

Mass Eviction During Famine



Unit III - Mass Eviction During Famine

ADDITIONAL, UNIT GOALS

PERFORMANCE OBJECTIVES

1. The student will determine what role mass eviction played in exacerbating the condition of the poor during the Great Famine.

TEACHING/LEARNING STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES

A. Students will learn the extent of the mass evictions, their causes and detrimental effects.

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Activity 1. Students will read "Mass Eviction During Famine", a compilation of excerpts from Famine histories, and a Document from The Irish Famine by Peter Gray. Students will answer questions following the readings and discuss issues raised.

INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIAL/RESOURCES

Gray, Peter, The Irish Famine, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, 1995. "Mass Evictions During Famine" (see footnotes for sources)

Irish Famine

Unit III

Activity 1

MASS EVICTIONS DURING FAMINE

Mass evictions or "clearances" will forever be associated with the Irish Famine. "It has been estimated that, excluding peaceable surrenders, over a quarter of a million people were evicted between 1849 and 1854. The total number of people who had to leave their holdings in the period is likely to be around half a million and 200,000 small holdings were obliterated" (1)

Under a law imposed in 1847, called the "Gregory Clause", no tenant holding more than a quarter acre of land was eligible for public assistance. To become eligible, the tenant had to surrender his holding to his landlord. Some tenants sent their children to the workhouse as orphans so they could keep their land and still have their children fed.

Other tenants surrendered their land, but tried to remain living in the house; however, landlords would not tolerate it. "In many thousands of cases estate-clearing landlords and agents used physical force or heavy-handed pressure to bring about the destruction of cabins which they sought." (2)

Many others who sought entrance to the workhouses were required to return to their homes and uproot or level them. Others had their houses burned while they were away in the workhouse.

"When tenants were formally evicted, it was usually the practice of the landlord's bailiffs - his specially hired 'crowbar brigade' - to level or burn the affected dwellings there and then, as soon as the tenants effects had been removed, in the presence of a large party of soldiers or police who were likely to quell any thought of serious resistance." (3)

THE EVICTED

"These helpless creatures are not only unhoused, but often driven off the land, no one remaining on the lands being allowed to lodge or

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harbor them. Or they, perhaps, linger about the spot, and frame some temporary shelter out of materials of their old homes against a broken wall, or behind a ditch or fence, or in a bog-hole, places unfit for human habitations disease, together with the privations of other kinds which they endure, before long carry them off.

As soon as one horde of houseless and all but naked paupers are dead, or provided for in the workhouse, another wholesale eviction doubles the number, who in their turn pass through the same ordeal of wandering from house to house, or burrowing in bogs or behind ditches, till broken down by privation and exposure to the elements, they seek the workhouse, or die by the roadside." (4)

"There were hoards of poor on the roads every day. The Catholics who could gave some little they had to these, a saucer of oatmeal, a handful of potatoes, a drink of milk or a little bottle of sweet-milk to carry away with them. It was not unusual to see a woman with two, three or four children half-naked, come in begging for alms, and often several of these groups in one day, men too. If the men got work they worked for little or nothing and when they were no longer needed they took to the road again. These wandering groups had no homes and no shelter for the night. They slept in the barns of those that had barns on an armful of straw with a sack or sack or some such thing to cover them." (5)

BRITISH GOVERNMENT & EVICTIONS

When there was widespread criticism in the newspaper over the evictions, Lord Broughman made a speech on March 23rd, 1846 in the House of Lords. He said:

"Undoubtedly it is the landlord's right to do as he pleases, and if he abstained he conferred a favor and was doing an act of kindness. If, on the other hand, he choose to stand on his right, the tenants must be taught by the strong arm of the law that they had no power to oppose or resist...property would be valueless and capital would no longer be invested in cultivation of the land if it were not acknowledged that it was the landlord's undoubted and most sacred right to deal with his property as he wished." (6)

Even when tenants were evicted in the dead of winter and died of exposure, the British Home Secretary, Sir George Grey, "rejected the notion that house-destroying landlords were open to any criminal proceedings on the part of the government." (7)

British Parliament passed a law reducing the notice given to people before they were evicted to 48 hours. The law also made it a misdemeanor to demolish a dwelling while the tenants were inside. As a grand gesture of goodwill, the law prohibited evictions on Christmas day and Good Friday.

