

Mortality Rates and "The Horror"

Irish Famine
Unit IV.

IV.

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Irish Famine

Unit IV

UNIT IV - Mortality Rates and "The Horror"

ADDITIONAL UNIT GOALS:

PERFORMANCE OBJECTIVES

1. The student will examine the levels of mortality experienced in

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Ireland during the Great Famine, and humanize numbers and statistics.

TEACHING/LEARNING STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES

A. Students will learn that the range of mortality estimates is from 500,000 to 1,500,000 or more, with a consensus mortality estimate of 1,000,000 deaths.

Activity 1. Students will read excerpts from This Great Calamity (p. 167-169), and The Great Hunger (p. 411-412), answer questions following the readings and discuss the issues raised.

Activity 2. Have students go to the library and use the Statistical Abstract of the United States to determine the population of the United States, and the number of deaths per year from automobile accidents.

- What percentage of the population are killed in such accidents each year?
- How does that percentage compare with the percent killed in Ireland during the Great Famine?

Activity 3. Students will read the personal accounts contained in "Famine Scenes (The Horror)" and compare their reactions to ones they experienced reading the statistical accounts in Activity 1. Students will answer questions following the reading.

INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIAL/RESOURCES

Kinnealy, Christine, This Great Calamity; The Irish Famine 1845-52, Roberts Rinehart Publishers, Boulder Colorado, 1995

Woodham-Smith, Cecil, The Great Hunger; Ireland 1845-1849 Penguin Books, London, England, 1991. First printing: 1962.

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Activity 1**

This Great Calamity

THE IRISH FAMINE

1845-52

By Christine Kinealy

Mortality

"The exact number of people who died during the Famine years (1845-51) is not known. In the first year of distress, no one was believed to have died from want; however, by the end of 1846, this had changed dramatically. In April 1847, an editorial in an Irish newspaper asked:

`What has become of all the vast quantity of food which has been thrown into Ireland? Where are the effects which it might have been expected to produce? How are the millions of pounds of money voted and subscribed been used that the march of famine, instead of being saved, has apparently been quickened. '

By this stage, it was obvious that the various relief measures employed since the appearance of the second blight had failed. The most telling manifestation was the great increase in mortality in the winter of 1846-7.

In 1851, the Census Commissioners attempted to produce a table of mortality for each year since 1841, the date of the previous census. Their calculations were based on a combination of deaths recorded in institutions and recollections of individuals (civil registration of deaths was not introduced into Ireland until 1864). The statistics provided were flawed and probably under-estimated the level of mortality, particularly for the earlier years of the Famine: personal recollections are notoriously unreliable and such methods did not take into account whole families who disappeared either as a consequence of emigration or death. In the most distressed areas, therefore, the data is the most incomplete and the information was sometimes based on indirect evidence.

The table below, which was compiled by the Census Commissioners, does offer some insights into the fluctuations in mortality in these years. Because the rates of mortality were computed at the county level, with the exception of the larger towns, the disparities within each county cannot be measured and thus it is difficult to identify pockets of particularly severe distress. Local reports and increased numbers of local studies revealed a complex picture of local diversity, exposing pools of distress and excess mortality in parts of the midlands, whereas areas in the west of Ireland were little affected. Furthermore, excess mortality was evident even in some of the wealthiest parts of the country.

Table 14: Irish Mortality, 1842-50 139

| Year | % of the Total Number of Deaths Occurring in Each Year |
|------|--|
| 1842 | 5.1 |
| 1843 | 5.2 |
| 1844 | 5.6 |
| 1845 | 6.4 |
| 1846 | 9.1 |
| 1847 | 18.5 |
| 1848 | 15.4 |
| 1849 | 17.9 |
| 1850 | 12.2 |

The number of deaths during the Famine has variously been calculated as lying between half a million and one and a half million fatalities. The correct number probably lies in between. It is more generally accepted that in the region of one million people died during these years. Excess mortality as a result of the Famine, however, did not end in 1851. In addition to deaths, the Famine also contributed to a decrease in the birthrate, by contributing to a decline in the rate of marriage and in the level of fertility and fecundity. The number of deaths in Ireland in 1847 was double the number in the previous year. This increase in mortality affected all parts of Ireland. The high rates of mortality were not prolonged and some areas in Ulster and the east coast showed signs of recovery in 1848, which was maintained despite the reappearance of blight in the same year. By this time, the local economies were recovering from the temporary industrial dislocation apparent in 1847. In parts of the west, however, mortality remained high and reached a second peak in 1849, a cholera epidemic providing the final, fatal blow to an already vulnerable people.

