

Sovereign Hill Education

The Great Irish Famine - 1846

Research Notes for Primary Schools



The potato was introduced to Ireland during the colonial settlements of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It rapidly established itself as the principal food of the Irish poor.

By the 1840s, the potato was the most extensively cultivated crop in Ireland. It accounted for one third of the tilled land and three million Irish consumed little else. An adult rural labourer consumed as much as 14 lbs. of potatoes a day!

The deadly and invisible fungus spores (Phytophthora Infestans) which were first reported in the United States in 1843, eventually reached Ireland in August 1846. By October, there was panic in Ireland. As crops began to fail, families began to starve and were evicted from their homes.

By the winter of 1846-7, a form of public welfare was in operation in Ireland. Relief was made subject to arduous and humiliating conditions in prison – like institutions known as workhouses. Men, women, boys and girls were housed separately and subjected to authoritarian discipline. Epidemic diseases were rife.

Eventually it became clear to the landowners that it was cheaper to provide emigration for the poor, than to keep them in workhouses. Between 1846-1850, one-and-a-half million Irish emigrated to either North America or Australia. Not all survived. The overcrowding and disease meant that up to a third of the passengers died on the journey to the New World.

It was the largest single population movement of the nineteenth century.

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