

“To Hell or Connaught:” How British Colonizers Both Caused and Benefitted from the Irish Potato Famine

The Irish potato famine is well-known for the suffering and death it inflicted upon the masses of Irish peasantry between 1845 and 1848. The famine is often remembered and mourned as the tragic but unavoidable result of natural circumstances, and the blight that swept through the potato crop year after year is attributed as the sole cause of starvation. This misrepresentation of the famine's history ignores the role of the British colonizer state in establishing conditions in Ireland that led to famine and exacerbating the suffering of the Irish through neglect. This paper explores the role of the British colonial government in Ireland in causing and amplifying the negative impacts of the Irish potato famine.

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Ruby Lewis

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The Irish potato famine is undeniably one of the greatest tragedies in Ireland’s turbulent and bloodstained history. One million people—roughly one-eighth of Ireland’s

population—perished of starvation between 1845 and 1848, and another two million were forced to flee the country in search of a safer life elsewhere.¹ Those who remained piled into disease-ridden, overcrowded workhouses or scraped out a living on meager plots of land. Too frequently, the famine is portrayed by historians as the inevitable outcome of population increase and unfortunate natural circumstances. In reality, the Great Hunger was the result of British conquest and subsequent neglect. After Cromwell’s invasion of Ireland in 1649, the British forced mass relocations of Irish farmers and peasants into the western and southern territories of Ireland, where fertile land was scarce.² Subsisting on land unable to support wheat, the Irish farmers quickly turned to the potato as a staple crop. The majority of the Irish peasantry subsided entirely on a potato-based diet.³ To benefit the British economy, almost all non-potato foodstuffs, like dairy and grain, were exported to England, even during the famine years.⁴ British mismanagement of the Irish potato famine through the Irish Poor Law system decimated the Irish population and traditional lifestyle while increasing the influence of the British colonizer state in Ireland and contributing to the further oppression of the Irish people.

The Irish potato famine may have devastated the country in the nineteenth century, but its beginnings lie with Oliver Cromwell’s invasion of Ireland and the centuries of colonization that followed. Oliver Cromwell was an English general and statesman who led a successful invasion of Ireland in 1649. In his journal article “The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society,” Dean M. Braa describes Cromwell’s invasion as an “intense and cruel

¹ David Nally, “‘That Coming Storm:’ The Irish Poor Law, Colonial Biopolitics, and the Great Famine,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 98, no. 3 (2008): 718, accessed October 28, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25515149>.

² Dean M. Braa, “The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society,” *Science & Society* 61, no. 2 (1997): 197, accessed October 29, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40403619>.

³ Ian Miller, “Nutritional Decline in Post-Famine Ireland, C. 1851-1922,” in *Food and Drink in Ireland*, ed. Elizabeth FitzPatrick and James Kelly (Ireland: Royal Irish Academy, 2016), 316.

⁴ Nally, “‘That Coming Storm,’” 211.

campaign.”⁵ Cromwell’s conquest was not the first attempt by the English to conquer and colonize Ireland, but it was the most successful. By robbing the Irish of their land, wealth, and right to self-government, Cromwell’s campaign allowed for the firm establishment of an English, Protestant ruling class in Ireland.⁶

Lead by Cromwell, the English ruling class laid claim to the expansive and fertile farmland located in northern and eastern Ireland at the expense of the Irish peasantry. The newly displaced Irish peasantry were banished to western and southern Ireland. While ordering the mass eviction of Irish Catholics from their land, Cromwell famously announced that he would send the Irish “to Hell or Connaught!”⁷ Connaught is a province in Western Ireland. Western Irish soil was sandy and rocky with poor drainage, which rendered farming very difficult.⁸ Braa notes that the English decision to enforce a mass relocation of native Irish peasants to Western Ireland in the 17th century was motivated by their desire to claim the vacant fertile land for their estates.

The outcome of the forced migration westward was, writes Braa, that “the density of the Irish peasantry was in inverse proportion to the quality (productivity) of the land.”⁹ The vast majority of Irish land, owned and occupied by English estate owners, maintained the lowest population in the country. For context, the overall population density in Ireland in 1841 was 214 people per square mile. The fertile, English-occupied counties of Meath and Kildare had slightly lower respective population densities of 201 and 187 people per square mile. In stark contrast, Connaught (one of the provinces to which many Irish peasants were sent) had a population

⁵ Braa, “The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society,” 197.

⁶ Braa, 197-198.

