pay for helping the famine victims, and placed the greatest burden on areas where the crisis was greatest. In July 1847, Russell canceled another shipment of maize--the first had run out---but, when blight struck the new potato harvest two months later, he had to purchase it anyway. Some died waiting. In April 1847, Parliament passed the Galway Act, which limited relief to Irish laborers renting a quarter-acre or less. Many died homeless.

In May 1849, after raising the landlords' rates even though many were in or near bankruptcy, Parliament passed the Rate-in-Aid Act which distributed the debt across all the Poor Law unions. In July 1849, Parliament passed the Encumbered Estates Act which allowed land to be sold without debt first being settled. This led to more land sales and more evictions--and raised the price of passage. British economic policies culminated in both the humanitarian crisis and also landlords and farmers being forced into bankruptcy--because of their tax burden--and merchants going out of business--because they had literally priced their customers out of existence. Their former customers were either dead, in workhouses, or emigrated.

Themes/Characters

Survival, courage, and hope are this history's dominant themes. The main characters are the six million Irish farm laborers who confronted their situation by acting pro-actively and defiantly, refusing to be passive victims of their circumstances. The recurring potato blight is presented as a villainous character that viciously assaults potatoes which are essential to the livelihood and nutritional well-being of the Irish people.

Prejudice and exclusion are also relevant themes. Nineteenth-century Irish society was divided into three basic social classes. The landlords were mostly Protestant British property owners who were often absent from their lands. Farmers rented varying sizes of acreage depending on their financial resources. The laborers worked land to earn wages and secure food. These agricultural workers were isolated from the landowners because of language, literacy, and cultural, economic, and religious differences.

The disruption of consistently practiced routines resulted in chaos. The Irish observed cyclical patterns in which seasons directed when crops were planted and harvested. The early crop of seed potatoes were removed from fields in August, while the general crop was harvested two months later. The Irish expected these potatoes to provide sustenance for nine months, especially during winter. They prepared for the summer to be a lean time when they would need to find other food sources or endure hunger until the August crops matured. The blight upset this carefully balanced system.

Bartoletti depicts the Irish laborers as devout Catholics who also express fondness for the supernatural, particularly fairies. Their delight turns to suspicion when they blame the scariest fairy, Fear Liath, known as the Gray Man, for spreading the blight. At that time, the primarily illiterate Irish were unaware of the scientific principles for the fungus that caused the blight.

They superstitiously placed religious medals and holy water to protect potatoes. Other laborers attributed the blight as a judgment by God. Some Irish accused the British for their agricultural dilemma.

Although Bartoletti identifies specific characters, most of the famine sufferers are presented as typical anonymous Irish laborers and their families. These people's adherence to honor, duty, and traditions emphasize the themes of perseverance and strength. Desperate Irish of all ages scoured fields for any vegetation they could consume. They experienced malnutrition, which weakened their immune systems making them susceptible to diseases and causing many people to behave irrationally. They tried to seek honest means to earn money or food.

Bartoletti describes ritual throughout rural Irish communities, especially those to commemorate life milestones such as birth, marriage, and death. The Irish celebrated holidays and enjoyed storytelling, singing, and dancing to express their shared heritage,

identity, and purpose. They attempted to retain this culture even when encountering hardship and enduring heartrending losses.

Devious characters included opportunistic land-grabbers who took advantage of low prices during the famine to buy property, which worsened already severe conditions. Most authority figures are cast as unmercifully cruel characters. Military escorts guarded grain that had been harvested for exports and did not offer any to starving people. Sheriffs and soldiers coldly arrest and evict people even if they are sick or pregnant. Approximately one quarter million Irish were evicted.

Bartoletti humanizes this statistic by telling about Bridget O'Donnel. The thirtyyear-old mother was forced from her Kilrush area cabin in County Clare even though she was seven months pregnant and confined to bed because of illness. As men placed ropes to collapse her house and tear off her roof, neighbors rescued Bridget. Bartoletti reveals that Bridget and a child survived the famine and were later recorded in a New York City census.

