

**FAMINE AND FORTUNE: THE GREAT IRISH MIGRATION**  
**200 YEARS OF SOLVING THE DEATH-PENALTY PROBLEM**

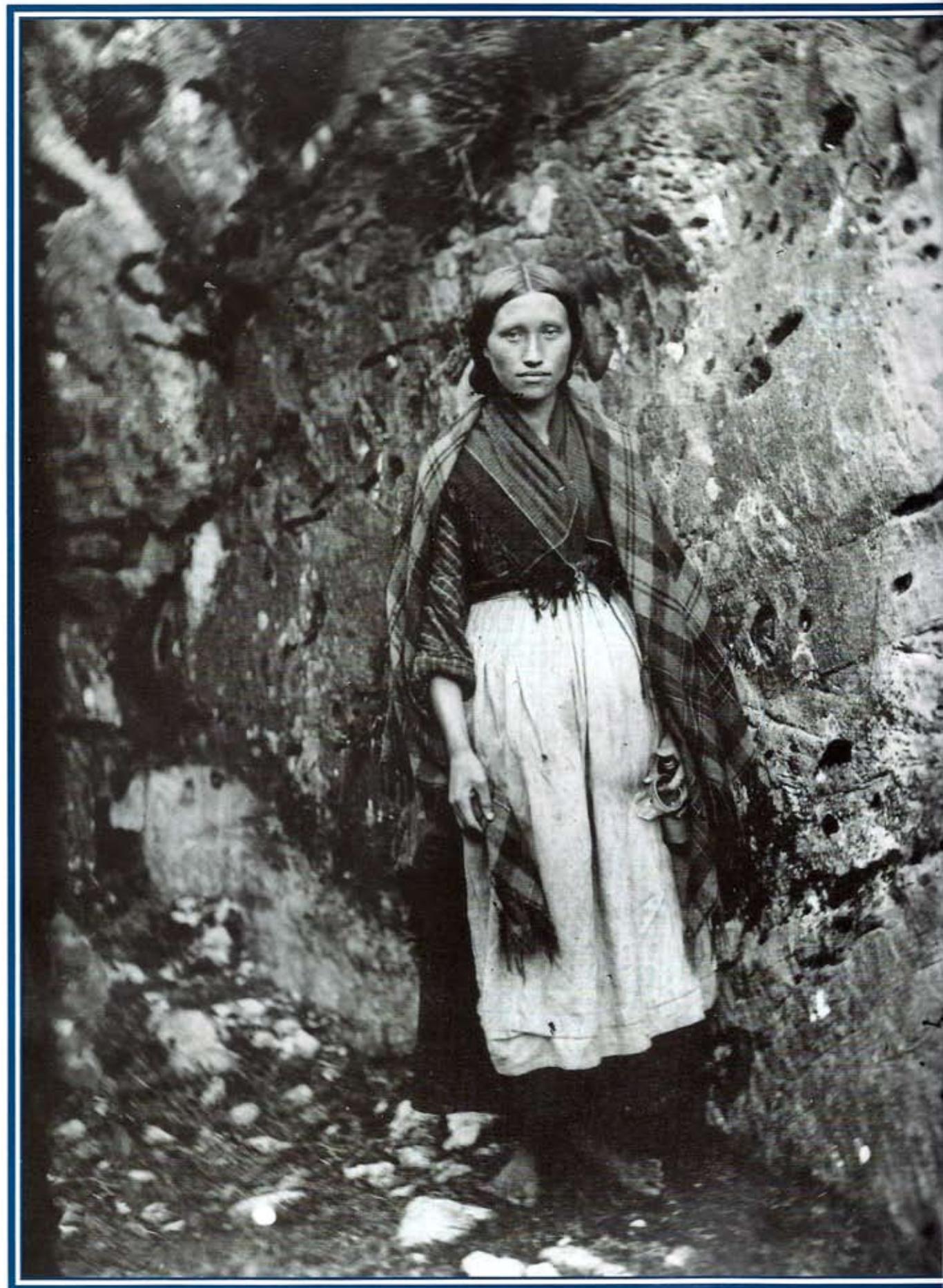
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## THE BRITISH ARE COMING!

**A 1964 Rock  
Invader tells  
how they  
changed our  
culture**

**...plus the  
Top Ten  
songs**



A hundred and fifty years ago famine in Ireland fostered a desperate, unprecedented mass migration to America.

Neither country has been the same since.

*A woman who survived the famine by selling refreshments to tourists at the Gap of Dunloe, in Killarney, pauses near her home in the early 1860s.*

# *The* **TRAGEDY OF BRIDGET SUCH-A-ONE**

WALKING THROUGH THE WOODS OUTSIDE Concord, Massachusetts, in the spring of 1846, amid his solitary experiment in living close to nature, Henry David Thoreau was driven by a sudden storm to find shelter in what he thought was an uninhabited hut. "But therein," Thoreau recounts in *Walden*, he found living "John Field, an Irishman, and his wife, and several children," and he sat with them "under that part of the roof which leaked the least, while it showered and thundered without."

Thoreau pitied this "honest, hard-working, but shiftless man," a laborer probably drawn to the area to lay track for the railroad and now reduced to clearing bogs for a local farmer. He also "purposely talked to him as if he were a philosopher, or desired to be one." "But alas," Thoreau lamented, "the culture of an Irishman is an enterprise to be undertaken with a sort of moral bog hoe."

Field "heaved a sigh" at Thoreau's suggestion that "if he and his family would live simply, they might go a-huckle-

BY PETER QUINN

berrying in the summer for their amusement." Field's wife neither sighed nor spoke. A woman of "round greasy face," her breast exposed to suckle an infant, she "stared with arms a-kimbo" at the Yankee in their midst. The Fields left no account of this visit. Yet along with weighing the bewildering improbability of Thoreau's suggestion, it is probable that there were other matters on their minds.

**B**Y THE SPRING OF 1846 THE condition of Ireland was well known. The country was on the edge. Hunger was widespread, and though the Fields may well have been illiterate, they must have shared with fellow immigrants a growing fear of what might happen if the potato failed again, as it had in 1845. Perhaps they had already received pleas from relatives still in Ireland who had sold their livestock or fishing nets to buy the American corn the government had imported. "For the honour of our lord Jasus christ and his Blessed mother," one contemporary letter writer to America cried, "hurry and take us out of this."

