Is the British government responsible for the devastating impact of the Great Famine in Ireland?

YES

1. The British government did not stop the export of food from Ireland during the Famine. During previous food shortages, Irish-grown food had been kept in the country to feed the local population. When the potato blight arrived in Europe in 1845, other countries such as Belgium closed their ports to exports and left them open for imports of food: this strategy helped mitigating the consequences of the crop losses. However, the British government chose to continue exporting grain from Ireland, even in the winter of 1846-47 and early in the following spring, at a time when insufficient food was produced in the country and before large supplies of foreign grain began to arrive. Ireland was forced to export its food while its own population was starving.

2. The British government closed down soup kitchens prematurely. The scheme to feed the poor for free started in spring 1847, when the British government decided to set up soup kitchens in Poor Law unions in Ireland. The scheme was effective but inexpensive for the British government since its cost and administration fell on the Irish. As many as three million people were fed daily at the peak of this scheme. However, the British government dismantled the scheme after only six months, despite the fact that the food shortage in Ireland was still dramatic.

3. The British government did nothing to stop the mass eviction of poor tenants. Since landlords had to pay rates for every tenant working on their land, they started evicting labourers when they became too poor to pay their rents due to the failure of potato crops. Not only did landlords evict tenants, but they also destroyed their houses, so that they were left homeless and with no income. Often, ruthless landlords intimidated their tenants to prevent them from giving shelter and help to those who had been evicted. It is estimated that more than half a million people were evicted during the Famine, and many of them died of starvation or illness, while others left the country.

4. The British government did not allocate sufficient funding to mitigate the effects of the crop failure in Ireland. The British government claimed that the 1847 fiscal crisis made it difficult for them to fund assisted emigration, land reforms and work schemes. Only £8 million were spent on the Irish Famine and over half of the sum was initially in loans, but £20 million were spent to reimburse British slave-owners during abolition in 1833, and £69 million were spent on the Crimean War of 1854-6. While large sums of money were donated by charities, foreign governments, the Catholic Church and other religious groups, finally reaching an estimated £1.5 million, the British government refused to assume responsibility for the fate of a country that was part of the Union and of the Empire.

5. The British government did not do enough to stop the famine because it held racist prejudices against the Irish. It was a widespread belief among government's officials that the Irish 'national character' was characterised by violence, filth, laziness, and a lack of self-reliance. The Famine was seen by many as an opportunity to teach the Irish to stand on their own feet and to unlearn their dependence on government. Thus, the British government limited its intervention in the hope that Irish indolence could be eradicated or at least reduced.