In 1848, when revolutionary movements were sweeping Europe, Irish rebels attempted to secure land system reform to make conditions more tolerable and equitable in Ireland. Throughout Ireland, rebel leaders recruited people for an army. Men and women armed themselves with pitchforks and stones for rebellion. Only a few people had access to guns, and a few shootings and murders of officials and landlords were reported. After the rebel army surrendered at the McCormack House in Ballingarry, several rebel leaders, including John Mitchel, Charles Gavan Duffy, and William Smith O'Brien, were captured and tried. In an effort not to stir public anger, British authorities decided to exile the men instead of executing them.

Bartoletti also features the voices of teenagers. Diarmuid O'Donovan Rossa tells about how his family reacted when they first saw black potatoes and comments throughout the history about his experiences, including being separated from family members as they emigrate to the United States. When he goes to Philadelphia, his mother does not recognize him but knows to verify his identity by feeling a scar on his forehead. Tom Flynn defies authorities in Ireland and Canada. After being arrested for fishing, he poisons the stream. He manages to emigrate to Canada where he boldly removes his family from a ship that has been detained in the harbor.

Artist James Mahony of Cork visited famine victims in their homes and in the countryside. He drew sketches for the Illustrated London News which supplemented articles that alerted the world to how extreme the famine was. Mahony's realistic drawings personalized the famine and served as a catalyst to increased humanitarian efforts and relief donations.

The theme of frustration is presented by British Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel's efforts to help the Irish. He wanted to repeal the Corn Law in order to bring ample corn supplies to Ireland. Members of Parliament resisted Peel because they emphasized that laissez-faire economic policies discouraged intervention. Also, representing the

Protestant versus Catholic theme of Ireland's history, the men were hesitant to help the Irish because of religious differences.

Although Peel had corn secretly imported to feed a half million Irishmen, the corn was not compatible with the Irish who suffered digestive distresses and were unfamiliar with how to prepare and cook corn. Most of the corn remained in storage. Peel eventually succeeded in having the Corn Law repealed, but he resigned when he realized he had lost support among fellow politicians. Queen Victoria was distressed by the famine and generously donated money but had minimal influence on Parliamentary members to change policies.

Empathy and generosity were themes that contrasted with greed and prejudice.

County Cork magistrate Nicholas Cummins witnessed conditions in Skibberdeen, and stated that lack of money, not access to food, was the problem. His plea for financial help resulted in the formation of the British Relief Association, and people, including Quakers and Native Americans, from Europe and North America sent money and supplies. Sir Charles Trevelyan promoted the formation of soup kitchens, which proved problematic because of pressures for Catholics to convert in order to receive relief. The association's relief efforts concluded in 1849 because leaders said England should assume responsibility for relief. Charitable adults and children distributed clothes and food or knitted garments to sell or give to famine victims. One of the most notable characters was "Little Miss" Kennedy who transported warm clothes to areas where famine victims resided.

Style

Perspective

This book is told in the third person. It is about the Irish potato famine. As such, the author on occasion introduces knowledge unknown during the period. For example, at the time, no one knew that the blight was caused by a fungus, Pythopthora infestans, inadvertently imported, possibly guano bought by a farmer to fertilize his field. The author, whenever possible, presents the history of the famine in the words of actual people collected from transcripts of personal interviews, historical documents, and newspaper reports. The voices she quotes are those of the farm laborers, on the lowest economic rung in Ireland's agricultural economy. Although no one in Ireland was unaffected by the famine, the poor were the most devastated. The poorer they were, the more they depended on the potato. Two of the stories she tells are those of Diarmuid O'Donovan Rossa--who did not emigrate--and Tom Flynn--who did.

Tone

Visitors were amazed that such ragged men and women--and nearly naked children--could exist in the United Kingdom. Ireland's land system was blamed for the poverty of its population. The Industrial Revolution, with its factory and mill jobs, had not reached Ireland, as it had Britain and the United States. Most of Ireland's economy was agricultural and therefore seasonal. The Irish fell into three classes; landowners, farmers, and farm laborers. Most landlords' management of their property consisted simply of collecting rent since there was no land improvement or investment in infrastructure. The landlords rented parcels of land to the farmers, who were stratified by the amount of land they rented. The landlords had the most status, and after them, the large farmers, who made a decent living, primarily from their dairy herds. The landlords and the large farmers paid taxes to support their local Poor Law union workhouse which sheltered the destitute. Historians estimate that between 1845 and 1850, one million Irish laborers and their families died from starvation or disease and twice as many emigrated. Ireland was forever changed.