**O**F THE eight and a half million people in Ireland in 1845, a million perished from hunger and the disease that stalked in its wake.

*A generation after the famine  
a family still lives hungry,  
shoeless, and in rags in a bare,  
dirt-floored, unfurnished  
cabin in Galway.*

The Fields themselves were part of a steady stream of Irish who had been heading to North America for more than a century. The so-called Scotch-Irish—mostly Presbyterians from Ulster—were the first to come. They settled in large numbers in Canada and the American South, especially on the westward-moving edge of settlement, away from the low country with its established churches and plantation economy. By 1790 there were at least 250,000 Scotch-Irish in the United States.

After 1815 and the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars, a steep fall in prices caused an agricultural depression in Ireland. At the same time, the start of widespread canal building in the United States (the Erie Canal was begun in 1817) and the laying of the groundwork for the country's industrial emergence drew more Irish Catholics, men whose sole marketable skill was their ability to wield a spade and whose religion, poverty, and numbers made them immediately suspect. The rough, brute work of canal building presaged the role that unskilled Irish labor would



play in railroad construction, road building, and mining. Subject to cyclical employment and low wages, often living in shanties, the Irish were prized for their hard work and resented for what was seen as their proclivity to rowdiness and labor militancy.

The numbers of unskilled Irish in the cities along the Eastern seaboard grew. They lived where they worked, near the docks, foundries, and warehouses, in decaying housing that the former residents had fled or in flimsy, crowded structures erected to bring a maximum profit to their owners. By the early 1840s the increasing presence of the Catholic Irish helped prompt such prominent Americans as Samuel F. B. Morse, the inventor of the telegraph, and Lyman Beecher, progenitor of Harriet Beecher Stowe, to sound the tocsin against a supposed Catholic plot to subvert the liberties of native (i.e., white Protestant) Americans. A Boston mob attacked and burned a Catholic convent in Charlestown in 1834. In the spring of 1844 a nativist rally in Philadelphia ended in a three-day riot in which two Catholic churches, a convent, and a library were torched and a dozen people were left dead.

All this was prelude to the transformation that the Irish Famine brought. The famine represented the greatest concentration of civilian suffering and death in Western Europe between the Thirty Years' War and World War II. It rearranged the physical and mental landscape of Ireland, sweeping away a language and a way of life, and within a generation made a people steeped in rural traditions into the most urbanized ethnic group in North America.

**O**F THE EIGHT AND A HALF million people in Ireland in 1845, a million perished from hunger and the fever and disease that stalked, jackal-like, in its wake. Between 1845 and 1855, in an unprecedented movement of people that was often less an organized migration than a panic, a mass unraveling, more than two million people left, for England and Australia and



*Some years later, in a still-destitute Ireland, tenants are evicted from their cottage, their meager possessions thrown out into the yard.*

the great majority for North America.

It was part of the continuum of the transatlantic movement of people, but the famine migration was also different and extraordinary. Particularly in the densely populated townlands of the south and west of Ireland, where the bonds of culture and community went deep, the famine broke the traditional ties of Irish society. More people left Ireland in the decade of the famine than had in the previous 250 years. The exodus from Cork, Tipperary, Kerry, Galway, Clare, Mayo, and Donegal became a self-perpetuating process of removal. It swept aside all the old reluctance of the people to let go of their one hope for survival—the land—and made emigration an expectation rather than an exception.

Just as the mass flight of the famine years dissolved the underpinnings of the Irish countryside, its impact on America was profound. From independence to 1845 the Republic had absorbed about 1.6 million immigrants,

the great majority Protestants looking to settle on the land. The annual number of Irish arriving in the United States tripled between 1843 and 1846, from 23,000 to 70,000. By 1851 it had reached a peak of 219,000, almost ten times what it had been less than a decade before.

Between 1845 and 1855 Irish Catholic immigration approached that of all groups over the previous seventy years, and the condition of these Irish sometimes bore more resemblance to modern-day "boat people" than to the immigrants arriving from Germany and Scandinavia. In an 1855 address to the Massachusetts legislature, Gov. Henry J. Gardner went back to classical history to find a comparable event. The scale of Irish immigration and the inmates it had deposited in the commonwealth's prisons and asylums called to mind, the governor said, the "horde of foreign barbarians" that had overthrown the Roman Empire.

The cause of this influx was the blight that attacked the potatoes of Ireland in the late summer of 1845. It is estimated that the potato crop represented about 60 percent of Ireland's annual food supply. Almost three and a half million people relied on it for the

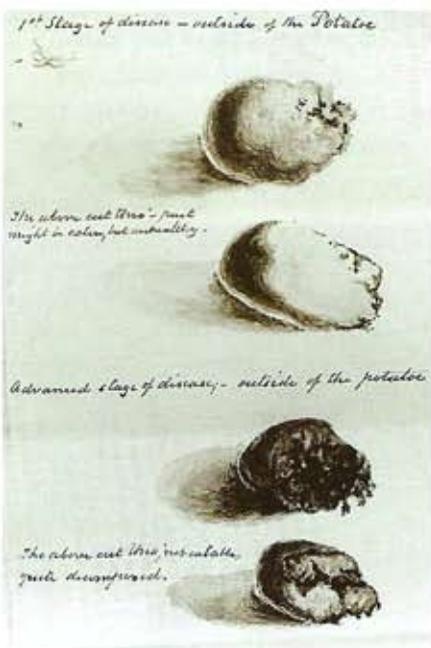
est part of their diet. The dreadful implications of a sudden and universal threat to the potato, which were instantaneously clear to Irish laborers and government officials alike, threw into dramatic relief the precarious condition of large parts of the population even in the best of times.