Mortality was particularly severe in the first three months of 1847, peaking in March and then starting a slow decline after April. This peak coincided with public works being used as the main vehicle for relief and is a clear testament to the failure of this system. The continuing high mortality of April and May 1847 coincides with the period during which public works were being wound down, even though their replacement was not always available. After May, the level of mortality began to decrease significantly, although it remained higher than its pre-Famine levels. This reduction is generally associated with the opening of soup kitchens in the summer of 1847 and the relatively generous provision of relief. The impact of mortality was most severe among the lowest economic and social groups within Ireland—those who, lacking their own capital resources, depended on external assistance for relief. The most vulnerable

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individuals within this group were children under five, old people and pregnant and lactating women. Overall, however, women tended to be more resilient than men to the effects of the Famine.

At the end of March 1847, Lord George Bentinck, leader of the Tory opposition, questioned the government regarding the number of deaths in Ireland and accused the Whigs of attempting to conceal the truth. No official figures had been released to parliament, although he suspected that there were:

`... tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands of deaths - they could not learn from the government how many, for there was one point about which the government were totally ignorant or which they concealed, which was the mortality which had occurred during their administration of Irish affairs. '

Bentinck continued by attacking an underlying economic philosophy of the government:

`They know the people have been dying by their thousands and I dare them to inquire what has been the number of those who have died through their mismanagement, by their principles of free trade. Yes, free trade in the lives of the Irish people. '"

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Activity 1

THE GREAT HUNGER

IRELAND 1845-1849

CECIL WOODHAM-SMITH

PENGUIN BOOKS

How many people died in the famine will never precisely be known. It is almost certain that, owing to geographical difficulties and the unwillingness of the people to be registered, the census of 1841 gave a total smaller than the population in fact was. Officers engaged in relief work put the population as much as 25 per cent. higher; landlords distributing relief were horrified when providing, as they imagined, for 60 persons, to find more than 400 'start from the ground'.

In 1841 the population of Ireland was given as 8,175,124; in 1851, after the famine, it had dropped to 6,552,385, and the Census Commissioners calculated that, at the normal rate of increase, the total should have been 9,018,799, so that a loss of at least 2.5

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million persons had taken place. The figures available, however, must be regarded as giving only a rough indication; vital statistics are unobtainable, no record was kept of deaths, and very many persons must have died and been buried unknown, as the fever victims died and were buried in west Cork, as bodies, found lying dead on the road, were buried in ditches, and as the timid people of Erris perished unrecorded.

In the four provinces of Ireland the smallest loss of population was in Leinster, 15.5 per cent, then Ulster, 16 per cent, Connaught's loss was greatest, 28.6 per cent, and Munster lost 23.5 per cent. In some respect, death and clearance improved Ireland; between 1841 and 1851, nearly 360,000 mud huts disappeared, the greatest decrease being 81 per cent in Ulster, which then included the distressed county of Donegal, followed by Connaught, with a decrease of 74 per cent, Munster 69 per cent, and Leinster 62 per cent. Small holdings under five acres were nearly halved, and holdings over fifteen acres doubled.

No advantage, however, was taken of the reduction of small tenants, agriculture was not improved, and in 1866 Isaac Butt wrote, 'Ireland has retrograded . . .' Between 1848 and 1864, however, thirteen million pounds was sent home by emigrants in America to bring relatives out, and it is part of the famine tragedy that, because no adequate measures of reconstruction were undertaken, a steady drain of the best and most enterprising left Ireland, to enrich other countries.

The famine left hatred behind. Between Ireland and England the memory of what was done and endured has lain like a sword. Other famines followed, as other famines had gone before, but it is the terrible years of the Great Hunger which are remembered, and only just beginning to be forgiven.