Structure

The book is divided into 10 chapters, "Black Potatoes, Black Potatoes, We've an Extra Potato," "Lend Me a Little Reliefe," "A Flock of Famishing Crows," "Only Till the Praties Grow," "The Fever," "God Bless Us and Protect Everyone," "A Terrible Leveling of Houses," "The Going Away," "Where Would the War Begin?," "Come to Cork to See the Queen." The book also includes an Introduction, Conclusion, Map of the Counties and Major Port Cities of Ireland, Timeline, Bibliography, and brief topical Index. In the Introduction, the author states that her goal is to tell the story of the famine through the words of the people. In the Conclusion she notes that famines are about societies in

crisis and that we today can deal with the poverty, famine, and disease in our own world more effectively than we are doing. Noteworthy are the book's numerous period illustrations, etchings from the *Illustrated London News* and the British Library archives. In Chapter 7 "A Terrible Leveling of Houses," for example, the author quotes from and shows the etchings the *Illustrated London News* used to tell the story of Bridget O'Donnel. The captions underneath each etching contain a brief subject line, source, and date.

Language and Meaning

This history focuses on people, particularly the children who starved during the famine. Although illustrated with black-and-white engravings from the period, it is not a picture book. The author describes the famine, whenever possible, in the words of those who suffered through it. Potatoes were called "praties" and relief, "reliefe." The poorest families had "dip-at-the-stool" meals meaning they ate their potatoes boiled right out of the pot, everyone peeling off the skin of their potato and dipping it into a communal salt bowl. Starving children stole from "under cocks of hay or stooks of oat and rye." Many emigrated to North America, especially the U.S., during the "going away." Many emigrants took along a chunk of the "auld sod," turf they'd dug from the ground of Ireland before they set sail. Memories of the horror of the blight and famine, as well as the bitterness between the British and the Irish, were never erased. In his old age--after he'd founded a pro-nationalism movement, been arrested for treason, and elected to Parliament while imprisoned--Diarmuid O'Donovan Rossa said that, before the famine, "There were fairies in Ireland .... English tyranny killed out the 'good people' as well as the living people." Tom Flynn--who emigrated, became an American citizen in 1856 and voted for Abraham Lincoln in 1860--even in his old age could not say "England" without spitting out "God damn her" immediately after. Words are the primary mode of human communication, but none who lived through that period forgot the images of what they saw.

Quotes

"Parents grew terrified that they wouldn't have enough food for their children the winter. Priests offered up Masses, asking God to save the Irish people from disaster. Few laborers knew how to read and write, but those who did sent pleading letters to their church officials, asking for help. Priests often wrote the letters for their parishioners. Many parents felt ashamed that they could not feed their families. John Mansfield sold his wife's extra clothing and his coat. When that money ran out, he wrote a letter to his clergy, asking for a small loan. 'Reverand [sic] Sir Pardon for letting you know my great distress,' wrote John Mansfield. 'I did not earn one Shilling This 3 weeks I had not one Bite for my family since yesterday Morning to eat And I am applying to you As a good Charitable gentle man to lend me little Reliefe ... I will pay you the first Money I will earn.' Others begged government officials. 'I am ashamed to tell you my wife, seven children, and myself only ate one meal of potatoes yesterday,' wrote another man. Another 'this day. We had two eggs in the house last night which my wife was obliged to get up and give the children to prevent them crying.' And 'Our last meal of potatoes is now in the house.' The letters and reports about the crop failure poured into the British government, but the British leaders remained cautious and skeptical. Many didn't believe the extent of the crop damage and called the reports exaggerated. The Irish, they said, had always had a tendency to exaggerate. Some British people criticized the Irish, saying that the people had brought the situation on themselves. They said that the Irish didn't work hard enough to improve their lives. They blamed the Irish for marrying too young, having too many children, depending too much on potatoes, and listening to the poor advice of their priests. One Kerry landlord even called the potato destruction 'a blessing to Ireland,' while others claimed that the crop failure was an act of God, designed to reduce the Irish population to realistic levels." Chapter 3, pg. 35