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LANDLORDS

Irish Poor Law made landlords responsible for relief of the poor on the smallest properties - those valued at 4 Pounds or less. This gave landlords a strong incentive to rid themselves of tenants who were in that category and unable to pay rent. They did this by evicting the tenants or by paying for the tenants to emigrate on the "coffin ships"

On January 23rd, 1846, Mr. Todhunter, a member of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends wrote: "It is evident that some landlords, forgetful of the claims of humanity and regardless of the Public Welfare, are availing themselves of the present calamity to effect a wholesale clearance of their estates." (8)

One landlord, the Earl of Lucan, evicted 187 families (913 people) in 18 months. A follow-up report by a Galway newspaper found that of the 913 evicted, 478 were receiving public relief, 170 had emigrated, and 265 were dead or left to shift from place to place. It is not known how many of the 170 who emigrated died at disembarkation centers or aboard "coffin ships".

The Limerick and Clare Examiner protested that even "the good landlords are going to the bad, and the bad are going to the worst extremities of cruelty and tyranny, while both are suffered by a truckling (submissive) and heartless government to make a wilderness of the country and a waste of human life." (9)

"I must say the landlords were not all alike. My grandfather, God rest his soul, went to pay part of his rent to his landlord, a Bantry man. 'Feed your family first, then give me what you can afford when times get better,' he told him." (10)

"The fact that our people escaped so well was owed to the landlord of the time, Mr. Cronin Coltsman. He earned the everlasting gratitude of the people. When he saw the awful plight of his tenants, he caused a mill to be built half a mile below our village When the mill was ready the landlord bought Indian meal in Cork City and got his tenants to go with their horses and bring the meal free of charge to the mill where, when it was ground, everyone who needed it got a measure or scoop of meal for each one of their family. (11)

"The landlords were not always to be blamed when evictions took place. Middle-men and well-to-do farmers were very often responsible. 'Grabbing' was quite common in the district. Farmers who had more money to spare were only too ready to approach the landlord or his agent and offer to pay back rent on a neighboring farm on the condition that they would be given possession. Sometimes landlords were asked to dispossess tenants from holdings, the rents of which were fully paid up." (12)

"A MODEST PROPOSAL"

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In 1729, Jonathan Swift, the Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, wrote a macabre satire, "A Modest Proposal" in which he tried to draw attention to the horrific conditions of the Irish poor. The pamphlet put forward a scheme for solving Ireland's economic problems by fattening up the children of the poor and selling them as meat:

"A young healthy child, well nursed, is at a year old, a most delicious, nourishing and wholesome food; whether stewed, roasted, baked or boiled; and I make no doubt, that it will equally serve in fricassee or ragout... I grant that this food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for landlords; who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have best title to the children."

CONCLUSIONS

University of Wisconsin History Professor James S. Donnelly, the author of Landlord and Tenant in 19th-Century Ireland, wrote: "I would draw the following broad conclusion: at a fairly early stage of the Great Famine the government's abject failure to stop or even slow down the clearances (evictions) contributed in a major way to enshrining the idea of English state-sponsored genocide in Irish popular mind.

Or perhaps one should say in the Irish mind, for this was a notion that appealed to many educated and discriminating men and women, and not only to the revolutionary minority..." (13)

Dennis Clark, author of Erin's Heirs and The Irish in Philadelphia, wrote that the British government's insistence on "the absolute rights of landlords" to evict farmers and their families so they could raise cattle and sheep, was "a process as close to 'ethnic cleansing' as any Balkan war ever enacted." (14)

