

# FAMINE

## IN CORK CITY

EXHIBITION

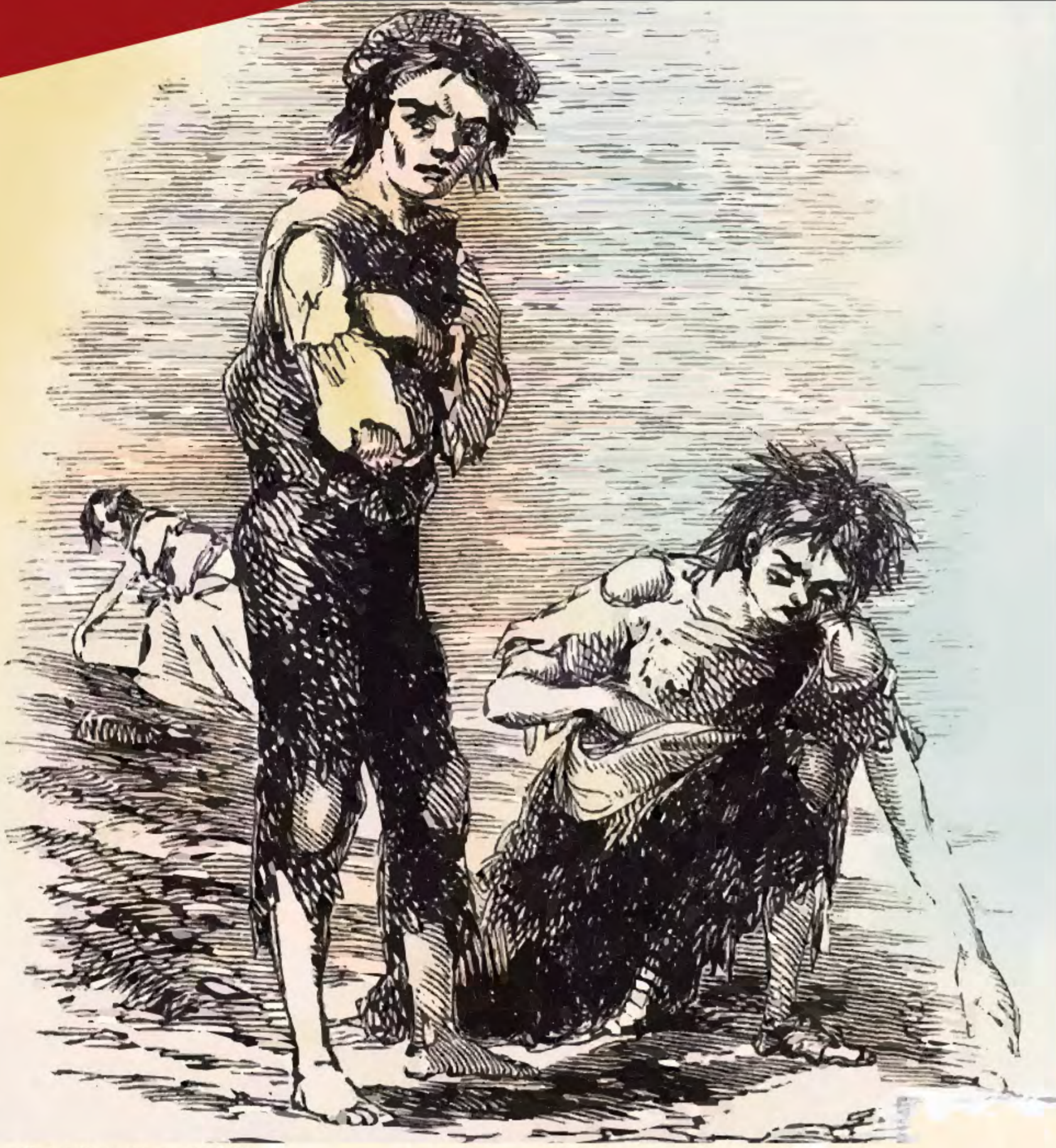
MAY 2018



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# Cork in the 1800s



Illustrated London News graphic, 1847

## 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 of a low standard, there was no sewerage system or supply of clean water, and all types of waste were either thrown onto the street and or into the River Lee.