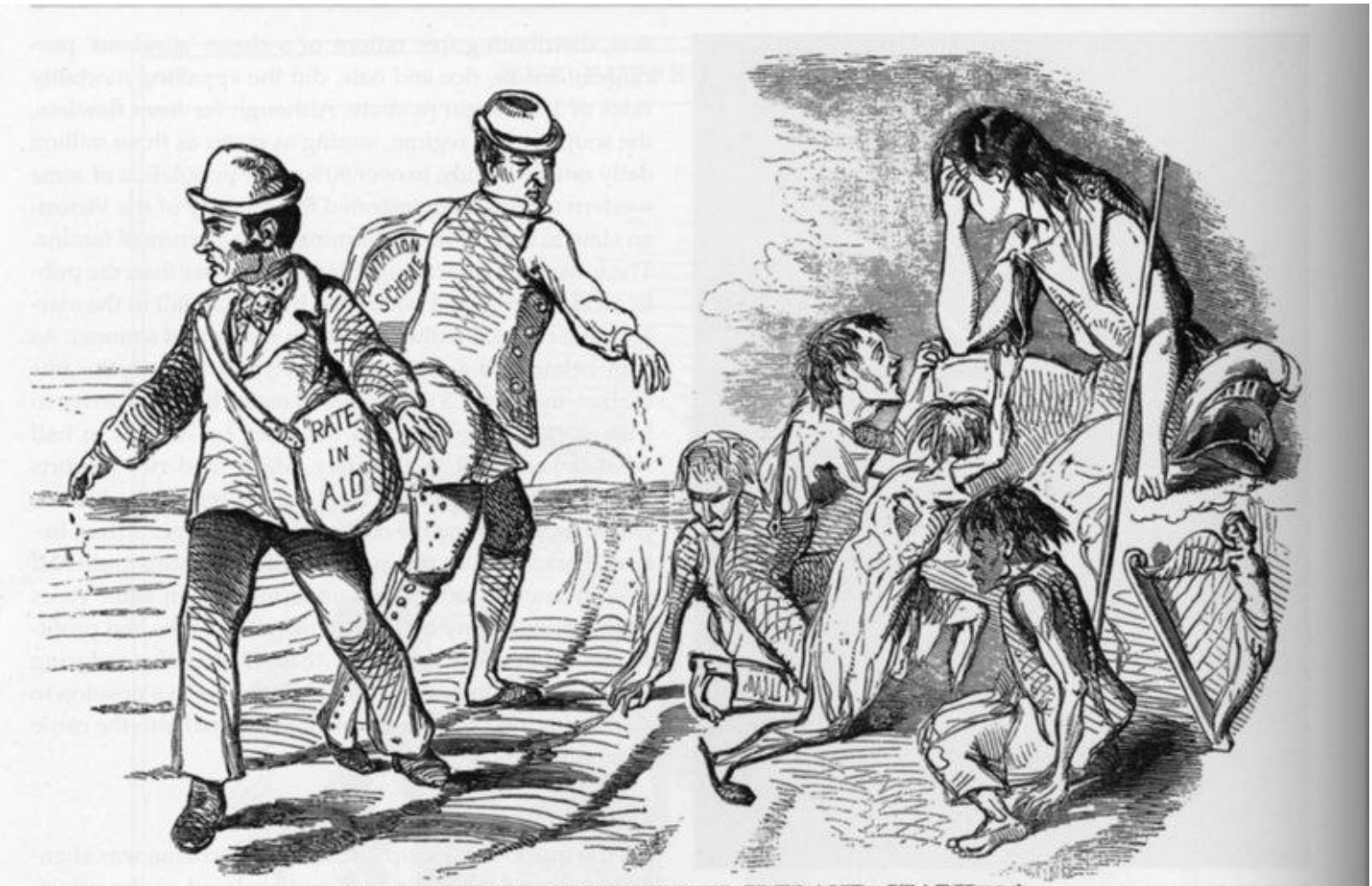
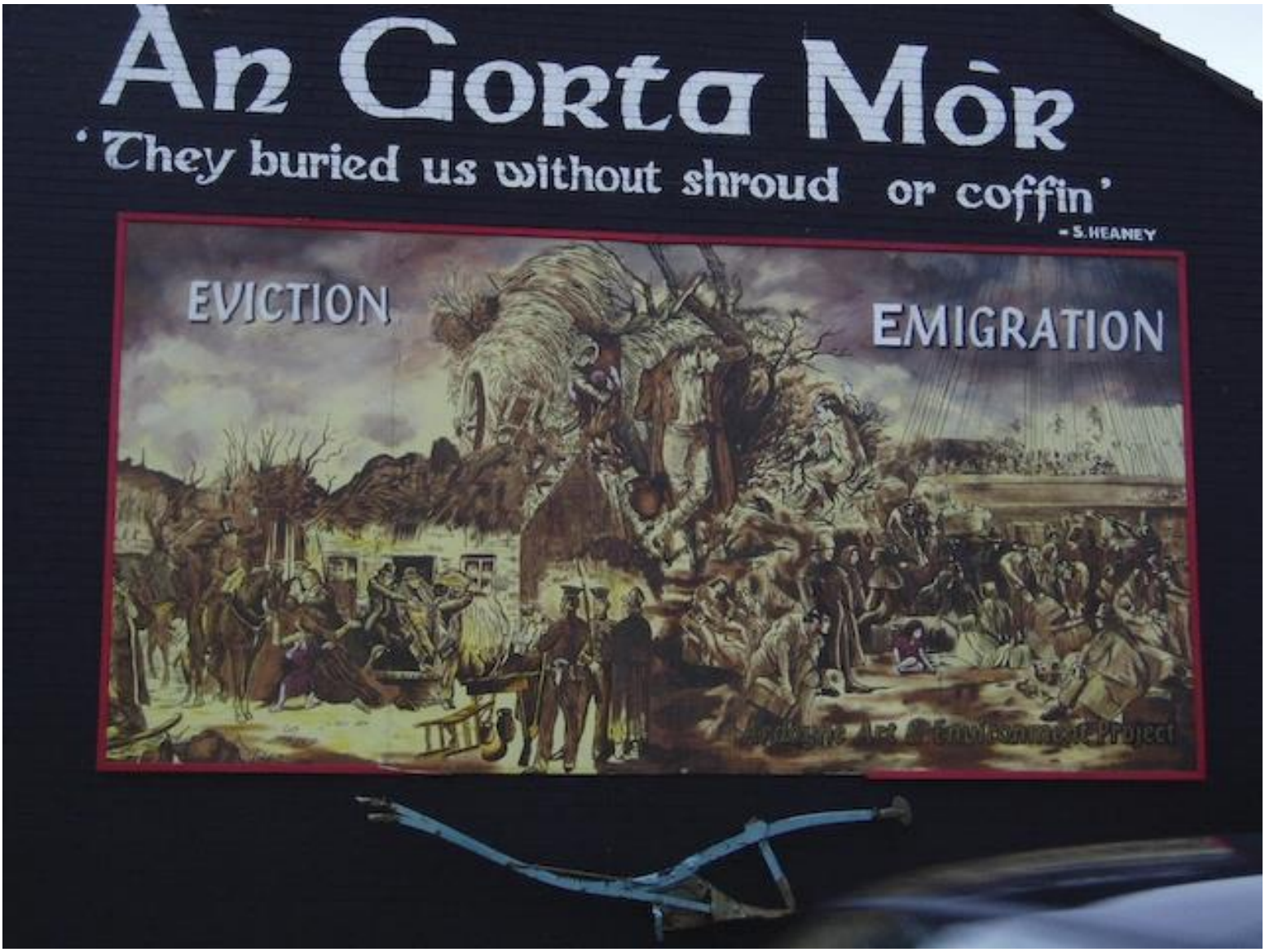


Fig. 10 'While the crop grows, Ireland starves', *The Puppet-Show*, 13 May 1849. Rival party leaders Lord John Russell and Robert Peel sow rival political schemes that offer little short-term relief to Ireland. Russell's 'rate in aid' angered northern and eastern Irish unions by taxing them for the benefit of the distressed west (and leaving Britain untouched); Peel's 'plantation scheme' for western development drew favourable press commentary but came to nothing.