⁷ T. C. Barnard, “Planters and Policies in Cromwellian Ireland,” *Past & Present* 61, no. 1 (1973): 31, accessed October 30, 2020, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/650264>.

⁸ Braa, “The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society,” 197.

⁹ Braa, 197.

density of 386 people per square mile. County Mayo, a county in Connaught, had a staggering population density of 475 people per square mile.¹⁰ The increased population density in Western Ireland meant that farmers had less land with which to work. Additionally, the soil of their new land was rocky and inhospitable. The resource base of Western Ireland was not adequately equipped to feed the hungry masses using the traditional farming techniques and crops. Thus, the potato gained popularity in Ireland.

Contrary to countless stereotypes, the potato was not traditionally an Irish staple crop. Irish dependence on the potato was a result of the forced migration of the Irish onto infertile land. In her chapter “Famine” featured in the *Princeton History of Modern Ireland*, Ciara Boylan notes that “the diffusion of the potato was both earlier and more extensive in Ireland than anywhere else in Europe.” The potato was introduced to Ireland by the English after Cromwell’s invasion. It was first used as a seasonal garden crop in the early seventeenth century. By 1750, it was relied upon as a year-round staple food for the poor in all areas of Ireland.¹¹ As mentioned above, the Irish Catholic peasantry had been forced into cramped areas of markedly high population density. The potato allowed for a greater concentration of population, Braa determined, because it “required approximately one-quarter of the land that wheat or other grains needed for the general maintenance of the average peasant family.”¹² An unusually hearty crop, the potato was able to flourish in the poor agricultural conditions of western and southern Ireland.

As well as producing a high crop yield on minimal land, the potato contained sufficient nutrients to be consumed as a staple food year-round. By the early 1840s, one-third of the

¹⁰ Braa, “The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society,” 199.

¹¹ Ciara Boylan, “FAMINE,” in *The Princeton History of Modern Ireland*, ed. Richard Bourke and Ian McBride (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 405, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvc77n5h.23>.

¹² Braa, “The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society,” 200.

population (nearly three million people) was “almost entirely dependent” on the potato for subsistence, and one-third of Irish land was dedicated to growing the potato.¹³ Irish monoculture and potato dependence primed the country for the devastation of the potato famine. Although other crops and dairy products were produced in Ireland, the majority of the output was quickly exported to England. The remainder was far too expensive for purchase by the Irish poor. When the blight arrived on Irish shores, the vast majority of the Irish population would lose their livelihood and their crucial food source.

The relief policies of the British colonial government struggled to address Irish poverty—a direct result of colonization—even before the famine struck. In the 1830s, shortly before the famine began, the English government began formulating a plan to address Irish poverty. In his journal article “‘That Coming Storm:’ The Irish Poor Law, Colonial Biopolitics, and the Great Famine,” David Nally stated that British policymakers had determined by the 1830s that Irish poverty was the result of “moral corruption, economic underdevelopment, and agrarian agitation.”¹⁴ In short, British policymakers viewed poverty as the product of moral failure by the Irish, rather than as a condition caused by circumstance.

Upon actual investigation, this prejudiced view was disproven. In 1833, the British government formed a Royal Commission to investigate, report on, and make policy-orientated suggestions regarding the condition of the Irish poor. The archbishop of Dublin, Richard Whately, was appointed chair of the commission.¹⁵ After a thorough investigation, Whately concluded that a law modeled after the English Poor Law would not be applicable in Ireland. In her chapter “Famine,” Boylan cites a line from a report by the inquiry commission which read, “we see that the labouring class [in Ireland] are eager for work, that work is not there for them,

¹³ Boylan, “FAMINE,” 405.

¹⁴ Nally, “‘That Coming Storm’” 720.

¹⁵ Nally, 721.

and that they are therefore, and not from any fault of their own, in permanent want.”¹⁶ The striking poverty in Ireland was not, as the British government commonly held, a result of moral degeneracy, but a consequence of colonization and lack of opportunity.