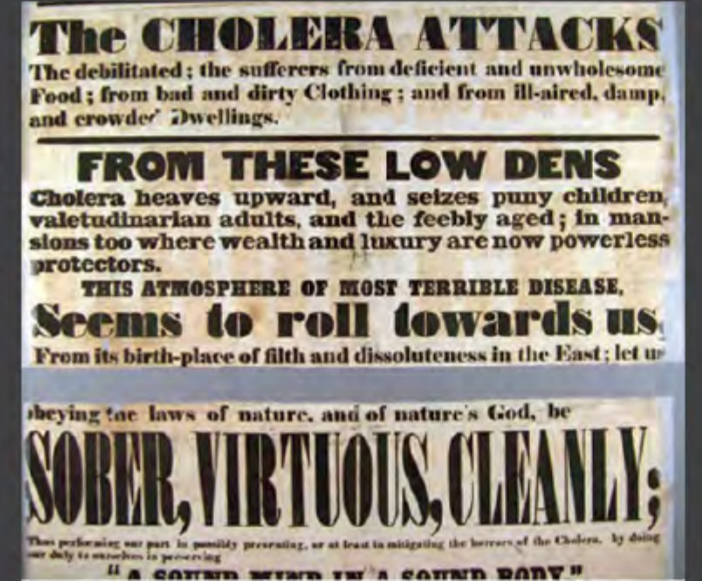
Large dunghills of waste lingered in many of the lanes in the city where people lived. As a result of these unhygienic conditions, infectious disease was common. Dysentery and typhus spread through the population. A House of Recovery was established in the early 1800s on the Old Youghal Road to treat the city's fever patients.

In the century before the great famine, the population of Ireland had more than trebled. 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 1816 a typhus outbreak began to spread through the city. There was a shortage of food and employment. Approximately 5,000 cases were admitted to fever hospitals during 1817.

At the time of the cholera epidemic in 1832 it was estimated Cork city housed up to 60,000 paupers living 'in a state of misery, suffering and destitution' (O Mahony, 1997). The disease claimed 225 lives in the first three weeks since its first appearance in the city. The number of deaths would surpass 1600 within a year, before the disease gradually disappeared. It would return in 1849.



Health notice issued during 1832 Cholera epidemic. (Cork Archives)

## Diet

By the mid 1700s the potato had become part of the standard diet at all levels of Irish society. Poor people became particularly dependent on it and by the early 1800s it had become their staple food, replacing milk and oatmeal. The diet within the workhouse, in the first years, could at times be superior to that of the working poor, with meat twice a week, as well as bread, oatmeal porridge, milk and potatoes.

## Cork Union Workhouse

Following the passing of the 1838 Poor Law Act, Ireland was divided into 130 poor law unions and a number of workhouses were established. The Cork Union Workhouse was initially established in the Cork House of Industry. The House of Industry (close to the present-day South Infirmary Hospital) accommodated over 1,800 residents by the early 1830s, but conditions were severely cramped. It was clear that additional resources would be needed to provide relief to the city's destitute.

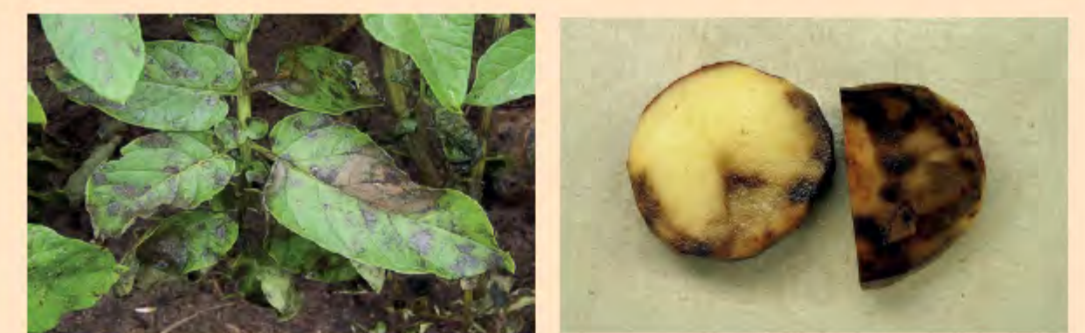
A purpose-built workhouse was completed in December 1841, designed by Poor Law Commissioner's Architect George Wilkinson, at a site on the Douglas Road (later redeveloped as St Finbarr's Hospital). The new building was designed to accommodate 2,600 paupers. During the famine years it would accommodate a great many more.