Cartoon commenting on the rivalling responses to the famine by Lord John Russell (Liberal) and Sir Robert Peel (Conservative) while the people of Ireland struggle to survive the Famine. Both Peel and Russell's responses were only short-term responses to the famine.



Mural remembering two important aspects of the Great Famine: tenants' evictions and mass emigration. "They buried us without shroud or coffin" is a line from an unrelated Seamus Heaney poem, Requiem For The Croppies. The mural in Ardoyne Avenue, a catholic area in Belfast, was replaced in 2012.

"The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the Famine."

Famous quote from John Mitchel's The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps), published in 1861. Mitchel was a nationalist activist who, in 1848, was sentenced to 14-years penal transportation, penalty for advocating resistance to landlords and to the shipment of harvests to England. In The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps), Mitchel argues that the dramatic consequences of the Famine resulted from a deliberate policy by the British government to eliminate excess peasantry in Ireland.

Skibbereen

"O father dear, I oft-times hear you talk of Erin's Isle,
Her lofty scenes and valleys green, her mountains rude and wild.
They say it is a pretty place wherein a prince might dwell.
And why did you abandon it, the reason to me tell."

"My son, I loved our native land with energy and pride,
Until a blight came on my land, my sheep and cattle died.
The rent and taxes were to pay, I could not them redeem,
And that's the cruel reason why I left old Skibbereen.

"Oh it's well I do remember that bleak December day,
The landlord and the sheriff came to drive us all away.
They set my roof on fire with their demon yellow spleen,
And that's another reason why I left old Skibbereen.

"Your mother too, (God rest her soul) lay on the snowy ground.
She fainted o'er in anguish with the desolation round.
She never rose, but passed away from life to immortal dream,
And found a quiet grave, my boy, in dear old Skibbereen.

"And you were only two years old and feeble was your frame.
I could not leave you with your friends, you bore your father's name.
I wrapped you in my cóta mór at the dark of night unseen.
I heaved a sigh and bid goodbye to dear old Skibbereen.

"It's well I do remember the year of forty-eight,
When I arose with Erin's boys to battle against the fate.
I was hunted thro' the mountains like a traitor to the Queen,
And that's another reason why I left old Skibbereen."

"O father dear, the day will come when vengeance loud will call,
And we will rise with Erin's boys to rally one and all.
I'll be the man to lead the van beneath our flag of green,
And loud and high will raise the cry 'Revenge for Skibbereen.'"

Skibbereen is a town in the south of Ireland that was severely hit during the Great Famine. Skibbereen is also the title of the above folk song in which a father tells his son about the Famine, their eviction and emigration to another country. The song ends promising revenge for the injustice suffered by Irish people.

He was afraid the House was not sufficiently aware of the extent of the misery; he did not think the Members were sufficiently impressed with the horrors of the situation of the people of Ireland; he did not think they understood the miseries—the accumulation of miseries—under which the people were at present suffering. It had been estimated that 5,000 adults and 10,000 children had already perished from famine; and that 25 per cent of the whole population would perish unless the House should afford effective relief. They would perish of famine and disease unless the House did something speedy and efficacious — not doled out in small sums—not in private and individual subscriptions, but by some great act of national generosity, calculated upon a broad and liberal scale. If this course were not pursued, Parliament was responsible for the loss of 25 per cent of the population of Ireland. (…)

It would be seen by the reports already before the House, that a large body of the Irish people were always on the verge of starvation. Another report, more recently made, had confirmed this statement, and established that in ordinary years great numbers were in destitution. But the destruction of the potato crop had occasioned a positive annihilation of food, and the people were starving in shoals, in hundreds — aye, in thousands and millions. Parliament was bound, then, to act not only liberally but generously—to find out the means of putting a stop to this terrible disaster. (…)

She (Ireland) was in their hands—in their power. If they did not save her, she could not save herself.

Abstract from the speech pronounced by Irish MP Daniel O'Connell in the House of Commons, 8th February 1847. At the time, speeches were recorded in third person.

“Some landed proprietors (…) demanded that, instead of being employed on the roads, the people should be paid for working on their own farms. (…) If the plan had been adopted, the entire cost of carrying on the agriculture of the country would have been transferred to the Government. (…) This scheme (…) may be considered as the masterpiece of that system of social economy according to which the machine of society should be worked backwards, and the Government should be made to support the people, instead of the people the Government”.

Abstract from *The Irish Crisis*, by Charles Trevelyan, British Head of the Treasury in charge of Irish relief during the Great Famine. In *The Irish Crisis* (1848), Trevelyan asserted that the Famine was part of the design of a benign God seeking to relieve Ireland’s overpopulation by natural disaster.