FOOTNOTES

1. Poirteir, Cathal, Famine Echoes, Gill and MacMillan Ltd., Dublin, Ireland. 1995 p.229
2. Donnelly, James S., Jr., "Mass Eviction and the Irish Famine: The Clearances Revisited", from The Great Irish Famine, edited by Cathal Poirteir. Mercier Press, Dublin, Ireland. 1995. p. 162
3. Ibid,
4. Litton, Helen, The Irish Famine; An Illustrated History Wolfhound Press Ltd., Dublin, Ireland, 1994. p.98
5. Poirteir, p. 235
6. Campbell, Patrick, Death in Templecrone, P.H. Campbell, Jersey City, NJ, 1995. Princeton Academic Press. p.55
7. Donnelly, p.162
8. Woodham-Smith, Cecil, The Great Hunger; Ireland 1845-1849 Penguin Books, London, England, 1991. First printing: 1962. p. 183

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9. Donnelly, p.165
10. Poirteir, p. 207
11. Ibid
12. Ibid, p.219
13. Donnelly, p. 170-71
14. Clark, Dennis, "The Great Irish Famine: Worse than Genocide?" published by the Irish Edition (Philadelphia) July, August and September, 1993. p.9

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Activity 1

Document from The Irish Famine by Peter Gray DOCUMENTS 141

James Hack Tuke, a Quaker from York, condemned the mass evictions in Connacht .

"The landlords of Mayo, as well as of many other portions of Connaught, as a class, (there are many noble exceptions who feel and see the impolicy and evil of such proceedings,) are pursuing a course which cannot fail to add to the universal wretchedness and poverty which exist.

The corn crops, bountiful as they may be, are not sufficient to meet the landlords' claim for rent and arrears contracted during the last two years of famine, and it is at least not unnatural for the tenant to be unwilling to give up that, without which he must certainly perish. In every direction, the agents of the landlords, armed with the full powers of the law, are at work everywhere. One sees the driver or bailiff "canting" the small patches of oats or potatoes or keepers, whose extortionate charges must be paid by the unfortunate tenant, placed over the crop. Even the produce of seed, distributed through the agency of benevolent associations, has been totally swept away.

To add to the universal distress caused by this system of seizure, eviction is in many cases practiced, and not a few of the roofless dwellings which meet the eye, have been destroyed at the instance of the landlords, after turning adrift the miserable inmates; and this even at a time like the present, when the charity of the whole world has been turned towards the relief of this starving peasantry.

Whilst upon the island of Achill, I saw a memorable instance of this mode of proceeding, at the wretched fishing village of Kiel. Here, a few days previous to my visit, a driver of Sir R. O'Donnells, whose property it is, had ejected some twenty families, making, as I was informed, with a previous recent eviction, about forty. A crowd of these miserable ejected creatures collected around us, bewailing,

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with bitter lamentations, their hard fate.

One old grey-headed man came tottering up to us, bearing in his arms his bedridden wife, and putting her down at our feet, pointed, in silent agony to her, and then to his roofless dwelling, the charred timbers of which were scattered in all directions around. This man said he owed little more than one year's rent, and had lived in the village, which had been the home of his forefathers, all his life.

Another man, with five motherless children, had been expelled, and their "boiling-pot" sold for 3shilling. Another family, consisting of a widow and four young children, had their only earthly possession "a little sheep," seized, and sold for 5 shillings!

But it is needless to multiply cases; instances sufficient have been given to show the hardships and misery inflicted. From this village alone, at least one hundred and fifty persons had been evicted, owing from half a year's to a year and a half's rent. The whole of their effects, even the miserable furniture of these wretched cabins seized and sold to satisfy the claims of the nominal owner of Achill (Island).

What prospects are there for these miserable outcasts? Death indeed must be the portion of some, for their neighbors, hardly richer than themselves, were principally subsisting upon turnip tops; whilst the poorhouse of the union of

Westport is nearly forty miles distant. Turnips taken, can we say stolen, from the fields, as they wearily walked thither, would be their only chance of support."

QUESTIONS

- How did the estimated half a million evictions contribute to the death rate during the Great Famine?
- What were the living conditions like for those evicted?
- Were there any tenant rights under British law?
- In what way did the Poor Law contribute to the death rate among the poor?

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