Cork Union Workhouse, present day (Source: kieranmccarthy.ie)

## 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 east coast of the country in 1845, and by September of that year the disease was visible 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.



Infected potato plant (left) and tuber (right)

## The British Government's Response

In 1845 there was a Conservative government in Westminster, led by Sir Robert Peel. The initial response to the impending crisis averted any deaths from starvation in that year, due to the importation of alternative foodstuffs.

A Whig administration led by John Russell replaced Peel's government in 1846. The potato crop failed again. Maize imports fell and grain prices rose sharply. Irish Nationalists argued that widespread famine could be avoided if food output (other than potatoes) were kept in Ireland. However, Russell's Government refused to ban exports.

## Life and Death in the Workhouse



At the Gate of a Workhouse, 1846

By December 1846, the number of inmates in the Cork Union Workhouse exceeded 4,600. In the last three months of the year, there were on average over 40 deaths per week. The Workhouse Guardians acquired a burial ground at Lapland, between Douglas and Carrigaline, from a workhouse official named George Carr.

Providing food for the inmates, even within the workhouse, proved difficult. Meals consisted largely of porridge and bread. Many destitute people came to the doors of the Workhouse for food in the last months of 1846. Although initially fed with leftovers, the Poor Law Commissioners disapproved of the feeding of non-residents and the service was withdrawn.

By the middle of January 1847, over 5,300 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 180 people died. The workhouse physician, Dr O'Connor, remarked that death came as a relief to many.

Dr Callanan, another workhouse doctor, said at the time:

*"From the commencement of 1847, however, Fate opened her book in good earnest here, and the full tide of death flowed on everywhere around us. During the first six months of that dark period one-third of the daily population of our shadows and streets consisted of shadows and spectres, the impersonations of disease and famine, crowding in from the rural districts, and stalking along to the general doom - the grave - which appeared to await them at the distance of a few steps, or a few short hours."*

(Dublin Quarterly Journal of Medical Science, 8 (1849), p. 270).