Illustration of Bridget O'Donnell and two of her children during the Great Famine. The illustration appeared in *The Illustrated London News* on 22nd December 1849, next to an interview with Bridget O'Donnell:

"I lived on the lands of Gurranenatuoha. My husband held four acres and a half of land, and three acres of bogland; (…) we were put out last November; he owed some rent. We got thirty stone of oats (…) for seed. (…) He paid ten shillings for reaping the corn. As soon as it was stacked, one 'Blake' on the farm, who was put to watch it, took it away to his own haggard and kept it there (…) by Dan Sheedey's orders. (…) I was at this time lying in fever. Dan Sheedey and five or six men came to tumble my house; (…) they commenced knocking down the house, and had half of it knocked down when two neighbors, (…) carried me out. (…) I was carried into a cabin, and lay there for eight days, when I had the creature (the child) born dead. I lay for three weeks after that. The whole of my family got the fever, and one boy thirteen years old died with want and with hunger while we were lying sick. Dan Sheedey and Blake took the corn into Kilrush, and sold it. I don't know what they got for it. I had not a bit for my children to eat when they took it from me."

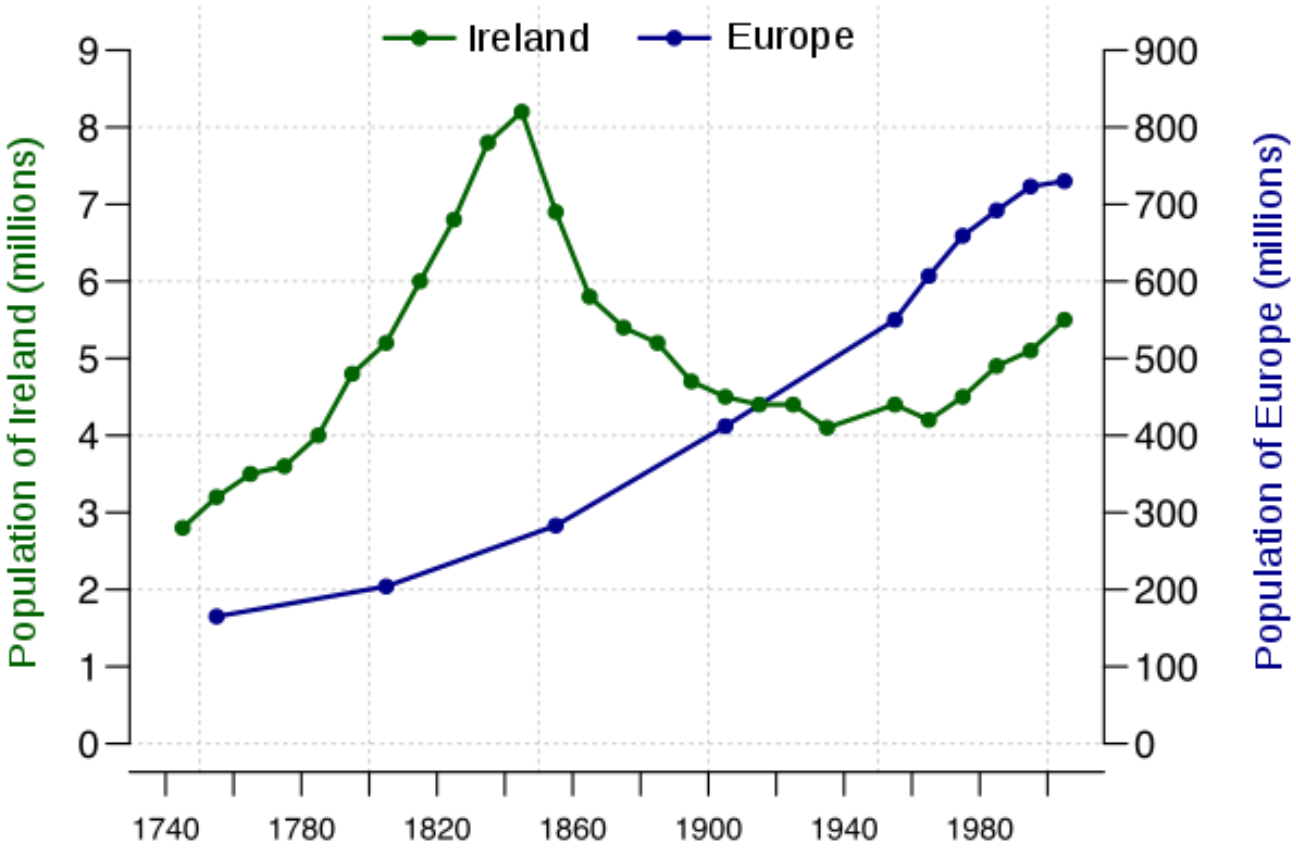
THE ENGLISH LABOURER'S BURDEN;

OR, THE IRISH OLD MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN.

English cartoon dating 1849. It depicts an English labourer struggling under the weight of a grinning Irish peasant, carrying a sack with £50,000, the amount of a relief grants recently given to Ireland. The Irish were often portrayed as freeloaders in the British press of the time.

“A more complete engine for the slaughter and expatriation of a people was never designed”

Abstract from *The History of the Great Irish Famine of 1847, With Notices of Earlier Irish Famines* (1874) by Canon John O’Rourke, parish priest of Maynooth. The abstract refers to an amendment to the Poor Relief (Ireland) Act of 1847 compelling all people occupying a quarter of an acre of land or more to surrender their plots if they wished to obtain public relief.