**A** DECADE EARLIER, IN 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville had made a tour of Ireland. "You cannot imagine," he wrote his father soon after landing, "what a complexity of miseries five centuries of oppression, civil disorder, and religious hostility have piled on this poor people." The poverty he subsequently witnessed was, he recorded, "such as I did not imagine existed in this world. It is a frightening thing, I assure you, to see a whole population reduced to fasting like Trappists, and not being sure of surviving to the next harvest, which is still not expected for another ten days." The same year as Tocqueville's visit, a German traveler in Kilkenny, in the relatively prosperous eastern part of the country, watched as a mother collected the skins of gooseberries that had been spit on the ground and fed them to her child.

Among the more unusual witnesses to the extent of Irish poverty was Asenath Nicholson, a widowed American temperance crusader and Protestant evangelist, who arrived from New York on the eve of the famine to distribute Bibles among the Catholic poor and stayed to become a one-woman relief expedition. Mrs. Nicholson told of giving a "sweet biscuit" to an obviously famished child, who held it in her hand and stared at it. "How is it," Mrs. Nicholson asked the child's mother, "she cannot be hungry?" The mother replied that the child had never seen such a delicacy before and "cannot think of parting with it." Mrs. Nicholson marveled that "such self-denial in a child was quite beyond my comprehension, but so inured are these people to want, that their endurance and self-control are almost beyond belief."

The anecdotes of visitors were confirmed by a commission of inquiry

**B**Y 1847  
three million  
Irish were being  
fed in soup  
kitchens that  
were the  
apogee — and  
end — of the  
relief effort.



An 1845 sketch shows the progress of the fungus as it turns a healthy potato into putrid rot.

formed to study the extent of Irish poverty. Reporting in 1835, the commission noted that two-fifths of the population lived in "fourth-class accommodations"—one-room windowless mud cabins—and at least two and a half million people annually required some

assistance in order to avoid starvation.

Although central to Irish life, the potato was a relatively recent ecological interloper. It is said to have been introduced in Cork in the 1580s by Sir Walter Raleigh, a principal in the plantation of both Ireland and the New World. Until the potato arrived, cattle and oats were the Irish mainstays. The land itself was divided among an amalgam of Gaelic and Norman-Gaelic lords, who were often feuding with one another. In the east a wedge of English-controlled territory—the Pale—had variously expanded and contracted since its conquest by the Normans.

The Atlantic explorations, the contest for overseas empire, and the bitter ideological divisions that accompanied the Reformation conferred on Ireland a new strategic importance. Beginning in the 1540s and extending through a long series of bloody wars and rebellions that ended in the defeat of the Catholic forces in 1691, Ireland was brought under the control of the English crown. Political power and ownership of the land were relentlessly concentrated in the hands of a Protestant ascendancy. The widespread dislocation caused by the long struggle for mastery of Ireland opened the way for the spread of the hardy, reliable, nutritionally rich potato, which not only thrived in the cool, damp climate but yielded, per acre, three times the calories of grain.

Between 1700 and 1845, thanks in large part to the potato, a populace of less than three million grew to almost eight and a half million, to the point where Disraeli pronounced Ireland the most thickly peopled country in Europe. However, the population distribution was uneven. In pre-famine Ireland the general rule was: The worse the land, the more people on it. The greatest growth was in reclaimed bogs and on mountainsides. The number of small tenant farmers and laborers soared, particularly in the west, where the scramble for land drove an intense process of reclamation and subdivision.

The unit of Irish settlement was the *clachan* or *baile*, a cluster of cab-

ins unlike the neatly laid-out village of school, shop, and church found throughout most of the British Isles. The *clachan* was a collection of families, often tied by friendship or blood, organized around a communal system of agriculture designed to ensure a fair distribution of the best land for tillage. The usually Irish-speaking culture of the *clachan* was carried on in the lives of the people, in storytelling, music, and dance, and in wakes, religious devotions, and fairs.

Like the potato, the fungus that destroyed it came from the Americas. In 1843 potato crops in the eastern United States were largely ruined by a mysterious blight. In June of 1845 the blight was reported in the Low Countries. In mid-September an English journal announced "with very great regret" that the blight had "unequivocally declared itself" in Ireland, then posed the question that anyone even passingly acquainted with the country knew must be faced: "Where will Ireland be, in the event of a universal potato rot?" The speed of the blight bewildered observers. Over and over they expressed amazement at how fields lush with potato plants could the next day be putrid wastelands. It was a generation before the agent of destruction was fingered as a spore-spreading fungus, *Phytophthora infestans*, and a generation after that before an antidote was devised.

WITHOUT PROSPECT OF a cure, Sir Robert Peel, the Tory prime minister, faced a crisis in Ireland. The appearance of the blight in late summer meant two-thirds of the potatoes had already been harvested, yet the near-total reliance of a sizable part of the population on a single crop left no doubt that extraordinary measures would have to be taken. Peel was an able administrator, knowledgeable about Ireland and its dis-

contents. Responding quickly to the impending food crisis, he ordered the secret purchase of a hundred thousand pounds' worth of American corn to be held in reserve and released into the market when demand threatened to drive food prices out of control. This same supply was to be available for purchase, at cost, by local relief committees. Landlord-directed committees were set up to cooperate with the Board of Works in funding work schemes. The aim was to provide tenants and laborers with the chance to earn the money they needed to buy imported food and avoid direct government handouts that would encourage what was seen as the congenital laziness of the Irish.

In December 1845, in order to lower

grain prices, Peel proposed repeal of the Corn Laws, import duties that protected British agriculture from foreign competition. He was convinced that increased competition would result in lowering the price of food for the British working classes, which it did. Cheap imports would not only lessen the immediate threat of mass hunger but help wean the poor from reliance on the potato and transform small tenants into landless, wage-earning laborers. As a result of Peel's relief measures, Ireland averted the worst consequences of the blight through the winter of 1845-46. The weather was unusually cold. The poorhouses began to fill up. The poor exhausted whatever reserves they may have had. But starvation was held at bay.