Upon receiving a thorough and ambitious report that was inconsistent with their bigoted preconceptions, the British government sought a second perspective more aligned with their prejudices. The British solicited the opinions of Nassau Senior and George Cornwall Lewis. Senior, despite being the principal author of the English Poor Law, was against instituting a Poor Law in Ireland. In “This Coming Storm,” Nally writes that “Irish poverty was considered too extreme and pervasive for a Poor Law to operate successfully.”¹⁷ Lewis, however, was evidently swayed by family bias, as his father was the chairman of the Poor Law commissioners in England. He advocated for a Poor Law in Ireland. Because of the discrepancy in Senior and Lewis’ conclusions, English Poor Law Commissioner George Nicholls was sent to Ireland to form his own conclusion on how best to address Irish poverty.¹⁸ After less than a year in Ireland, Nicholls submitted a report suggesting that the English Poor Law system could be used in Ireland with “only a few minor amendments.”¹⁹ Notably, the language in Nicholls’ report tied poverty in Ireland to the poor character and immorality of the Irish people—a dangerous and unfounded conclusion that perpetuated stereotyped narratives around the Irish poor. Nicholls’ report was the basis for the Poor Law Ireland Act, which was introduced into law on July 31st, 1838. A signature feature of the Poor Law Ireland Act was communal living in workhouses, which would have a devastating impact on the Irish during the famine years.

¹⁶ Boylan, “FAMINE,” 406.

¹⁷ Nally, ““That Coming Storm,”” 722.

¹⁸ Nally, 722.

¹⁹ Nally, 723.

In late June of 1845, just seven years after the Poor Law Ireland Act became law, the fungal disease *Phytophthora infestans* first appeared in Belgium. The blight swept across northern and central Europe, reaching Ireland in August of the same year.²⁰ On August 20th, 1845, Dr. David Moore of the Botanic Gardens in Dublin's Glasnevin recorded Ireland's first observation of the disease.²¹ Seventeen countries were infected with the blight by late November, but Ireland would encounter devastation on a magnitude entirely unforeseen and unmatched.²² Beginning in 1845, the potato harvest failed four times in five years. Boylan recounts that in 1844, 2.4 million acres of potatoes were sown to produce a crop of roughly 15 million tons of potatoes. In 1845, the crop shrank drastically to only 10 million tons of potatoes. In 1846, a scant 3 million tons of potatoes were grown, only one-fifth of the original crop. In 1847, the crop was only 2 million tons.²³ Starvation is typically heralded as the leading cause of death during the famine. In reality, the majority of deaths in famine years were the result of famine-related diseases, often exacerbated by starvation. In the winter of 1846 and spring of 1847, the country experienced an "onset of epidemic fever."²⁴ Diseases like typhus spread wildly among the overcrowded workhouses²⁵ and few, ill-equipped hospitals.²⁶ Families and individuals with the means chose emigration. Tens of thousands of starving Irish families piled aboard ships bound for the United States, England, and other European countries. After the first five years of famine, two million Irish had fled the country aboard emigrant ships. Another one million had died.²⁷ Before the famine, Ireland's population had been steadily increasing. In 1841, the country's

²⁰ Boylan, "FAMINE," 407.

²¹ Boylan, 407.

²² Braa, "The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society," 210.

²³ Boylan, "FAMINE," 407.

²⁴ Boylan, 408.

²⁵ Workhouses were an institutional form of social welfare established under the Poor Law Ireland Act of 1838. Inside workhouses, families were provided with meager provisions in exchange for punishing labor. They were miserable places designed to discourage extended stay by residents.

²⁶ Boylan, "FAMINE," 408.

²⁷ Nally, "That Coming Storm," 715.

official population totaled 8,175,124. The Parliamentary Census Commissioners predicted that, under normal conditions, the population should have increased to over 9,000,000 individuals by 1851. But after a decade of famine, the Irish population had dropped to a mere 6,552,385.²⁸

The loss of life in the Irish potato famine cannot be overstated, but there were other notable losses than remain frequently overlooked. For one, the famine was culturally devastating for the native Irish who made up the vast majority of the population. More than one million native speakers of the Irish language were lost to death or emigration. In 1845, roughly half of Ireland's population was fluent in Irish. By 1851, this figure decreased by more than half—only 23% of the population could speak Irish.²⁹ Speaking the native Irish language (sometimes referred to as Gaelic) has for centuries remained a point of cultural pride and a subtle means of resistance against English colonization. In this area, the famine dealt a demoralizing wound to Irish cultural heritage.