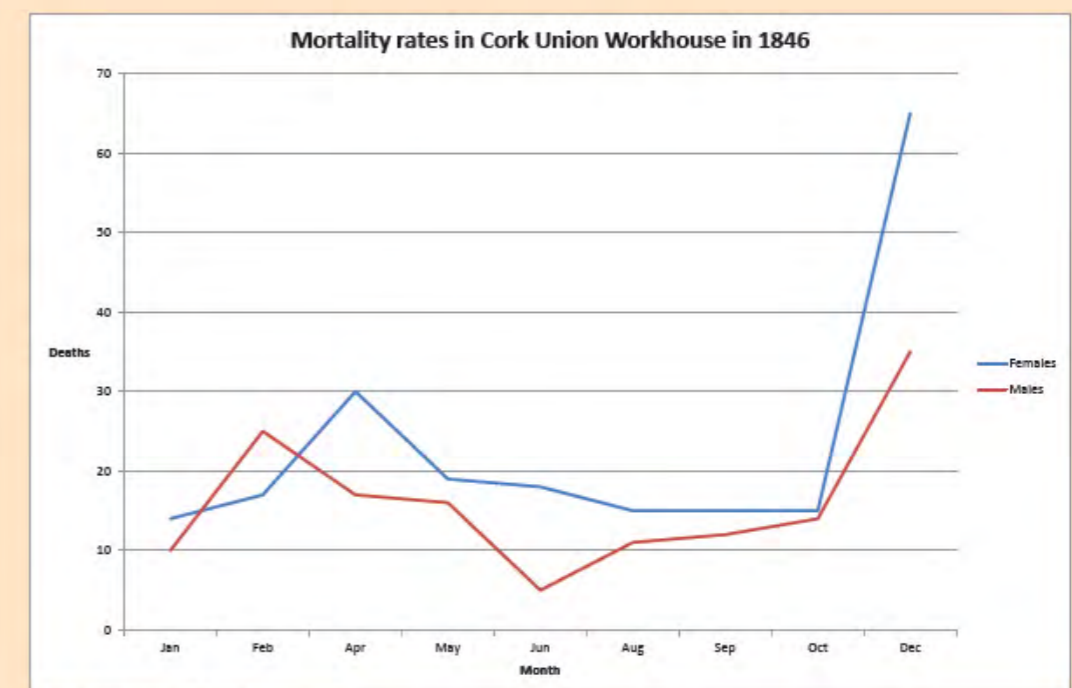
## Cork Relief Committee

With little direct involvement from the British government, famine relief within the country fell, by and large, to charitable relief groups, such as the Cork Relief Committee. Started in March 1846, they quickly raised over £3,000 in subscriptions from members of the public. One of their first acts was to purchase Indian Meal from the government's store, and distributed it to designated sellers in the city. The meal sold out within hours. At their depots the Relief Committee sold meal significantly below market price, but because the cost of food was rising it became increasingly out of reach for many of the city's poor, even those who were in employment.

## Mortality Rates

From September 1846 and May 1847 there were 13,000 burials in St Joseph's cemetery. It has been estimated that there were between 400 and 500 deaths in the city each week during this period. Paupers were also buried in Curraghkippane, often in large, single plots. By June, over 2,000 workhouse inmates were buried at the new Carr's Hill graveyard. Deaths from starvation began to decrease during the summer of 1847, but deaths from disease, in particular typhoid fever, began to increase. Fever affected not only paupers, but also members of higher social classes, including merchants and clergy.

Between 1846 and 1848, over 5,000 inmates of the Cork Union Workhouse died, 3,000 or so of these during 1847 alone. Thousands more would die from cholera during 1849.



Adapted from O'Mahony (2005)

## Disease

The Fever Hospital and the North Infirmary reached capacity early in 1847. Dozens of applicants were refused daily, and were left to die on the streets or in their homes. A fever hospital was opened at Cat Fort in April 1847; thirty patients were admitted in the first two hours. Horrifying conditions were reported in the city's newspapers. Typhus, dysentery and influenza infected the population, and in 1848 a new cholera epidemic approached.

## Charitable Groups

Soup kitchens were established in the city by charitable groups such as the Society of Friends (Quakers) and the Lee Committee. The Society of St Vincent de Paul also visited the poor and provided them with assistance. Father Theobald Mathew was heavily involved with relief efforts in the city. Assistance from the United States, in the form of grain and meal, began to arrive in 1847.



Quaker Soup kitchen in Cork (Illustrated London News)

# FAMINE IN CORK CITY

# Aftermath

## Emigration

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

The *Cork Examiner* reported: "The quays are crowded every day with the peasantry from all quarters of the country, who are emigrating to America, both direct from this port and 'cross channel' to Liverpool, as the agents here cannot produce enough of ships to convey the people from this unhappy country. Two vessels - the *Fagabec* and *Coolock* - were despatched this week, the former with 208, the latter with 110 passengers. There are two other ships on the berth - the *Wandsworth* for Quebec, and the *Victory* for New York; both are intended to sail on Tuesday next. There are nearly 1200 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 believed over 70,000 people emigrated directly from Cork between 1845 and 1851, while 25,000 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.