The repeal of the Corn Laws in June 1846 quickly precipitated the fall of Peel's government. Lord Russell, the new Whig prime minister, faced a more daunting challenge than had Peel. The return of the blight for a second year, and the devastation of three-quarters of the potato crop, drove thousands more on to the public works. In August 1846 the works were temporarily halted and overhauled along lines set down by Charles Trevelyan, the head permanent civil servant in the Treasury. The rules of employment were made stricter, and more of the cost was put on local landlords. By October the public works employed 114,000; three months later, in January 1847, more than 500,000; by March, 750,000. Reports of extreme suffering and death began to pour in from different parts of the country. In Skibbereen, County Cork, an artist sent by the *Illustrated London News* testified that neither pictures nor words could capture the horror of "the dying, the living, and the dead, lying indiscriminately upon the same floor, without anything between them

**SUGGESTIONS**  
 TO  
 THE  
 POTATERS  
 IN COOKING their  
**POTATOES.**

Commence with YOUR DISEASED POTATOES, by washing them well, then peel or scrape off the skins, carefully cutting out such parts as are discoloured; cut the large Potatoes to the size of the smaller ones, and steep them for a short time in salt and water.

Provide a few cabbage leaves (the white kind is the most suitable;) steep them in cold water, then line the bottom and sides of a common metal or oven pot, with the wet leaves; pack in it, the peeled Potatoes in layers, shaking salt and pepper over each layer until the vessel is nearly full; spread more wet cabbage leaves over them, cover all close down with a lid, and set them on a hot-hearth, or a moderate fire, as too hot a fire might be attended with risk.

The object of the above-mentioned method is, that the Potatoes should be cooked through the medium of their own moisture, instead of the usual mode of steaming or boiling them in water.

The following additions may be made by those who can afford to improve upon the above, by introducing sliced Onions, salt Herring, salt Butter, salt Pork, Lard or Bacon cut in slices, or small pieces, or Rice, previously boiled.

It would be found more economical, instead of peeling, to scrape off the skins of such Potatoes as are only slightly discoloured, or altogether free from taint.

Those who have a Cow or Pigs to feed should collect the peelings and rejected portions of the Potatoes, steep them for some time in salt and water, then pack them in a metal pot, in layers, with cabbage leaves, sprinkling salt over each layer, and cook them as above directed; if found necessary, a little Bran or Oatmeal may be added.

Berryluskán, 1st December, 1845.

E. WOODS, PRINTER, CLONMEL.

*The enormity of the disaster was still hard to grasp when an 1845 broadside offered hopeless advice.*

and the cold earth, save a few miserable rags upon them."

The American temperance worker Asenath Nicholson got her first view of the worsening condition of Ireland in the outskirts of Dublin. In December 1846 a servant in a house where she was staying implored her to see a man nearby, the father of seven, who, though sick with fever and "in an actual state of starvation," had "staggered with his spade" to the public works. The servant brought in a human skeleton "emaciated to the last degree." Horrified as she was, Mrs. Nicholson would remember this as only "the first and the beginning of . . . dreadful days yet in reserve."

Daunted by the expense of the public works, the government decided to switch to soup kitchens, a form of relief introduced by the Quakers. The public works began to close in March. By midsummer of 1847 three million men, women, and children were being fed with soup. An indication of the government's capacity to restrain the ravages of hunger, the soup kitchens were the apogee of the relief effort—and its effective end.

**W**RITING IN *BLACKWOOD'S Magazine* in April 1847, a commentator complained of the expense being incurred to help the Irish. The famine was not an English problem, he wrote, and there was no need for wasting another shilling on a disaster "which the heedlessness and indolence of the Irish had brought upon themselves." A month earlier the *Times* of London had expressed a similar sense of the widespread frustration with the Irish, again connecting Ireland's agony to the innate defects of its people: "The Celt is less energetic, less independent, less industrious than the Saxon. This is the archaic condition of his race . . . [England] can, therefore, afford to look with contemptuous pity on the Celtic cottier sucked in poverty which he is too callous to feel, and too supine to mend."

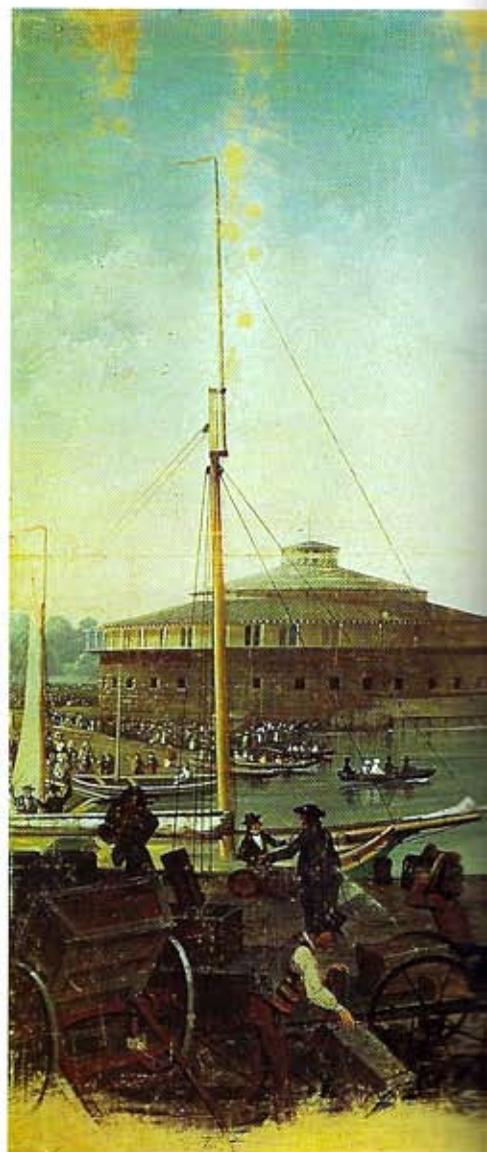
Since the abolition of the Dublin parliament in 1801, Ireland had theo-

**E** MIGRATION became a torrent, on vessels that quickly developed a well-earned reputation as "coffin ships."

retically been an integral part of the United Kingdom, its people entitled to the same protections and considerations as those of English shires. But as the famine made inexorably clear, Ireland remained a colony, one usually viewed as a turbulent, perplexing, intractable anomaly.