Time brought retribution. By the outbreak of the second world war, Ireland was independent, and she would not fight on England's side. Liberty and England did not appear to the Irish to be synonymous, and Eire remained neutral. Many thousands of Irishmen from Eire volunteered, but the famous regiments of southern Ireland had ceased to exist, and the 'inexhaustible nursery of the finest soldiers' was no longer at England's service.

There was also a more direct payment. Along the west coast of Ireland, in Mayo especially, on remote Clare Island, and in the dunes above the Six Mile Strand are a number of graves of petty officers and able seamen of the British Navy and Merchant Service, representatives of many hundreds who were drowned off the coast of Ireland, because the Irish harbours were not open to British ships. From these innocents, in all probability ignorant of the past, who had never heard of failures of the potato, evictions, fever and starvation, was exacted part of the price for the famine.

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Activity 1

Questions:

- Out of a pre-famine population of just over 8 million people, how many Irish died?
- Given a normal rate of increase, what would have been the total population in Ireland in 1851?
- Which groups were the most vulnerable to starvation? Why?
- What is the "retribution" or "direct payment" for the Famine mentioned by Woodham-Smith?
- Does she make the case that Ireland's neutrality in World War II was designed to punish England for the Great Famine?

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Activity 3

FAMINE SCENES (THE HORROR)

"A cabin was seen closed one day a little out of town, when a man had the curiosity to open it, and in a dark corner he found a family of the father, mother, and two children, lying in close compact. The father was considerably decomposed; the mother, it appeared, had died last, and probably fastened the door, which was always the custom when all hope was extinguished, to get into the darkest corner and die, where passers-by could not see them. Such family scenes were quite common, and the cabin was generally pulled down upon them for a grave." (1.)

"Six men, beside Mr. Griffith, crossed with me in an open boat, and we landed, not buoyantly, upon a once pretty island. The first that called my attention was the death-like stillness - nothing of life was seen or heard, except occasionally a dog. These looked so unlike all others I had seen among the poor - I unwittingly said, "How can the dogs look so fat and shining here, where there is no food for the people?" The pilot turned to Mr. Griffith, not supposing that I heard him, and said, "Shall I tell her?"

That was enough: if anything were wanting to make the horrors of the famine complete, this supplied the deficiency." (2.)

"Going out one cold day in a bleak waste on the coast, I met a pitiful old man in hunger and tatters, with a child on his back, almost entirely naked, and to appearance in the last stages of starvation; whether his naked legs had been scratched, or whether the

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cold had affected them I knew not, but the blood was in small streams in different places, and the sight was a horrid one. The old man said he lived seven miles off, and was afraid the child would die in the cabin, with the two little children he had left starving, and he had come to get the bit of meal, as it was the day he heard food relief was being given out. The officer told him he had not time to enter his name in the book, and he was sent away in that condition. A penny or two was given him, for which he expressed the greatest gratitude.

The next Saturday we saw the old man creeping slowly in a bending posture upon the road. The old man looked up and recognized me. On inquiring where the child was, he said the three were left in the cabin, and had not taken a 'sup or a bit' since yesterday morning, and he was afraid some of them would be dead upon the hearth when he returned. He was so weak that he could not carry the child and had crept seven miles to get the meal. He was sent away again with a promise to wait till next Tuesday, and come and have his name on the books. This poor man had not a penny nor a mouthful of food, and he said tremulously, 'I must go home and die on the hearth with the hungry ones.'" (3.)

"The deaths in my native place were many and horrible. The poor famine-stricken people were found by the wayside, emaciated corpses, partly green from eating docks (weeds) and nettles and partly blue from the cholera and dysentery." (4.)

"There was a girl who had her hands worn from scraping the stones of the strand for food, such as shaddy and all sorts of shellfish, and when she had the strand bare she was found lying dead." (5.)

"The children's appearance, though common to thousands of the same age in this region of the shadow of death, was indescribable. Their paleness was not that of common sickness...They did not look as if newly raised from the grave and to life before the blood had begun to fill their veins anew; but as if they had been thawed out of the ice, in which they had been imbedded until their blood had turned to water." (6.)

"We met flocks of wretched children going to school for the 'bit of bread', some crying with hunger, and some begging to get in without the penny which was required for their tuition. The poor emaciated creatures went weeping away, one said he had been looking for a penny all day yesterday, and could not get it." (7.)