All efforts at famine relief were marred by the British refusal to sacrifice the Irish capitalist economy to save the Irish people. Early relief systems crumbled because of negligence and greed on the part of the British government, and the full burden of famine relief quickly fell to the Irish Poor Law system—an ill-advised effort that was woefully unequipped to meet the needs of the people. In late 1845 and 1846, the British made their first and only attempts at offering relief to the Irish. Under the instruction of Robert Peel's conservative government, the Board of Works in Ireland and a specially formed relief commission split their efforts between attempting to regulate food prices and offering employment opportunities to the Irish people.³⁰ In June of 1846, John Russell's government replaced Peel's. Russell abandoned Peel's efforts at making food more affordable and widely available, instead focusing the government's energy on

²⁸ Braa, "The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society," 210.

²⁹ Boylan, "FAMINE," 418.

³⁰ Boylan, 411.

raising employment numbers. Unfortunately, the Board of Works quickly became unable to support the number of laborers seeking employment. In 1846, the works were relatively functional in providing employment for 100,000 laborers. By 1847, the public works system crumpled under the strain of a total of 714,390 laborers. Boylan writes that, “weakened and malnourished, workers began to die in large numbers on the works in early 1847.”³¹ Peel and Russell’s halfhearted attempts at famine relief were all but dead by June of 1847. Boylan writes that, by the end 1847, “it had become official policy to allow the famine to ‘run its course.’”³² Supplemental relief efforts were abandoned, and the Irish Poor Law took up the mantle as the principal means of state relief.

The Irish Poor Law, which Richard Whately’s investigation had found unsuitable to meet Ireland’s needs even before the famine, was by no means equipped to support the starving masses. Beginning in 1838, the Irish Poor Law had divided Ireland into 130 administrative units (the number would later increase to 163) referred to as “poor law unions.”³³ Each union contained a workhouse. The workhouses were run by an elected board and supported by the tax money of the Irish families residing within the union. The workhouses were designed to be so miserable that families were only driven there out of absolute need and would desire to leave the workhouse as soon as they were able. In his second report on the Poor Laws in Ireland, Commissioner George Nicholls wrote, “I further propose that, in Ireland, no relief should be given except in the workhouse.” Nicholls’ aim, he noted, was “to guard against the abuse and train of evils which have invariably attended the unrestricted distribution of out-door relief...”³⁴

The bigoted misconception on the behalf of Nicholls and other British policymakers that the Irish

³¹ Boylan, “FAMINE,” 412.

³² Boylan, 414.

³³ Nally, “That Coming Storm,” 724.

³⁴ George Nicholls, *Poor Laws—Ireland: Three Reports* (London: W. Clowes and Sons, 1838), 36, https://brittlebooks.library.illinois.edu/brittlebooks_open/Books200907/nichge0001poolaw/nichge0001poolaw.pdf.

poor would take advantage of relief offered outside of the confines of the workhouse (referred to as “outdoor relief”) caused immeasurable harm to the Irish during the famine years. As Nicholls noted, this prejudice led the British to build no outdoor relief measures into the Irish Poor Law. The only way for the Irish to claim relief was to move into a workhouse, where they endured cramped quarters, disease, separation from their families, and generally dehumanizing treatment. However, bigoted and merciless as he was, even Nicholls admitted in his report to the queen that the Poor Law would not be equipped to provide relief for the Irish in the case of a famine. Nicholls wrote, “The occurrence of a famine, however, if general, seems to be a contingency altogether above the powers of a Poor Law to provide for.”³⁵ When famine struck Ireland, Nicholls’ warning was left unheeded.

Beginning in 1847, the abandonment of Peel and Russell’s attempts at famine relief gave the Irish Poor Law, and therefore the British government, newfound power over Ireland. Nally noted that, “Through the machinery of the Poor Law the government gradually maneuvered itself into a very powerful position vis-a-vis some of the poorest and most vulnerable members of Irish society.”³⁶ In November of 1847, the British parliament passed a piece of legislation known as the “Gregory clause,” after its author, William Gregory. The Gregory clause declared that “famine relief, indoor and outdoor, at the workhouses administered by the poor law boards of guardians, would be limited to those with a quarter acre or less of land.”³⁷ This clause made seeking relief in a workhouse impossible for Irish landholders with more than a quarter acre of land. Many people gave up their land in order to receive relief from a workhouse, which meant landlords accumulated large quantities of land. Others chose to keep their land and go without

³⁵ Nicholls, *Poor Laws—Ireland: Three Reports*, 37.

³⁶ Nally, ““That Coming Storm,”” 718.