During the period immediately preceding the famine, Daniel O'Connell, who had led the agitation in the 1820s that won Catholics the right to sit in Parliament, had headed a movement to repeal the union with Britain and return a measure of self-rule to Dublin. The union was maintained, but now, in the face of Ireland's continuing distress, a tired, broken O'Connell told the House of Commons: "Ireland is in your hands. If you do not save her, she cannot save herself." His plea went unheeded. As framed by Sir Charles Wood, the chancellor of the exchequer, the challenge was no longer to help feed the Irish but "to force them into self-government . . . our song . . . must be—'It is your concern, not ours.'"

The potato didn't fail in the summer of 1847, yet the distress of the past two seasons had seriously curtailed the scale of plantings. Trevelyan, however, convinced that Ireland's



*Immigrants come ashore in Manhattan. Samuel Waugh painted the scene in 1855, but the Chinese junk in the harbor, which visited New York in 1847, suggests the newcomers must be famine Irish. Below, a newspaper advertisement tells rosy lies.*

**FOR NEW YORK.**  
TO SAIL ON THE 26<sup>th</sup> AUGUST.  
**THE** First Class Packet Ship "LAND MARY," 800 Tons—Commanded by  
PAYNE, Commander.  
This magnificent Ship will be comfortably fitted for the accommodation of passengers, who will be supplied with Water, Fuel, Medicines, and Provisions according to Act of Parliament.  
For Passage, Apply to  
**THOMAS H. PUNCH,**  
(1758) 13, Merchant's Quay, Cork.



problem wasn't inadequate food supplies but "the selfish, perverse and turbulent character of the people," pronounced the famine over. There would be no more extraordinary measures by the Treasury, not even when the potato failed again in 1848, 1849, and into the early 1850s. Irish needs would be met out of Irish resources.

The government's change of direction went beyond the withdrawal of desperately needed assistance. The passage in June 1847 of the Irish Poor Law Extension Act married racial contempt and providentialism—the prevalent conviction among the British elite of God's judgment having been delivered on the Irish—with political economy. According to the theorists of the

iron laws of economics, the great deficiencies of Ireland were a want of capital accumulation—the result of the maze of small tenancies—and the incurable lethargy of a people inured to indolent reliance on an inferior food. The famine provided an opportunity to sweep away the root causes of Ireland's economic backwardness.

The amendment of the Irish Poor Law made landlords responsible for the rates (taxes collected to support the workhouses) on all holdings valued under four pounds per year. Another provision—the Gregory Clause—denied relief to anyone holding more than a quarter-acre of land. This left many tenants with the choice of abandoning their holdings or condemning

their families to starvation. Together these clauses were a mandate to clear the land of the poorest and most vulnerable. Entire villages were "tumbled." In one instance a newspaper reported that some of the evicted were found dead along the roadsides, "emitting green froth from their mouths, as if masticating soft grass." On the Mullet Peninsula in Mayo, James Hack Tuke, a Quaker involved in the intensive relief effort undertaken by the Society of Friends, witnessed an entire settlement being razed: "Six or seven hundred people were evicted; young and old, mother and babe, were alike cast forth, without shelter and without means of subsistence! A fountain of ink (as one of them said) would

not write half our misfortunes.”

Asenath Nicholson traveled some of the same territory as Tuke and was horrified by the sheer scale of what she witnessed: “Village upon village, and company after company, have I seen; and one magistrate who was travelling informed me that at nightfall the preceding day, he found a company who had gathered a few sticks and fastened them into a ditch, and spread over what miserable rags they could collect . . . under these more than two hundred men, women, and children, were to crawl for the night . . . and not *one* pound of any kind of food was in the whole encampment.”

Across much of Ireland the purgatory of the first two years of famine became a living hell. The workhouses, which the people had once done their best to avoid, were besieged by mobs clamoring to get in. The dead were buried coffinless in mass graves. The Reverend Francis Webb, a Church of Ireland rector in West Cork, published an account of dead children being left unburied and asked in anger and disbelief, “Are we living in a portion of the United Kingdom?” Asiatic cholera, carried from India in the bowels of British soldiers, eventually arrived and cut down thousands of those already weakened by hunger.

**E**MIGRATION FROM IRELAND became a torrent, no longer a quest for new opportunities but a question of life or death. The ports filled with people. Most sought passage to Liverpool, the former capital of the slave trade and now the entrepôt of emigration. From there they hoped to find a cheap fare to America. Jammed in the holds of coal barges and on the decks of cattle boats, three hundred thousand Irish sailed to Liverpool in 1847 alone.

The government made a pretense of enforcing regulations that prescribed medical inspection of all passengers and minimum space and rations for each. In reality emigrants, having scrambled however they could to put together the four pounds that passage to America typically cost, were

**M**ANY

Americans saw  
the Irish  
as a threat to  
prosperity  
and liberty,  
their poverty  
a function of  
character.

at the mercy of a laissez-faire system that treated them more like ballast than like human beings. Dr. J. Cus-tis, who served as a ship’s surgeon on half a dozen emigrant vessels, published a series of articles that described their sailings: “I have been engaged during the worst years of famine in Ireland; I have witnessed the deaths of hundreds from want; I have seen the inmates of a workhouse carried by the hundreds weekly through its gates to be thrown unshrouded and coffinless into a pit with quicklime . . . and revolting to the feelings as all this was, it was not half so shocking as what I subsequently witnessed on board the very first emigrant ship I ever sailed on.”

During a journey in steerage of anywhere from three to seven weeks, disease, seasickness, spoiled rations, hostile crews, and a lack of space and air—an experience one observer compared to “entering a crowded jail”—eroded whatever differences of region or accent or status once had divided the emigrants. By the time they landed, it was easy for nativists to lump them together as a race of feckless Paddies destined to be a permanent drain on American resources.

The reaction to the arrival of growing numbers of impoverished, famished immigrants wasn’t long in coming. Congress tightened the regulations that governed passenger ships entering American ports and raised the fines on violators. Massachusetts began to enforce a law requiring that before any pauper or sick person was landed on its shores, the ship’s master had to post a bond for every passenger. New York also required a bond and leveled a per person tax to cover the cost of those who became public charges. The net effect was that in the spring of 1847 a significant portion of the first wave of famine migrants left not for the United States but for British North America.