DEATH FROM EATING FOOD

"So many had been starving for so long that when they were given food...the danger of death actually increased. The body could neither absorb nor assimilate so sudden an intake of nutrients it had been craving for so long...The heart especially could not withstand the added workload of a sudden increase in the body's metabolic rate." 'Carthy swallowed a little warm milk and died' was the simple

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statement of one man's death from starvation in Skibbereen. One man connected with the Quaker Society of Friends said, "If they get a full meal it kills them immediately." (8.)

"When the Indian meal came out, some of them were so desperate from starvation that they didn't wait for it to be cooked properly, they ate it almost raw and that brought on intestinal troubles that killed a lot of them that otherwise might have survived." (9.)

"The house was near the road and a pot of stirabout was kept for any starving person who passed the way. My mother Mary was a young girl at the time and alone in the house one day when a big giant of a fellow staggered in. He wolfed his share of stirabout and made for the door, but there was a tub of chopped raw cabbage and porridge for the pigs. He fell on his knees by the tub and devoured the stuff till she was in a fright, then he reeled out to the road and was found dead there a short time after." (10.)

"I heard my grandmother say that she knew fine people to be seen lying dead along the roads and in the fields. It seems they fell dead out of their standing and the dogs eating at them. They mustered up, she said, in bunches like, them that felt getting weak, and then went away to some place away out, and one done what they could for the other till they died." (11.)

There were so many deaths that they opened big trenches through the graveyards and when they were full of dead they filled them in. Most of those who died were children or old people. "It is estimated that three out of every five who died were under 10 years of age or over 60." (12.)

DEALING WITH THE DEAD

The problem of finding materials for coffins or transporting the corpses and digging graves for over a million dead, was made worse by the dire poverty and physical exhaustion caused by hunger and disease.

"A woman from the Teelin district of County Donegal, on the death of her little son, not having the wherewithal to get a coffin, put the child in the cradle, strapped the cradle on her back and carried it five miles to the nearest graveyard and buried it." (13.)

"The people had neither the material nor the strength to make coffins nor dig graves. When a person died they got a plank and tied the feet of the corpse to one end of it and the head to the other end, and the hands together, then two men took hold of it at each end and carried it to a bog nearby where the water was deep and threw it in." (14.)

"My father told me that he saw a man carrying his brother's corpse in a coffin on his back to Moybologue graveyard. He had no one to help him and he had to dig the grave and bury the corpse himself. He died

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in the hospital and people didn't like to attend the funeral because he died of fever, and they afraid they might take it. My father said it was the saddest sight he'd ever seen." (15.)

"They saw the man coming along the road - Scannlon was his name - and a load on his back. My grandmother asked him what he had there, and he said 'twas his wife that was dead and he was taking her to Leitrum graveyard to bury her. He had her sitting on a board fastened over his shoulders and she was dressed in her cloak and hood just as she'd be when she was alive. His little son was with him. My grandmother went into the house and brought them food and milk. Scannlon wouldn't take anything; he said it would overcome him and he wanted to have his wife buried before dark. The little boy drank the milk." (16.)

Questions:

- Do these personal stories help to make individuals out of statistics?
- Why did people die from eating food?
- Why did the dead present such unusual problems for the living?



FOOTNOTES

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1. Litton, Helen, The Irish. Famine;. An Illustrated History Wolfhound Press Ltd., Dublin, Ireland, 1994, P.40.
2. Ibid., p.38
3. Ibid., p.79
4. Poirteir, Cathal, Famine Echoes, Gill and Macmillan Ltd., Dublin, Ireland, 1995, p.90.
5. Ibid., p.88
6. Gray, Peter, The Irish Famine,. Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, 1995. p.139
7. Ibid., p. 143
8. Gallagher, Michael & Thomas, Paddy's Lament. Harcourt Brace Company, New York / London, 1982, p.104
9. Poirteir, p. 89
10. Ibid.,p.92
11. Ibid., p.11
12. Ibid.,p.182
13. Ibid., p.183
14. Ibid., p.185
15. Ibid.,
16. Gallagher, p.11