"The potato blight struck during the first week of August of 1846, even more viciously than the year before. Three-quarters of the potato crop was ruined overnight. Many people lost their entire crop. 'My brother and I went up the hill to dig the potatoes,' said Diarmuid O'Donovan Rossa, now fifteen years old. 'He was the digger and I was the picker. He digged [sic] over two hundred yards of a piece of ridge, and all the potatoes I picked after him would not fill a skillet. They were no larger than marbles.'" Chapter 5, pg. 53

"No matter how historians interpret the facts this truth remains: while people were starving, ships filled with Irish grain and livestock headed to England and other markets. ... It is difficult to understand how food could be exported from a country where people are hungry. One of the harsh realities about famine is that it is not about a lack of food; famine is about who has access to food." Chapter 4, pg. 55

"One of its editorials shamed the British government, calling its relief efforts a mockery. 'We have not done our duty by Ireland. ... Neglect, carelessness, and laissez-faire do not make a cheap system of government but a very costly one.' The writer concluded with a stinging comment: 'There is only one book the English believe in--the ledger." Chapter 6, pg. 67

"A person can live for months on a scanty amount of food. The starved person's body adapts by slowing its metabolism and surviving on proteins, vitamins, and minerals stored in its tissues, muscles, and bones. At first, a starving person clamors for food, but the brain slows down as the body wastes away. Some starving people were described as 'cringing' and 'childlike' in manner. 'They will stand at a window for hours, without asking charity, giving a vacant stare, and not until driven away will they move,' said one woman. Starvation victims suffer from dehydration, hypothermia, arrhythmia, and infections; eventually they die from heart failure, kidney failure, or disease. Without the nutritious potato, the Irish people suffered from malnutrition, which reduced their body's resistance to viruses and bacteria. It is estimated that ten times as many people died from disease than from hunger during the Famine years. The exact number will never be known, since whole families disappeared and thousands of others lied buried in unmarked graves." Chapter 6, pp. 92-94

"One newspaper editorial pointed out that Queen Victoria would not see the worst areas in Ireland. She would not witness the wretched starving peasants, the workhouses crammed with inmates, and the slums. Others also criticized the extravagant amount of money spent on the preparations, especially as thousands of destitute Irish people lay dying from starvation and disease. ... Other people, remembering the hundreds of people who had perished in Skibberdeen, sang 'Arise ye dead of Skibberdeen/And come to Cork to see the Queen.' Some suggested that a funeral procession would offer the best greeting from a famine stricken land." Chapter 10, pp. 161-163

Adaptations

Other nonfiction works about the potato famine include Tony Allan's The Irish Famine: The Birth of Irish America (2001) and Feed the Children First: Memories of the Great Hunger (2002) edited by Mary E. Lyons. Many novels have been written about the potato famine, including Carole Bolton's The Search of Mary Katherine Mulloy (1974); Leonard Everett Fisher's Across the Sea from Galway (1975); Eve Bunting's The Haunting of Kildoran Abbey (1978); Karen Branson's The Potato Eaters (1979); Patricia Reilly Giff's Nory Ryan's Song (2000); Mary E. Lyons's Knockabeg: A Famine Tale (2001); Marita Conlon-McKenna's Under the Hawthorn Tree: Children of the Famine (2001); Mical Schneider's Annie Quinn in America (2001); Laura Wilson's How I Survived the Irish Famine: The Journal of Mary O'Flynn (2001); and Clare Pastore's Fiona McGilray's Story: A Voyage from Ireland in 1849 (2001) in the Journey to America series.

James Heneghan's The Grave (2000) is a time-travel novel in which the teenage protagonist shifts between 1974 and 1847. Ann Moore's Gracelin O'Malley (2001) is a famine novel for adult readers. Marie-Louise Fitzpatrick's The Long March: The Choctaw's Gift to Irish Famine Relief (1998) focuses on how people in distant places helped the Irish.

Topics for Discussion

1. How does Bartoletti's text emotionally involve readers?

2. In what ways does Bartoletti focus on specific groups associated with the potato famine? Does she seem biased in her presentation of certain people? Why or why not?