³⁷ Brian M. Walker, “Villain, victim, or prophet?: William Gregory and the Great Famine,” *Irish Historical Studies* 38, no. 152 (2013): 585, accessed December 16, 2020, file:///Users/rubylewis/Downloads/villain-victim-or-prophet-william-gregory-and-the-great-famine.pdf.

relief, which often meant accepting the deaths of family members or sinking into even greater depths of starvation and despair. Another manipulation of the Poor Law to harm the Irish peasantry occurred in the 1847 famine relief act. A clause in the 1843 poor law amendment act had made it such that rates for land holdings valued at £4 or less were the responsibility of the landlord to pay. After the passage of the 1847 famine relief act, rates went up on most plots of land in order to provide funding for famine relief, and landlords raised the rent.³⁸ Tenants were overwhelmingly unable to pay rent, and landlords who were unwilling to continue to cover the rates for their tenants' land turned to evictions. The number of formal and permanent evictions between 1849 and 1854 totaled nearly 250,000 persons.³⁹ This figure does not include temporary or informal evictions, of which there were many. It also does not encompass any of the many voluntary evictions that were forced by the Gregory clause.

Because of evictions (formal, informal, and voluntary); immigration; and the deaths of landholders; estate owners, many of whom were British, were able to accumulate much of the land that was held by small Irish farmers pre-famine. In her chapter "Famine," Boylan writes, "Holdings of 1-5 acres, which made up 45% of all landholdings in 1841, had dropped to 15.5% of the total in 1851. In contrast, holdings of more than 30 acres had risen from 7% to 26% over the same period."⁴⁰ In 1847 and the years following, the British colonizer state gained an exorbitant quantity of Irish land at the expense of its dead or departed owners. The Irish Poor Law was no longer a shoddy means of relief to fall back on during hard times, but a stringent and exacting system of living and working in which the vast majority of the Irish peasantry were irrevocably entrenched.

³⁸ Walker, "Villain, victim, or prophet?," 587.

³⁹ Walker, 587.

⁴⁰ Boylan, "FAMINE," 417.

It is essential not to overlook the villainization of the Irish during the potato famine in British legislation, documentation, and popular culture. One has only to examine the language used by the British elite to describe the Irish poor to understand the depths of prejudice and hatred that pervaded British treatment of the Irish. In his report to England on the potential effects of implementing an Irish Poor Law, George Nicholls repeatedly insulted the “desultory and idle habits of the Irish peasantry.”⁴¹ Rather than acknowledging the stunning poverty inflicted upon the Irish under British rule, Nicholls jibed, “If they felt a wish to better their condition, or to appear better, they might do so; but they seem to have no such ambition...”⁴² Not only did Nicholls fail to recognize the fault of British colonization in the condition of the Irish poor, but he attempted to attribute Irish poverty to the lack of “ambition” of the Irish—an opinion that was not only deeply incorrect, but bigoted and demeaning. An issue of *The British Medical Journal* released on February 10th, 1883 is perhaps the most revealing of British prejudice against the Irish in the media (although it addressed a later bout of famine). The *Journal* read, “Whole villages are desolate, and men, women, and children have died, and are daily dying, of actual deprivation of food. Again the Irish potato-crop has failed, and again, with its periodical persistence, famine stalks through the unhappy land. A fortnight ago, we drew attention to the wise suggestion of Dr. Lyons, M.P., that an organised national effort, on a sufficient scale, should be forthwith made, to induce the peasantry of the sister island to cease their reliance upon the untrustworthy potato, which has so often and so sorely failed them, as their staple food, and to teach them to transfer their allegiance to the hardy and wholesome oats of the Scotch, supplemented by the fish with which the Irish seas abound.”⁴³ The inaccuracies,

⁴¹ Nicholls, *Poor Laws—Ireland: Three Reports*, 10.

⁴² Nicholls, 10.

⁴³ “The Potato-Famine In Ireland,” *The British Medical Journal* 1, no. 1154 (1883): 262, accessed October 30, 2020, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25262242>.

