

# The Irish Famine

The Irish Famine of 1846 to 1850 is one of the darkest periods in Irish history and inspired a lot of stories, poems and songs.

In 1846, the potato crop in Ireland failed. For the next four to six years, the nation was plagued by starvation, poverty, and death on a massive scale. Up to a million people died, which at the time was roughly 1/8th of the total population. To understand the Irish Famine, we need to explore the causes of the famine, the response, and its aftermath.

Ireland had long before been conquered by England before 1846 and almost all of the land was owned by wealthy English lords and businessmen. These lords rented out land to Irish laborers, using them to harvest crops that the lords could sell for profit. Nearly all of the Irish people lived in this arrangement. As a result, Ireland was being managed by absentee landowners, creating a geographical division between the people who owned the land and those who lived on it. The English lords weren't interested in the welfare of their Irish workers, just their profits, so they planted a single crop across the island: potatoes.

Around 1844, a potato disease called **blight** made its way into Ireland, and in 1846 that disease destroyed both the crops and the stores of potatoes used by Irish laborers for food. Without their main source of food, the Irish began to starve.

And what started as a matter of crop failure was magnified by the response of the British. Since England controlled Ireland, they were in charge of responding to the crisis. Unfortunately, the British provided only minimal assistance to the Irish, letting a crop failure turn into full-scale famine.

The Irish maintained different cultural and religious beliefs from the British, and the lack of Irish desire to behave as proper English citizens convinced the Brits that Irish people were inferior. This in turn led to two prejudicial philosophies :- **providentialism** : the Irish were predominantly Catholic, while England adhered to the Anglican branch of Protestant Christianity. Therefore, many English saw the famine as an act of divine will against the heretical Catholics.

- **moralism** : Irish being lazy, they had brought this upon themselves, why should the English bother intervening?

And so under Queen Victoria's reign, the English let the Irish starve.