The demand for passage resulted in a hodgepodge of vessels being pressed into service. Poorly provisioned, devoid of medicines or sanitary facilities, crowded with hungry, fever-ridden passengers, they quickly developed a well-earned reputation as “coffin ships.” In May 1847 the first of them arrived at a quarantine station, with a small hospital that had been set up on Grosse Île, in the St. Lawrence, thirty miles below Quebec. Out of a company of 240 passengers, 80 were down with typhus, and 9 already dead. By June nearly forty vessels were backed up for miles along the river, and 14,000 people awaited quarantine. The dead were buried in mass graves. By the end of the sailing season, the British government’s conservative estimate was that of the 107,000 who had left for Canada from British ports, 17,500—one out of every six—had died.

Despite the barriers raised by American ports, the overwhelming majority of famine emigrants sought passage to the United States, for few wished to remain under British dominion. Even in 1847, as many as 25,000 immigrants arrived in Boston from British ports, and at least another 5,000 managed to find their way down from Canada. New York received the greatest number. Between 1845 and 1855, a million Irish—one-eighth of the country’s population—landed on the wharves and piers around Manhattan. Many

moved on. But many stayed, helping swell the city's population from 370,000 to 630,000 in a single decade.

The voyage to the United States wasn't characterized by the same catalogue of horrors as the emigration to Canada in 1847, but it was ordeal enough. Stephen de Vere, an Anglo-Irish gentleman with an interest in emigration, sailed to New York aboard the *Washington*, a well-built ship, in 1847. He watched the passengers in steerage being physically abused and denied the rations they were supposedly due. When he protested, the first mate knocked him to the deck. Taking his complaint to the captain, de Vere was threatened with the brig. Dysentery was rampant on the ship; a dozen children died from it. On landing, de Vere collected accounts of similar abuse aboard other ships and wrote a complaint to the emigration commissioners in London. In the end nothing was done.

ONE OF THE MOST COMPELLING renderings of the emigrant trade in the famine era was by an American whose introduction to the sea was aboard a packet ship between Liverpool and New York. Herman Melville was nineteen when he made the voyage out and back in 1839. Ten years later, in 1849, he published *Redburn*, an account of his journey that is part fiction, part memoir, and part meditation on the changes that the mass descent of strangers was bringing to America. Though a novel, the book is alive with a real sense of the grandeur and misery of Liverpool and of the unromantic business of hauling five hundred emigrants across the Atlantic in a creaking, swaying, wind-driven ship.

The emigrants aboard Melville's fictional ship, the *Highlander*, were mostly Irish, and like many real emigrant ships, the *Highlander* wasn't built for passengers but was converted to that purpose. Triple tiers of bunks jerry-built along the ship's sides "looked more like dog-kennels than anything else" and soon smelled little different. "We had not been at sea one week,"

the protagonist, Wellingborough Redburn, observed, "when to hold your head down the fore hatchway was like holding it down a suddenly opened cesspool." Driven by hunger, some of the passengers stole a small pig, and "him they devoured raw, not venturing to make an incognito of his carcass." Fever struck. Emigrants began to die. Venturing down into steerage, Redburn encountered "rows of rude bunks, hundreds of meager, begrimed faces were turned upon us. . . the native air of the place . . . was



*A poster seeks recruits for one of many Irish brigades in the Civil War.*

foetid in the extreme."

Docked at last on South Street, crew and passengers dispersed. As they left, young Redburn wondered at the fate of those who had survived the gantlet of hunger and emigration but now seemed exhausted and broken: "How, then, with these emigrants, who, three thousand miles from home, suddenly found themselves, deprived of brothers and husbands, with but a few pounds, or perhaps but a few shillings, to buy food in a strange land?"

Other Americans shared such doubts, and for many the answer was that the Catholic Irish were a threat to the country's prosperity and liberty. Nativists focused on Irish poverty as a

function of Irish character, a result of their addiction to "rum and Romanism." When the Irish banded together to form religious, fraternal, and labor organizations aimed at improving their lot, this was taken as proof of their conspiratorial clannishness. Near the end of the famine decade, in 1854, the American party, which was formed to halt the incursion of foreigners and Catholics, controlled the legislatures of most New England states as well as those of Maryland, Delaware, Kentucky, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and California. For a time it was the most successful third-party movement in American history.

The poverty of the Irish, while only a part of the famine story, was not merely a figment of the nativist imagination. The cities of the Northeast faced problems of public order that wouldn't be repeated until after World War II. The newcomers didn't invent street gangs or rioting or machine politics—all pre-dated the arrival of the famine Irish—but the deluge of masses of disoriented, disorganized, unskilled alien labor raised an unprecedented sense of alarm. In 1851 it was estimated that one out of every six New Yorkers was a pauper. Of the 113,000 people residing in jails, workhouses, hospitals, or asylums or receiving public or private charity, three-quarters were foreign-born, the bulk of them Irish.

New York State formally opened its first immigrant depot in 1855 at Castle Garden, its purpose to bring order to the process of arrival. Three decades later, under federal control, the depot was moved to Ellis Island. Golden or not, the door America erected at its entryway was a legacy of the famine.

By the autumn of 1849, when Melville wrote of the travails of his company of tired and poor Irish immigrants, Asiatic cholera had arrived in New York. It spread as far west as St. Louis and took thousands of lives. At that same moment, two real-life immigrants reached American shores, and, for all their differences—one was an ex-policeman fleeing arrest, the other a young woman seeking work

—they embodied much of the pain and the promise of the famine years.

**M**ICHAEL CORCORAN WAS THE son of an Irishman who had made a career in the Royal Army. In 1845, at the age of eighteen, Corcoran joined the Revenue Police, which, along with the Irish Constabulary, was organized along military lines. He was posted to Donegal to help suppress the trade in illicit liquor. The advent of the famine heightened the role of the constabulary and the army in Ireland, already the most policed and garrisoned part of the British Isles. By 1848 their combined total was at an all-time high of forty thousand—almost twice the size of the expeditionary force that the British government would soon send to the Crimea at a cost nine times what it spent on famine relief in Ireland.