The graph compares population growth in Ireland and Europe, both affected by the potato blight. Ireland is unique in being the only European country where the population today is lower than it was in 1800

Is the British government responsible for the devastating impact of the Great Famine in Ireland?

NO

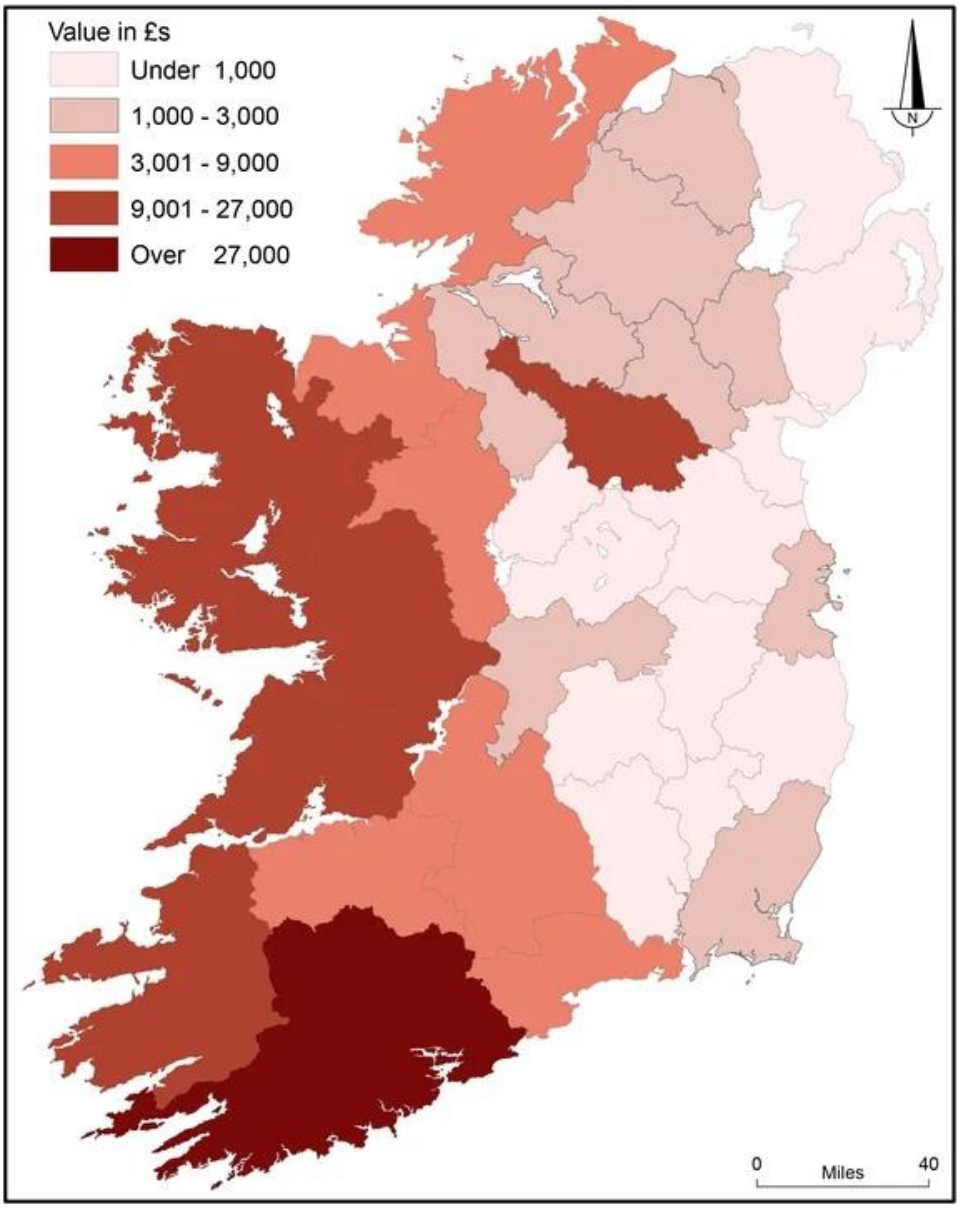
1. The British government was not responsible for Ireland's dependence on potatoes. This resulted from the potato becoming a staple crop in the 18th century due to its qualities as a hardy, nutritious, and calorie-dense crop that was relatively easy to grow in the Irish soil. When the blight hit, half the Irish population, and primarily the rural poor, depended almost exclusively on the potato for their diet. The fact that almost all the potatoes grown in Ireland were of a single high-yielding type reduced the genetic variety that normally prevents the decimation of an entire crop by disease. The British government was not responsible for Ireland's precondition that allowed the potato blight to become a disaster.

2. The British government did not stop the export of grain from Ireland during the Famine because only by selling food, some of which would be exported, could tenants earn enough money to pay their rents and avoid evictions. And only if the landlords received the rents they were due, they could then pay the rates levied on local property owners to fund the workhouses providing relief to the poor. In other words, only by selling food, and by exporting part of it, could a "virtuous circle" be created whereby the rents and rates would be paid, and the workhouses funded. Therefore, exporting Irish produced food contributed to mitigate the effects of the Famine.

