FAMINE
IN CORK CITY

EXHIBITION

MAY 2018
Cork in the 1800s

Living Conditions in Cork

In the early part of the nineteenth century living conditions for the majority of inhabitants of the city were quite poor. Sanitation was, at a low standard, there was no sewerage system or supply of clean water, and all types of waste were either thrown onto the streets or into the River Lee. Large quantities of waste lingered in many of the lanes in the city where people lived. As a result of these unsanitary conditions, infectious disease was common. Dysentery and typhus spread through the population. A House of Recovery was established in the early 1800s on the Old Youghal Road to treat the city’s fever patients.

In the century before the great famine, the population of Ireland had never been so large. By the time of the 1841 census, 80,720 people lived in Cork City. A high percentage of these were poor, and lived almost exclusively on potatoes. Although the population of the country decreased by approximately 25% as a direct result of the famine, the population of the city rose. Many people had left their rural homes and flocked to the cities from 1846 onwards in search of food and work. As a result, the population of Cork would actually increase to stand at over 85,000 by the time of the 1851 census.

Disease

In late 1844, a typhus outbreak began to spread through the city. There was a shortage of food and employment. Approximately 1,000 cases were admitted to four hospitals during 1847.

At the time of the cholera epidemic in 1832 it was estimated that Cork City hosted over 6,000 places for the sick, mainly hospitals, almshouses and inns. At the first outbreak of cholera, it was believed that the disease would last three weeks. However, it continued for over a year, with many deaths attributed to other diseases.

Diet

By the end of 1844, the potato had become part of the standard diet of all levels of Irish society. Poor people were particularly dependent on potatoes, which had been their staple food, replacing eggs and oatmeal. The diet within the workhouse, in the first year, could at times be superior to that of the working poor, with meat being a staple, as well as bread, oatmeal porridge, and potatoes.

Appearance of Potato Blight

Potato blight is caused by a fungus, Phytophthora infestans, which manifests as brown, dry and sunken patches on the potato tuber. Originating in North America, blight was initially reported on the west coast of the country in 1843. By September of that year the disease was widespread in potato crops in and around Cork City. The potato crop would also fail in 1846. The following year very few seeds were planted and in 1848 blight struck once again, prolonging the crisis.
By December 1846, the number of inmates in the Cork Union Workhouse exceeded 4,000. In the last three months of the year, there were on average over 40 deaths a week. The Workhouse Guardians acquired a burial ground at Lackland between Douglas and Carrigaline, from a workhouse official named George Corr. Providing food for the inmates, even within the workhouse, proved difficult. Meals consisted largely of potatoes and bread. Many restrictive measures came into play in an attempt to control the Workhouse and food in the last months of 1846. Although initially fed with attention, the Poor Law Commissioners disapproved of the feeding of non-residents and the workhouse went hungry.

By the middle of January 1847, over 5,000 inmates were housed in the building. Overcrowding led to poor hygiene and the spread of disease. Fever infected many inmates, and during one week in March over 300 people died. The workhouse doctor, Dr. O’Connor, remarked that death came as a relief to many.

Dr. Callahan, another workhouse doctor, said at the time: "from the commencement of 1847, however, fate opened her hand in a more earnest manner, and the full tide of death flowed over every crevice around us. During the five months of that dark period one-third of the daily population of our establishment and inmates consisted of barren and dead bodies, the remains of disease and famine, crowding from the rural districts, and staking their claim to the general asylum - no prayer, which appeared to avail them at the distance of a few steps, or a few short hours."

(Dublin Quarterly Journal of Medical Science, II (1849), p. 270.)
Emigration

It is estimated that between 1845 and 1855 some two million people emigrated from Ireland, more than the port of Cork. Several thousand potential emigrants arrived in the city each week from the戴上 of 1846.

The Cork Examiner reported: "The queues are crested every day with the procession from all quarters of the country, all avenues converging on America, with almost every part of the port and town jammed to its doors, as the agents have ceased producing enough of ships to convey the people from the large depots of London, Cork, and Liverpool. The vessels - the Empress of India, the St. Patrick, and the St. John - are coming in fast the line of the point where the ships go to the World's Fair, and the ship for New York, with its intended passengers, is to sail today. There are nearly 2,000 passengers booked in these vessels (15 April 1847)."

It was common for potential emigrants to be exploited during the time they spent in the city. It is estimated that 50,000 people were exploited directly from Cork between 1845 and 1855, while 23,000 emigrated via Liverpool each year during that period.

Mass emigration had started in the years before the famine but reached a peak during its worst years. It would continue for several decades.

Unemployment, Vagrancy and Disease

Very large numbers of poorer people came from the countryside during and after the famine years, seeking employment and food. Others had been ejected from their rural homes and drifted to Cork for a lack of anywhere else to go. Many of these people could not find relief in the city, and by early 1849 it was common to see hundreds of hungry people parading the streets. On 13 February 1847, Officers lived in over-crowded and unsanitary conditions. By early 1849 cholera was again common in the city and was responsible for high rates of mortality.

Social problems associated with begging and crime would persist well into the 1850s, and in November 1853 cholera returned to Cork. The Cork Union Workhouse still housed many inmates in the years directly after the famine. Typhus continued to cause many deaths, up to the 1870s, and living conditions and general hygiene remained poor. It would not be until the 1880s that Cork Corporation began to make serious inroads into improving dwellings and sanitation.

The 2018 National Famine Commemoration will take place on Saturday 12 May in University College Cork. The event will be hosted by University College Cork in collaboration with Cork City Council. The focal point of the 2018 commemoration will be the launch of The Great Irish Famine Online.
Modern Food Crises

The Great Irish Famine and Other Famines

The Irish Famine of 1845–52 was truly a ‘great’ food crisis, caused by global standards historically and in modern times. It was directly responsible for the deaths of about one million people (roughly 12% of the population) and another 600,000 emigrated, a significant portion of the country. A significant number of deaths had been avoided but for the poor laws policies of the Whig Government in Westminster.

Unlike the Irish famine of the nineteenth century, today’s famines generally coincide with periods of war, conflict, or natural disaster. The potato famine was caused in large part by potato blight but exacerbated by failed Government policies. These also had an impact on the duration of the crisis.

Food Security

In many cases, famine is the availability of food is not an issue, but access to food is severely restricted. During the Great Irish famine, significant quantities of food were exported from the country and any available food was too expensive for most people to buy.

The World Food Summit in 1996 provided the following definition:

“Food security is achieved when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”

Food Poverty

Food poverty is a distinct concept to famine; it can occur in highly-developed countries where there is no physical shortage of food, but where individuals cannot access the correct food and quantity to sufficiently nourish them. This can occur where people or low incomes cannot financially afford nutritious food. It may also occur where individuals do not have access to food at affordable prices, or where they do not have the cooking skills, to prepare foods which are nutritious, relying instead on cheap or takeaway food that does not provide them with the nutrients they need to thrive.