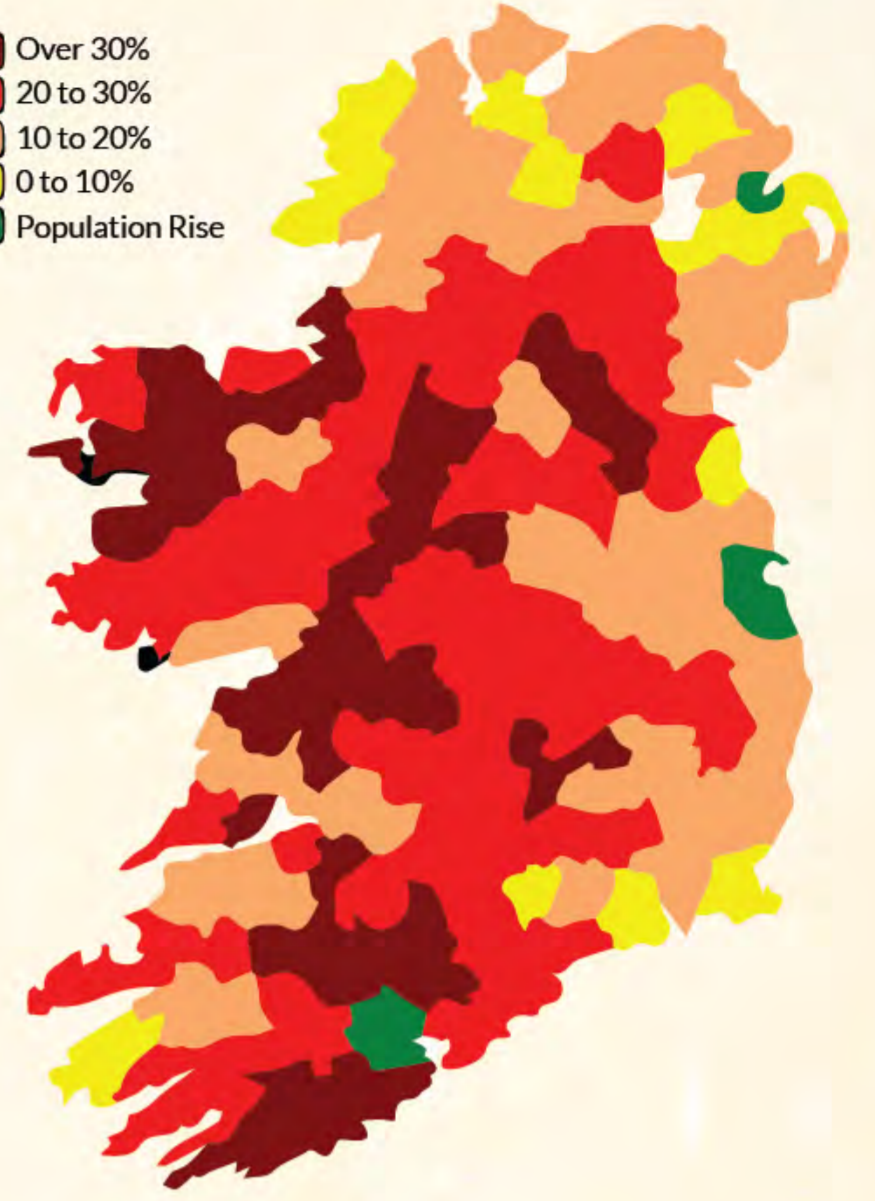
Shipping notices from *The Southern Reporter* newspaper, 5 June 1847



Emigrants awaiting departure in Cork (Illustrated London News)

## Population Fall in Ireland 1841-1851

- Over 30%
- 20 to 30%
- 10 to 20%
- 0 to 10%
- Population Rise



## Population Changes

The population of Ireland fell by over 2 million after the Great Famine. Although the population of County Cork fell by 24 per cent between the census of 1841 and 1851, the population of the city grew by over 5,000 due to the influx of rural migrants seeking food, work, or passage to North America.

## Unemployment, Vagrancy and Disease

Very large numbers of paupers came from the countryside during and after the famine years, seeking employment and food. Others had been evicted 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 1848 it was common to see 'hordes of hungry people parading the streets' (O Mahony, 1997). Others lived in overcrowded and unhygienic 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*.