3. The British government imported so much Indian corn or maize into Ireland that food imports exceeded exports during the Famine. As a result, there was enough food on the island to prevent mass starvation. However, the Irish were unable to properly distribute the food so as to reach the smallholders and labourers of the west and the south of the country, the areas which were hit the hardest by the potato blight. Many people starved not because the British government did not provide enough food, but because the food was not adequately distributed by Irish authorities.

4. The British government introduced multiple programmes of relief works, but the Irish Board of Works was unable to administer them properly. Public relief works were funded from state loans and were carried out by the Irish Board of Works in collaboration with local authorities. The first programme was set up as early as in March 1846 and it employed a third of a million destitute people by December of that year. By March 1847, over 700,000 Irishmen were employed with between two and three million people dependent on their meagre earnings. The Board of Works could not provide sufficient organisation while cash for wages ran short and salaries could not keep up with food prices. In the end, the relief works, for which the British government had laid out £5 million, failed due to the inadequacy of the Board of Works.

5. When the British government abandoned the public relief works, it started organizing soup kitchens that saved the lives of thousands of starving people. The scheme, which fed 3 million people at its peak, was always meant to be temporary, and was called off after a few months. This was due to the fact that the initiative violated the dominant economic ideology of the time: laissez-faire. According to it, there should be as little government interference with the economy as possible. The ideology was very popular among government officials in Britain, and although it did not completely various forms of intervention against the Famine, it limited their duration.



Map showing the percentage distribution of the maximum population receiving food relief under the Temporary Relief (Soup Kitchen) Act, with the south and west of Ireland receiving more relief than elsewhere.

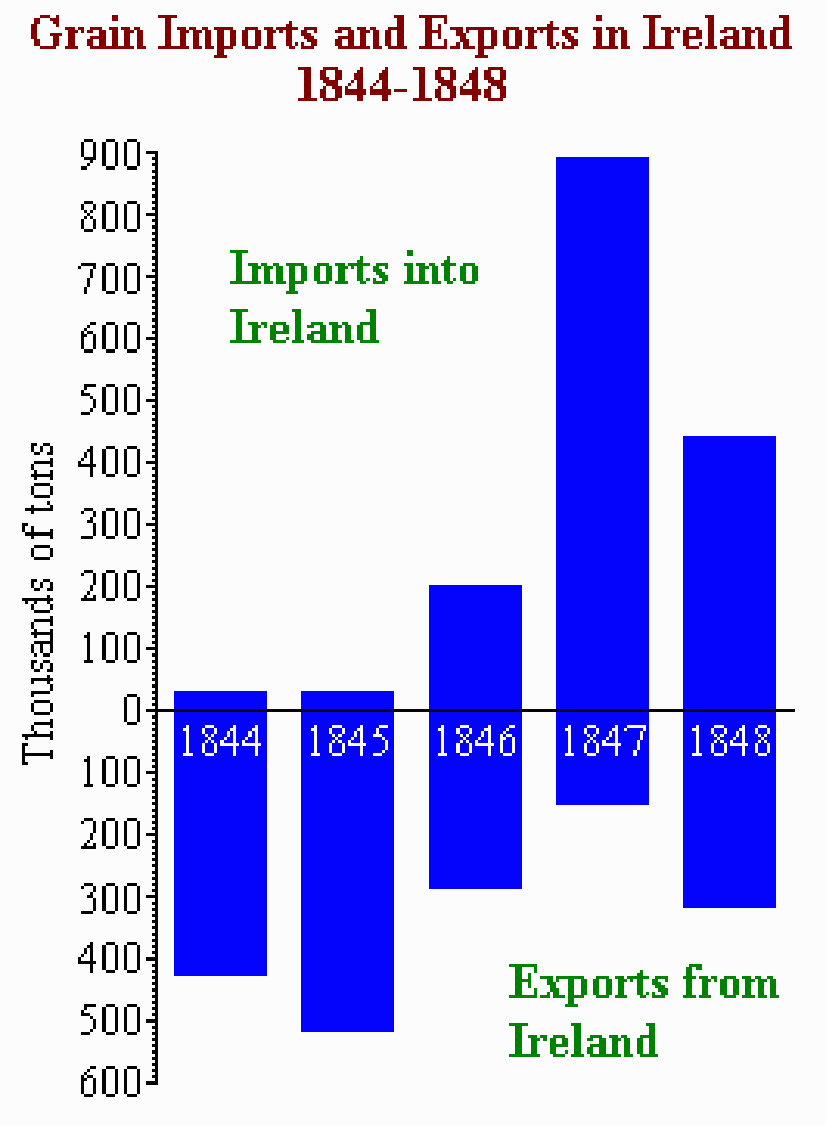
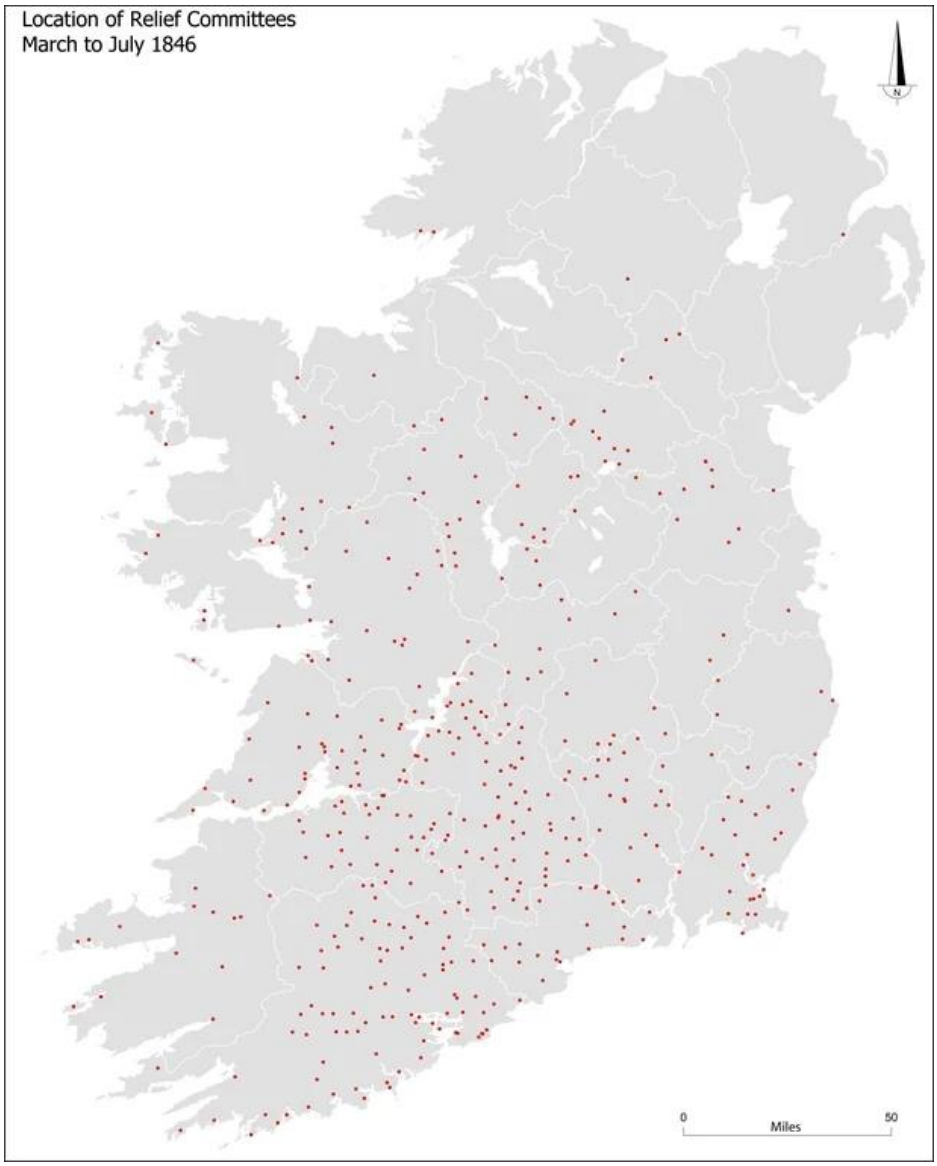