over-simplification, and condescension displayed in this short segment of the article reveal an intentional abasement of the Irish character and misrepresentation of the cause of the Irish famine. In the first two sentences, the *Journal* appears to acknowledge the suffering of the Irish people, describing the “desolate” circumstances and daily deaths as a result of “actual deprivation of food.” However, the article continues with a mocking, condescending tone, implying that the famine was a result of Irish “reliance on the untrustworthy potato,” rather than other available foodstuffs (“hardy and wholesome oats” and “the fish with which the Irish seas abound”). The article implies that the oats and fish mentioned would be enough to feed the “desolate” villages and “men, women, and children” who are “daily dying.” The famine would be over, suggests the article, if the dying Irish poor would simply “cease their reliance” on the one crop able to be grown on their land and provide adequate nourishment to their families. Braa notes in “The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society,” that the Irish dependence on the potato “must be understood as the direct result of a long period of English/British colonialism.”⁴⁴ To suggest that the famine was the fault of the Irish for their overreliance on the potato is both incorrect and offensive. The article expands its outrageously obtuse perspective with the suggestion that the British, who had for years failed to provide adequate famine relief to the Irish and allowed them to die by the millions, should “teach” the Irish to rely upon alternative food sources. The grating oversimplifications and prejudice expressed in Nicholls’ reports and the *British Medical Journal* are only a meager sample of the ideas and published material promoted by the British during the famine years and beyond.

In part as a result of the dominant British narrative expressing England’s innocence in the Irish potato famine, historians often portray the famine as a natural disaster. However, in “That

⁴⁴ Braa, “The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society,” 194.

Coming Storm,” Nally points out that famines “are a scandal, not a scourge.” The fungal disease *Phytophthora infestans* was the scourge. The famine was a byproduct of governmental mismanagement of the blight. *Phytophthora infestans* killed the crop, but the British government killed the farmers. One of the most shocking examples of British negligence during the famine can be found in records of food exports from Ireland during the famine years. Although the majority of the Irish peasantry did not possess the amount or quality of land required for grain production, wheat, oats, and barley were grown on British estates throughout the famine years.⁴⁵ During 1846, 1847, and 1848, at least 100,000 tons of grain were exported from Ireland per year.⁴⁶ Any grain that was not exported was too expensive for the Irish poor to afford.⁴⁷ The grain exports were beneficial to the British economy, so they continued despite the famine. The export of grain from Ireland during the famine years is a pertinent example of how British misconduct in Ireland exacerbated the initial consequences of the potato crop failure.

British colonialism has often been overlooked as a cause of the Irish potato famine in famine historiography. As the colonizers, the British perspective has long dominated historiographical examinations of the famine. Most historical accounts of the famine begin in 1845, when the blight reached Irish shores, with little to no discussion of the historical context that bred the famine. The rebellions, uprisings, and political agitation in the years preceding the famine have frequently been framed as “symptoms of a domestic squabble between equal participants in the UK,” rather than as the desperate struggle of the Irish to wrest control of their country from the grasping hands of the British.⁴⁸ Historical accounts of the famine years are too often biased towards the British government. The relief policies proposed and implemented by

⁴⁵ Braa, 200

⁴⁶ Braa, 201.

⁴⁷ Boylan, “FAMINE,” 405.

⁴⁸ Nally, ““That Coming Storm,”” 715.

the British colonial government are frequently mischaracterized as “aid” or “improvement.” These descriptions do not mean that British policies were effective, or even well-intentioned. The progression of the famine suggests that in most cases, they were not. In “This Coming Storm,” Nally emphasized that colonial projects are often misrepresented as saviorism or improvement efforts in order to mask the harm they create. In the 1990s, however, the 150th anniversary of the Irish potato famine sparked a revived historiographical interest in the causes of the famine, during which the role of British colonialism in the famine was critically examined.⁴⁹

When evaluating the Irish potato famine, one must keep in mind that famines are not natural disasters. Every famine has a cause. For Ireland, the colonization of Ireland by the British and the subsequent centuries of abuse of the native Irish Catholic population were the root causes of famine. The forced relocations of Irish citizens by the British to the agriculturally unforgiving lands of western and southern Ireland brought about the dependency of the Irish population on the potato. The implementation of the woefully unhelpful Irish Poor Law system, despite recommendations to the contrary, allowed disease, poverty, and joblessness to flourish in Ireland during the famine. The popular elite narrative describing the poor as lazy and villainous aided the government’s attempts to blame the Irish for the famine. Contrary to revisionist narratives, the devastating Irish potato famine was the byproduct of years of mismanagement and mistreatment of the Irish poor by the British colonizer state. The Irish potato famine provides a striking example of how a stilted governmental response to national tragedy can devastate the vulnerable populations in a nation. When examined from a modern light, the similarities between the malign neglect in the British government’s response to the famine and the United States government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic become strikingly and disturbingly clear.

⁴⁹ Walker, “Villain, victim, or prophet?,” 59

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