All materials used in this exhibition can be viewed in

## LOCAL STUDIES

2nd floor, Grand Parade Library  
Open Wed to Sat, 10.00 am to 5.30 pm



Famine memorial at the site of the former Cork Union Workhouse

## SOURCES USED IN THIS EXHIBITION

- BOOKS**  
 O Mahony, C. (1997). *In the Shadows: Life in Cork 1750-1930*, Tower Books, Cork  
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 Crowley, J., Smyth, W. J., and Murphy, M. (Eds) (2012). *Atlas of the Great Famine*, Cork University Press.  
 Crowley, J., Devoy, R., Linehan, D. and O'Flanagan, P. (Eds) (2005). *Atlas of Cork City*, Cork University Press
- NEWSPAPERS**  
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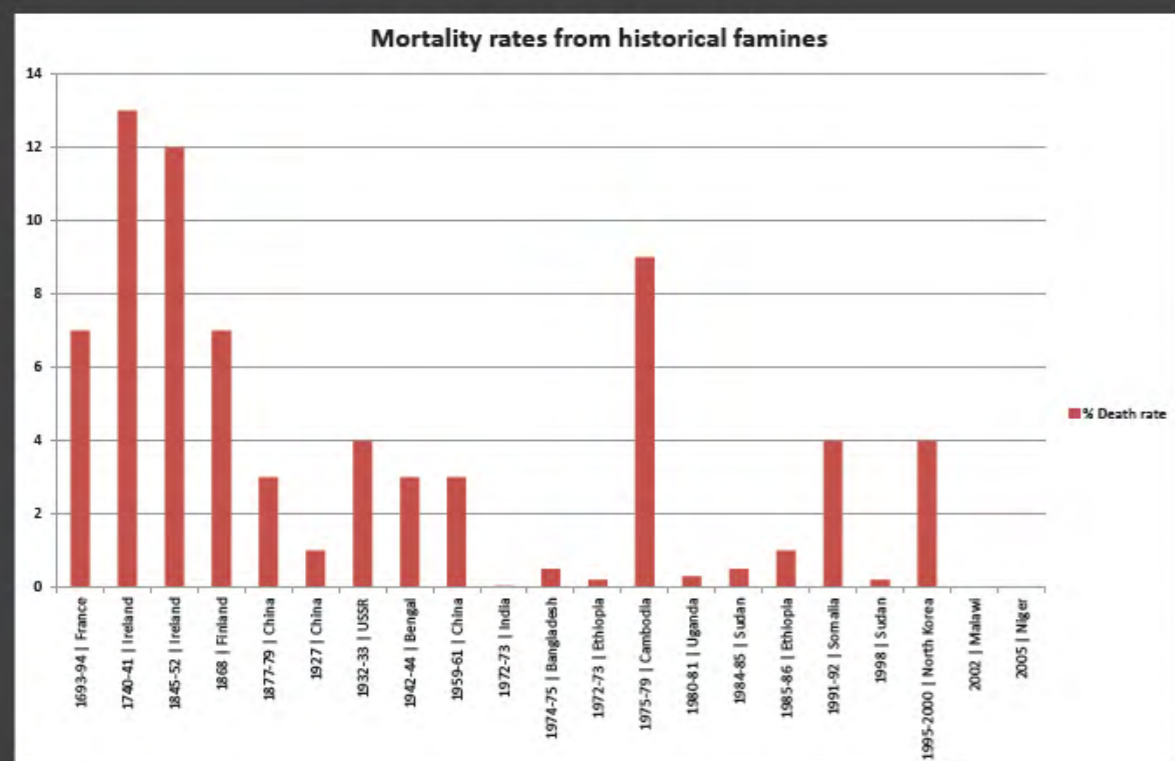
IN CORK CITY

# Modern Food Crises

## The Great Irish Famine and Other Famines

The Irish Famine of 1845-52 was truly a 'great' food crisis, severe 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), with the same numbers again emigrating to escape a similar fate. A significant percentage of deaths could have been avoided but for the *laissez-faire* policies of the Whig Government in Westminster.