Whether Corcoran, as a member of the Revenue Police, was called to the support of the army or constabulary is unknown. Both forces were active during the famine, especially in areas like Donegal. They helped distribute relief as well as guarantee the all-important

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*Domestic service became so identified with the Irish that maids were often called "Bridgets" or "Kathleens." These young women worked in Wisconsin around 1870.*



rights of property. In the latter capacity they not only assisted in mass clearances but guarded the convoys that carried grain and beef to England throughout the famine. The image of those convoys became a touchstone of Irish bitterness in later years, alleged proof of the charge leveled by the Irish nationalist John Mitchel that "the Almighty indeed sent the potato blight, but the English created the Famine."

Over the course of the famine, more grain may have entered Ireland than left. But often the imports didn't reach the most distressed parts of the country, or were spoiled by the time they did. Unfamiliar with processing or cooking the yellow corn imported from America, people were made sick by it. The memory of soldiers and police guarding precious stores of food from the starving wasn't an invention. Mrs. Nicholson testified to the sight of well-fed, well-armed soldiers and "haggard, meagre, squalid skeletons . . . grouped in starving multitudes around them." In 1847—"Black '47," the Irish called it—two thousand people were transported to Australia for cattle stealing. On Spike Island, in Cork Harbor, three hundred adolescents were imprisoned for "taking bread while starving."

Whatever Corcoran witnessed or took part in as a policeman may have been part of what led him to break his oath to the Crown. In August 1849 he was "relinquished" from his duties on suspicion of belonging to one of the secret agrarian societies that were violently resisting evictions. Before he could be arrested, he slipped aboard an emigrant ship and escaped to New York. There was little to distinguish him from his fellow immigrants when he landed in October 1849. But he quickly made a name for himself. He got work in a tavern and became a district leader for Tammany Hall, which was just awakening to the potential of the Irish vote, and he was an early member of the Fenian Brotherhood, the secret Irish revolutionary society fueled by the burning intent to revenge the famine and overthrow British rule in Ireland.

Five years after he arrived, Corcoran

was elected a captain in a heavily Irish militia unit, the 69th New York. Not long afterward he was commended for helping defend the quarantine station on Staten Island, which a mob had attempted to burn. In 1860 the Prince of Wales (the future Edward VII) paid the first visit by a member of the royal family to the United States. The militia was ordered to parade in the prince's honor; Corcoran, now the colonel of the 69th, refused to march his men for someone they called the "Famine Prince." He was court-martialed for what in many eyes confirmed the worst suspicions of Irish disloyalty to American institutions.

The outbreak of the Civil War saved Corcoran from being cashiered. He returned to his regiment, which he commanded at Bull Run, where he was badly wounded and captured. Freed a year later in a prisoner exchange, he returned to service as head of his own "Irish Legion." He again fell under an official cloud when he shot and killed an officer who had not only assaulted him, Corcoran said, but had called him "a damned Irish son of a bitch." Before any official judgment could be reached, Corcoran died—partly as the result of his wounds—and was given a hero's funeral in New York.

As with generations of immigrants to come, Irish and otherwise, Corcoran was eager for the opportunities that America had to offer and grateful when they proved real. He readily took on American citizenship and showed no hesitation about defending the Union. Yet he was equally unwilling to turn his back on the culture and people that had formed him. Fiercely loyal to his new homeland, he had no intention of abandoning his religion, disguising his ancestry, or detaching himself from the struggles of his native land. No one who observed Michael Corcoran could doubt that a powerful new element had been added to the American mix.

**T**HE MONTH MICHAEL CORCORAN landed in New York, October 1849, Henry David Thoreau traveled to Cohasset, Massachusetts, to see the wreck of the *St.*

*John*, a Boston-bound brig that had set sail from Ireland "laden with emigrants." It was one of sixty emigrant ships lost between 1847 and 1853. Thoreau walked the beach and inspected the bodies collected there: "I saw many marble feet and matted heads as the cloths were raised, and one livid, swollen and mangled body of a drowned girl,—who probably had intended to go out to service in some American family. . . . Sometimes there were two or more children, or a par-

ent and child, in the same box, and on the lid would perhaps be written with red chalk, 'Bridget such-a-one, and sister's child.'"

Besides what Thoreau tells us of the drowned girl, we know only that she sailed from Galway, part of a legion of Bridget such-a-ones. It's possible that coming from the west, she was an Irish speaker; more than a third of the famine emigrants were. Perhaps she had relatives waiting for her. Perhaps not. Yet her corpse points to a larger

**1945:**

## The Famine's Children a Century Later

**W**illiam Donovan, Joseph Kennedy, and James Forrestal were descendants of famine immigrants. By 1945, the centenary of the famine, they had not only surmounted the working-class status typical of Irish Catholics but scaled the bastions of the WASP elite.

Donovan, a prominent New York lawyer, headed the Office of Strategic Services (O.S.S.), forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency. His grandfather had left Cork in 1847, landed at Grosse Île in Canada, settled in Buffalo, New York, and been active in the Fenians, the secret Irish revolutionary organization.

Kennedy's grandfather, Patrick, had left his small holding in Wexford in 1848 and died a poor man in Boston a decade later. Grandson Joe became a wealthy businessman and served as the first chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission. He was the highly controversial ambassador to Britain from 1938 to 1940.

When James Forrestal's grandfather died in Cork during the famine, his widow left her infant son with relatives and sailed to America to find work. She brought her boy over several years later. Forrestal, that boy's son, made a fortune on Wall Street and became Undersecretary of the Navy in 1940,

then Secretary in 1944.

Donovan, Kennedy, and Forrestal attended Ivy League schools. Forrestal and Donovan married wealthy Protestants. Forrestal distanced himself from his Irish Catholic relatives. (His sons didn't meet their father's family until his funeral.) Donovan, who as the most decorated American officer in World War I earned the nickname "Wild Bill," was a Republican. (President Hoover passed him over for Attorney General in the belief the country wasn't ready for a Catholic in that position.)

