

The Great Hunger's Impact on the Irish Language

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The "Great Hunger" was one of the many famines Ireland experienced within the first half of the nineteenth century. After being underestimated, this potato blight proved to surpass the devastation of previous famines. After an undetected fungus was transported by potato cargo from North America to Belgium in 1843, a potato disaster had greatly affected the crops and infected Flanders, Normandy, Holland, and southern England. By that August, the fungus, identified as *phytophthora infestans*, had spread to Ireland and destroyed their primary food source. The Irish watched as their seemingly healthy crops withered and decomposed, spreading the infectious spores through the air, along with the stench of rotting plants. Panic had arisen by October, food sources became scarce. Despite this, Irish tenant croppers were expected to farm and harvest their cash crop corn, provide rent, and pay their taxes. Because of the newfound method of free trade and tillage, and England's demand of corn, Ireland's economy greatly depended on a continued production and trade.

Between the years of 1845 through 1850, approximately 1.5 million Irish citizens died of starvation or starvation-related diseases. Another 1 million emigrated to areas of North America, England, and Scotland. Irish culture suffered greatly from the famine. Preceding the potato blight, the Irish language of Gaelic had already begun its downfall. Starting in the 1830's, instituted schools had banned students from speaking the Irish language. Irish parents leaped at the opportunity to educate their children, only to find that their education came with consequences. The National School system brought in foreign, English-speaking teachers, who were unconcerned with the Irish culture. They introduced a "tally stick", and with each Irish word spoken in the classroom or on the playground, a tick was added. At the end of the school day a punishment was implemented based on the number of tallies.

A stigma began to arise regarding the language, as trade expanded, many Irish looked to adopt the language of their neighboring country, England. The intelligent and upper class began to view Gaelic as the language of the lower class. With the rural geography of western Ireland, many poor Gaelic-speaking farmers had found home and work in this region. Because of the failing crops and therefore their inability to pay their leases, landowners evicted as many as 500,000 of these people from their homes. As the famine progressed, emigration rates rose as the Gaelic-speaking rural population had suffered the full extent of the potato blight.

Adults began to abide by the phrase "Keep Irish from the children". The Irish had to abandon their culture and language if they wished to emigrate to the New World. They assimilated to the American lifestyle, learning English and strengthening their Catholic faiths. It was rare that a family would emigrate together, at one time. Often, a young son would make the journey, where he would then find a job in order to send money back home. This money would be saved until another family member could make the trip. This cycle would continue until the family would be able to reunite in new land. Some families would not be as lucky, an estimated one out of five would die on their journey across the seas. The vessels were referred to as "coffin ships", infested with disease and malnourished passengers. Those who fled did not likely receive warm welcomes from the hosts of the foreign lands. The Irish were viewed as uncivilized, low-class people by the citizens of Canada, America, and Britain. Emigrants took the menial jobs-working in mines, as laborers, and workers for the ports they docked in. Although many natives thought lowly of these laborious jobs, they resented the Irish for accepting them. The Irish, speaking in their foreign tongues amongst themselves, disregarded the disputed wages and graciously took any available jobs. Despite the Irish prejudice, the will of emigrants contributed to their success in their new lands.

Even those who did not plan on emigrating from Ireland were expected to learn English, as the Catholic Church became less interested in its Gaelic-speaking parishioners. As the church wished

to preach its beliefs, they believed only English speakers would make successful missionaries. As practicing religion became necessary, marriage was put on the back burner.

Pre-famine, in 1830, the average age for marriage in women was 23 and 27 years old for men, and was taboo for people to not marry at all. These beliefs changed after the potato blight destroyed majority of the farmland in Ireland. Citizens worked to repair their farms and rebuild their lives after the calamitous famine, unconcerned about the prior importance of marriage. In the years following the famine, the average ages had risen, many women did not marry until 28-29 years old and not until 33 for men. Now as-many-as a fourth of adults never married. The emphasis on work, rather than home life, as-well-as low wages and constant economic faults, lent to the further decline of the Irish language. With the low marriage rates, came low reproduction rates. The western Irish who knew Gaelic may have never married, and would not have passed the native tongue to their children. Without teaching the new generations Gaelic, the language died with the few that spoke it.

It wasn't until the 1890's that the decline of the Irish language was recognized and organizations were created to revive it. The Gaelic League and Literary Revival, along with others, were created to preserve the Irish culture. These groups worked to restore the pre-famine lifestyle of Ireland. They spread the Irish language throughout Ireland, hoping to pick up followers interested in preserving their native culture. To this day, only a few hundred-thousand Irish speak Gaelic fluently, and some ten-thousand say that Gaelic is their "mother tongue". The Great Hunger of Ireland not only obliterated the potato crops, but robbed the lives of many Irish.

Between the years of 1845 through 1850, Ireland lost approximately 2.5 million citizens; 1.5 million died consequently from the blight, and another 1 million emigrated to the New World. The effects of the Great Hunger are still seen today, over 150 years later. This famine is stained into Ireland's history, not only for culture but for economics, religion, and agriculture.