Chart showing that during the Famine Irish farmers continued to export grain while British government imported grain



Almost 700 relief committees receiving government funds were established in the spring and summer of 1846.

"It is impossible to overrate the valuable services rendered by the gentlemen who attend here, and undertake the arduous duty of administering the daily rations of food to the famishing and clamorous crowds who beset the gates. The average number supplied every day at this establishment for the past week has been 1300, and many hundreds more apply, whom it is impossible at present to accommodate. The upper gate is opened at twelve o'clock, and eight hundred are admitted, when the tremendous rush which takes place presents fearful evidence of the hunger and misery which the crowd are enduring; on entering, they are classified, and stationed in the order in which it is intended to serve them, in a row of pens or enclosed places under the range of sheds at the right hand, each lot of 100 being in charge of a policeman, to see that each is properly attended to: there is then a communication from the kitchen in the rear, through which the hominy is handed in tins, containing a quart each, with great rapidity, to each person, who then crosses the yard to the sheds at the other side, and there eats his food. The whole 800 are served in about three hours, and are then let out by the lower gate, and a fresh batch of 5 to 600 admitted as before, and fed in the same way. We tasted the food they receive, which is most carefully prepared from rice and Indian meal, well boiled and seasoned, and can safely declare that it is excellent. We would, however, earnestly appeal to the ever-active benevolence of the charitable, by suggesting the immense advantage the poor would derive from the addition of a little bread to this description of soup. Even a two-penny loaf per day from one half of the respectable families in Cork, who would not miss ten times its cost, sent to this Depôt, would be of incalculable assistance, and greatly aid the noble exertions of the Committee."

Abstract from an article published by the Irish newspaper *Southern Reporter* in March 1847. The article describes a soup kitchen in Barrack-street, Cork, stated to be the first establishment of the kind opened in Ireland for the distribution of food to the poor gratuitously.

"The impoverished labourers assembled in great numbers, thinking to intimidate the assembled ratepayers and magistrates […] The riotous conduct of those assembled created considerable alarm, and the majority of the shops were closed during the day. The magistrates ordered out the military and police, but they were hooted and pelted with stones. One fellow was arrested in the act of throwing a stone at the County Inspector, who escaped without receiving much injury, though struck by it. […] [O]ne soldier of the 27th regiment received a desperate cut in the face from a missile thrown by one of the mob. The forbearance of the police and military was very great under the trying scenes passing before them as they refrained from dealing "death blows" from their muskets in return for the many injuries attempted to be inflicted upon them, and for which they deserve the gratitude and esteem of the well disposed people of Dungarvan".