3. How do the Irish quotations and lyrics enhance the text? How are the Irish words and translations useful or distracting? In what way does the information about fairies, mythology, and folklore illuminate the facts?

4. Would you have preferred that Bartoletti have written her book in topical chapters rather than chronologically, and, if so, why?

5. Do you consider any of the details Bartoletti includes to be too horrible or violent for young readers? Why or why not?

6. Why do you think Bartoletti chose to describe specific people? Did she ignore any groups, such as Protestants, who should have been included among the victims of the famine?

7. Discuss why famine relief was ineffective. Who does Bartoletti blame and why? How could people's misery have been alleviated?

8. In what ways did Bartoletti depend too much on some sources? Were those people reliable narrators, especially when recalling facts years after the famine?

9. What literary techniques does Bartoletti use to create the tone of despair which resonates throughout her book?

10. What information did you hope to learn from this book but was not explained?

Essay Topics

The first quotation describes the panic parents felt during the first winter of the famine as they realized they could not feed their children. What did these parents do?

How did these parents feel?

The second quotation describes the blight as it spread across Ireland in the words of a single teenage boy. Why does the author use the words of those who experienced the famine first hand?

What happened to this particular teenager?

The third quotation describes food being exported during the famine. The author states that the famine was caused by lack of access to food. Do you agree?

How did British economic policies affect access to food?

The fourth quotation is from a newspaper editorial. What is meant by the English believing only in "the ledger"?

What was the basis of the British "laissez-faire" system?

The fifth quotation describes how starving people usually die. How many actually died from starvation relative to the number of those who died from disease?

What was the purpose of the Irish Fever Act? Was it simply to remove those dying from the streets (and those dead from being piled up in front of shop doors)?

The last quotation refers to Queen Victoria's visit to Ireland. The Queen was popular in England, but how was she regarded by the Irish?

How did the Queen react to the famine?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Use 1840s newspapers to read primary accounts of the potato famine and write a report based on experiences not included in Bartoletti's book. Why do you think photographs of the potato famine are scarce even though that technology was available?

2. Compare Bartoletti's book with other histories of the potato famine. Write a review explaining which books you preferred and why, citing specifics such as literary techniques and sources used.

3. Read oral histories of potato famine immigrants and their descendants after they emigrated to other countries. How do their memories, often decades later, contain similarities and differences with those presented in Bartoletti's book?

4. Write a readers' theater set in a scalp, workhouse, soup kitchen, or cottage during the potato famine.

5. Grow a potato plant. 6. Research how other countries such as Norway experienced famines at the same time as Ireland, and compare their emigration statistics and relief policies.

7. Prepare journal entries as if you were a farmer, landlord, and politician, discussing your concerns during the famine. How would your point of view differ in each account?

8. Learn how famines continue to plague Third World countries and how modern genetic methods developed by innovators, such as Nobel Prize winner Dr. Norman Borlaug, relieve starvation.

9. Write a newspaper account as if you were an international correspondent accompanying Queen Victoria on her visit to famine-stricken Ireland.

Further Study

"Bartoletti, Susan Campbell." In Something about the Author, vol. 88. Detroit: Gale, 1997. This article provides biographical information and several quotes regarding Bartoletti's historical research.

Bush, Elizabeth. Review of Black Potatoes.

Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, vol. 55 (October 2001): 51-52. Bush states that Bartoletti explains the causes of the famine and corrects mistakes often written about that disaster. She also praises the use of primary material and discussion of the famine's impact on social, economic, and political history.

Bush, Margaret A. Review of Black Potatoes.

Horn Book Magazine, vol. 78 (January 2002): 91-92. Bush praises Bartoletti's use of resources that bring to life and personalize those who suffered and those who were influential.

Hofmann, Mary R. Review of Black Potatoes.

School Library Journal, vol. 47 (November 2001): 168-169. Hofmann describes Bartoletti's book as "gruelingly poignant" and suggests that the bibliographical essay is fascinating historical reading.

Rochman, Hazel. Review of Black Potatoes.

Booklist, vol. 98 (October 15, 2001): 394.

In this starred review, Rockman likes Bartoletti's book for personalizing the ordinary victims of the famine.

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