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



Mortality rates for major famines in world history (Adapted from *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine*)

## Food Security

In many cases of famine, the availability of food is not an issue, but access to this 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.

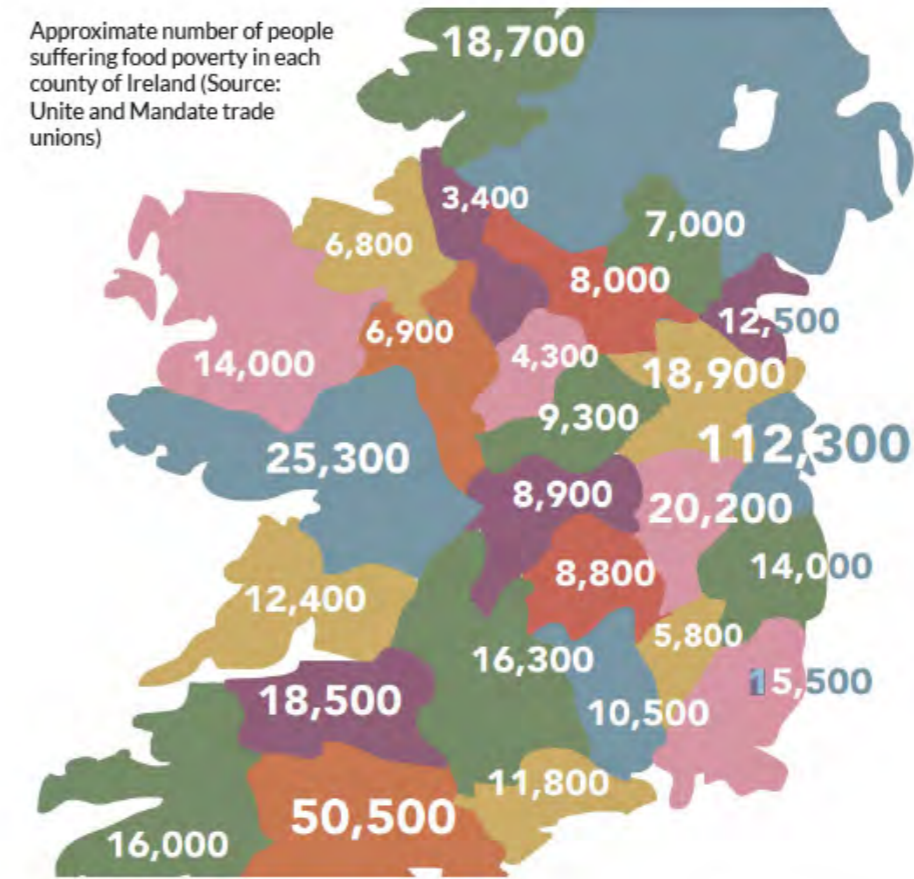
The World Food Summit in 1996 provided the following definition:

*"Food Security, at the individual, household, national, regional and global levels 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 on low incomes cannot financially afford nutritious food. It may also occur where individuals do not have access to outlets that sell food at affordable prices, or where they do not have the cooking skills, to prepare foods which are nourishing, relying instead on cheap or takeaway food that does not provide them with the nutrients they need to thrive.

Approximate number of people suffering food poverty in each county of Ireland (Source: Unite and Mandate trade unions)



## Famine in the World Today

Most famine in the last half-century has occurred in developing countries in Africa and Asia. The reasons behind each crisis vary, but most are associated with conflict and/or natural disaster, such as drought or floods. The North Korean famine of the late 1990s could be primarily attributed to flawed Government policy. Although the death rates from these famines were lower than that of the Great Irish Famine, the overall death tolls were high in many cases.



- LEGEND
- <5% Very Low
  - 5-14.9% Moderately Low
  - 15-24.9% Moderately High
  - 25-34.9% High
  - 35% and over
  - Missing / Insufficient Data

Prevalence of undernourishment in the countries of the world (Source: Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United States)