In 1949 Forrestal resigned as the first Secretary of Defense. Exhausted from his work, and haunted by his own personal demons, he killed himself soon afterward. Donovan left the O.S.S. in 1945 but remained an influential presence in the post-war intelligence community. Though Kennedy's public career went into eclipse after his stint as ambassador, he hoped his son Joe would be the first Irish Catholic President. When Joe Jr. was killed in the war, the mantle passed to his brother Jack.

At war's end Jack Kennedy returned to Boston to run for Congress. His entry into the White House in 1961 symbolized, as no other event could, the final arrival of the famine's children in America. —P.Q.

story than the perils of the Atlantic crossing or the travails of a single season of immigrants. The dissolution of Irish rural life resulted in a bleak, narrow society of late marriage and of dowries carefully passed to single heirs, encouraging the young, especially girls, to emigrate. No other group of nineteenth-century immigrants had nearly the proportion of women as the Irish reached in the aftermath of the famine: more than 50 percent.

Encouraged, even expected, to make a contribution to the welfare of the parents and siblings they had left behind, Irishwomen worked in factories and mills. Irish maids became a fixture of bourgeois American life. Domestic service became so associated with the Irish that maids were often referred to generically as "Kathleens" or "Bridgets." The work could be demeaning as well as demanding. In 1845 the antislavery crusader Abby Kelley visited fellow abolitionists in Pennsylvania. Her hosts' Irish servant girl came to her in private and catalogued the work she had to perform for a dollar a week. "When I tried to console her and told her that we were trying to bring about a better state of things," Kelley wrote, "a state in which she would be regarded as an equal, she wept like a child."

Female employment was a source of independence and adaptation to American life, but above all, it was a wellspring of the money that poured back into Ireland, rescuing families from starvation and financing a self-perpetuating chain of emigration that would stretch across generations. At the height of the famine, Mrs. Nicholson marveled that "the Irish in America, and in all other countries where they are scattered, were sending one continued train of remittances, to the utter astonishment of the Postmasters." In the famine decade more than £8.4 million was remitted for passage out of the British Isles. The British colonial secretary was delighted that the outflow of Irish was being funded at no expense to the government and surprised to discover that

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"such feelings of family affection, and such fidelity and firmness of purpose, should exist so generally among the lower classes." In Massachusetts, Edward Everett Hale was struck by the generosity of the Irish but worried that their "clannish" spirit of sharing might drag them down together. "For example," he wrote, "it is within my own observation, that in the winter of 1850 to 1851, fourteen persons, fresh from Ireland, came in on the cabin hospitality of a woman in Worcester, because she was the cousin of one of the party."

**T**HE STRAINS OF ADJUSTMENT to America were enormous. The itinerant work of railroad building, which many took part in, and high rates of disease, accidental death, and alcohol abuse put tremendous pressure on families. Irishwomen were more likely to be widowed or deserted than their American counterparts. But amid the epic transformation of potato-growing tenants into urban laborers, moving from the tightly woven fabric of Irish townlands to the freewheeling environment of American cities, what was most remarkable of all was the speed and



scope with which the Irish reorganized themselves. Within little more than a generation they translated their numbers into control of the Democratic party in the major cities and turned municipal patronage into an immediate and pragmatic method for softening the ravages of boom-and-bust capitalism. Barred from the privileged circle of high finance, equipped with few entrepreneurial skills, suspicious through experience of theories that made capital accumulation a supreme good, the Irish spearheaded the rise of organized labor.

The greatest manifestation of their effort to regroup was the Catholic Church, which was elevated from an ingredient in Irish life to its center, the bulwark of a culture that had lost its language and almost disintegrated beneath the catastrophe of the famine.



*Irish demonstrate their political clout on St. Patrick's Day, 1939. The crowd includes Gov. Francis P. Murphy of New Hampshire and former mayor Alfred Smith of New York.*

In America as well as Ireland, vocations to the priesthood and sisterhood soared. Catholic parishes became the defining institution of Irish neighborhoods. Catholic schools, hospitals, and asylums created a vast social welfare network. Catholic nuns founded protectories and orphanages that countered the placing-out system, which took hundreds of thousands of immigrant children and shipped them west to "Christian" (Protestant) homes. Eventually these institutions were influential in establishing the obligation of the state to the support of dependent children.

The Catholic Church was the strongest institutional link in the exodus from Ireland and adjustment to America. It was the enduring monument to the effects of the famine: to the sexual repression and religious devotionism that followed it; to the quest for respectability amid jarring dislocation and pervasive discrimination; and to the discipline, cohesion, and solidarity that allowed the Irish to survive, progress, and eventually reach undreamed-of levels of success. Only after a century and a half, when the Irish had erased almost every trace of their once seemingly ineradicable status as outsiders, would the power of the church begin to wane.

For Irish Catholics in America, the famine was the forge of their identity, fire and anvil, the scattering time of flight and dissolution, and the moment

of regathering that would one day make them an influential part of the world's most powerful democracy. The famine was rarely recalled in its specifics. There was no record made of its horrors or complexities. The blistering humiliations it inflicted and the divisions it exacerbated—the way it fell hardest on the landless Irish-speaking poor—were subsumed in a bitter and near-universal detestation of British rule in Ireland. Yet, unspoken, unexamined, largely lost to conscious memory, the famine was threaded into Irish America's attitudes, expectations, and institutions. The Irish-American film director John Ford said that he was drawn to making the movie version of *The Grapes of Wrath* because in the Depression-era saga of Okies evicted from the land and left to wander and starve he recognized the story of his own ancestors.

**F**OR AMERICA AS WELL THE Famine was a time of testing. As Herman Melville saw it, the immigrants arriving unchecked on the docks of New York were a sign that America would be "not a nation, so much as a world." The greatness and genius of America wasn't in reproducing the ethnic sameness of Britain or France, he wrote. The world had no need of more pure-blooded tribes or xenophobic nationalities. Bereft of wealth or education or Anglo-Saxon pedigree, what Bridget such-a-one and all the other nameless, tired, hope-filled immigrants carried with them was the opportunity for America to affirm its destiny: "We are the heirs of all time, and with all nations we divide our inheritance. On this Western Hemisphere all tribes and people are forming into federated whole; and there is a future which shall see the estranged children of Adam restored as to the old hearth-stone in Eden." ★

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