Abstract from an article published by the *Cork Examiner* on 18th September 1847. The rioting took place in Dungarvan, Co. Waterford, in response to the continuing export of food.

“To be convinced that potatoes are as nutritious and good as corn bread one needs only to consider the actual state of Ireland. This island contains a little more than three million people, and it is incontestable that two thirds of them eat no more than twelve pounds of bread a year. The Irish live on potatoes, to which they occasionally a little salt and butter. And yet the whole world knows that the Irish peasants are very strong and very brave…”

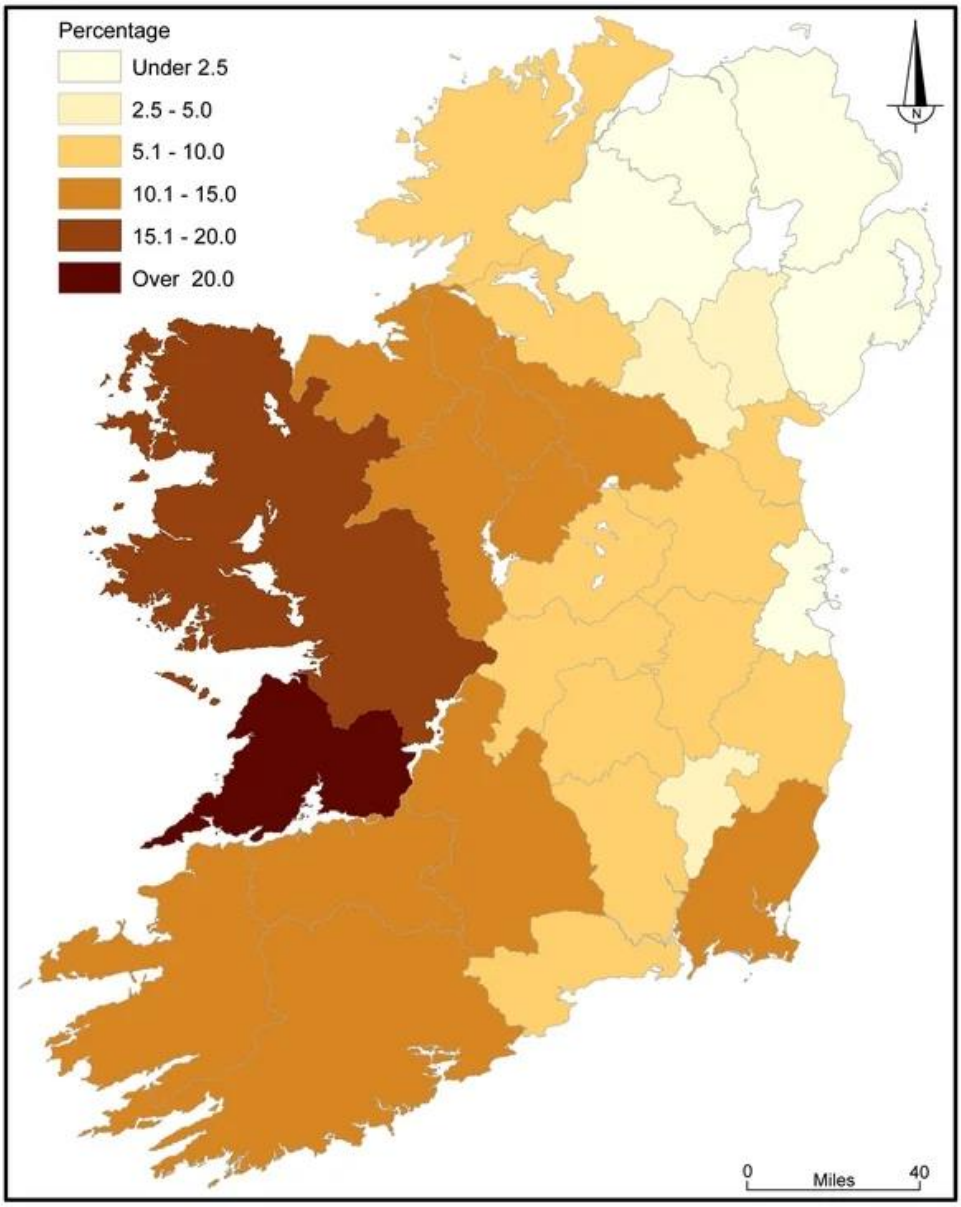
Thomas Keating, Irish emigrant, explaining the benefits of potatoes to the French revolutionaries in the late eighteenth century, who assisted Irish Republicans in the latter’s rebellion against British rule.

Picture of the Cork side of the Healy Pass. Now a popular tourist route, its original track, called the Kerry Pass, was cut in 1847 as a poor relief public works project, financed by the British Government.

“They blended well with the diet of the poor; with the cow’s drop their sweetness was enough; they were great with fish and pure butter, and there was never a cheaper food”

Lament for the potato, 1740. Popular song praising the potato crop.

Famine relief tokens enabling the holders to receive a free meal from a soup kitchen in 1847.



Map showing the percentage of adult population employed on public works in the spring of 1847.