

Hunger on Trial

An Activity on the Irish Potato Famine and Its Meaning for Today

By **BILL BIGELOW**

SOMEWHERE BACK IN SCHOOL I learned about the 19th-century Irish Potato Famine: More than a million people starved to death when blight hit Ireland's main crop, the potato. The famine meant tremendous human suffering and triggered a mass migration, largely to the United States.

All this is true. But it is also incomplete and misses key facts that link past and present global hunger. Beginning in 1845, blight did begin to hit Ireland's potato crop, which was the staple food of the Irish poor. But all other crops were unaffected. And during the worst famine years, British-ruled Ireland continued to export vast amounts of food.

The first winter of famine, 1846-47, while as many as 400,000 starved, landlords exported 17 million pounds sterling worth of grain (wheat, oats, and barley), cattle, pigs, flour, eggs, and poultry—food that could have fed 12 million people over the winter, twice the number of Irish tenant farmers dependent on potatoes.

According to Thomas Gallagher's book, *Paddy's Lament*, one British steamer alone, the *Ajax*, which sailed from Cork to England during the depths of the famine in 1847, contained: "1,514 firkins of butter, 102 casks of pork, 44 hogs-heads of whiskey, 844 sacks of oats, 247 sacks of

wheat, 106 bales of bacon, 13 casks of hams, 145 casks of porter [beef steak] ... 8 sacks of lard, 296 boxes of eggs, 30 head of cattle, 90 pigs, 220 lambs, 34 calves, and 69 miscellaneous packages." As the Irish poor starved.



Courtesy of Views of the Famine

In the 1840s, English newspapers brought a certain tourist mentality to reporting on the plight of the Irish poor, offering sketches full of both pathos and mockery, like this one drawn by a visiting English artist for the Illustrated London News.

In approaching the potato famine in my global studies class, I wanted students to see that hunger is less a natural phenomenon than it is a political and economic phenomenon. In 19th-century Ireland, food was a commodity, distributed largely to those who had the means to pay for it. Like today, the capitalist market ruled, and commerce trumped need. According to the Institute for Food and Development Policy/Food First, “Enough food is available to provide at least 4.3 pounds of food per person a day worldwide: two and a half pounds of grain, beans, and nuts, about a pound of fruits and vegetables, and nearly another pound of meat, milk, and eggs.” And yet, according to the organization Bread for the World, 852 million people in the world are hungry, and every day 16,000 children die of hunger-related causes. The main issue was and continues to be: Who controls the land and for what purposes?

Hunger Guilt

I designed a trial role play to highlight the “crime” of famine and to encourage students to reflect on responsibility for that crime. The Irish Potato Famine lends itself to this teaching strategy, as students could plainly recognize the enormity of the famine, but the causes for the Irish suffering were not self-evident and required more consideration. [For examples of the trial role play format, see “The People v. Columbus, et al.” in *Rethinking Columbus*; “The People v. Global Sweatshops” in *Rethinking Globalization*; and “The Case of Cultural Destruction,” online at <http://www.rethinkingschools.org/publication/rg/RGLak.shtm>.] I wrote five detailed “indictments” (see box): British landlords, Irish tenant farmers, the Anglican Church, the British government, and “Political Economy”—the system of colonial capitalism.

This last role requires some explanation for students, because unlike the others, it is not a specific group of humans: It is a system of ownership, production, and distribution. But asking students

to think systemically—reflecting on how the “rules of the game” reward and punish particular behaviors—is a key aim of my global studies curriculum. I don’t want to dehumanize responsibility for injustice, but I want students to look beneath the surface to try to account for why people make the choices they do, and not to rely on glib explanations like “greed.”

Each group was charged with the same crime, but for different reasons:

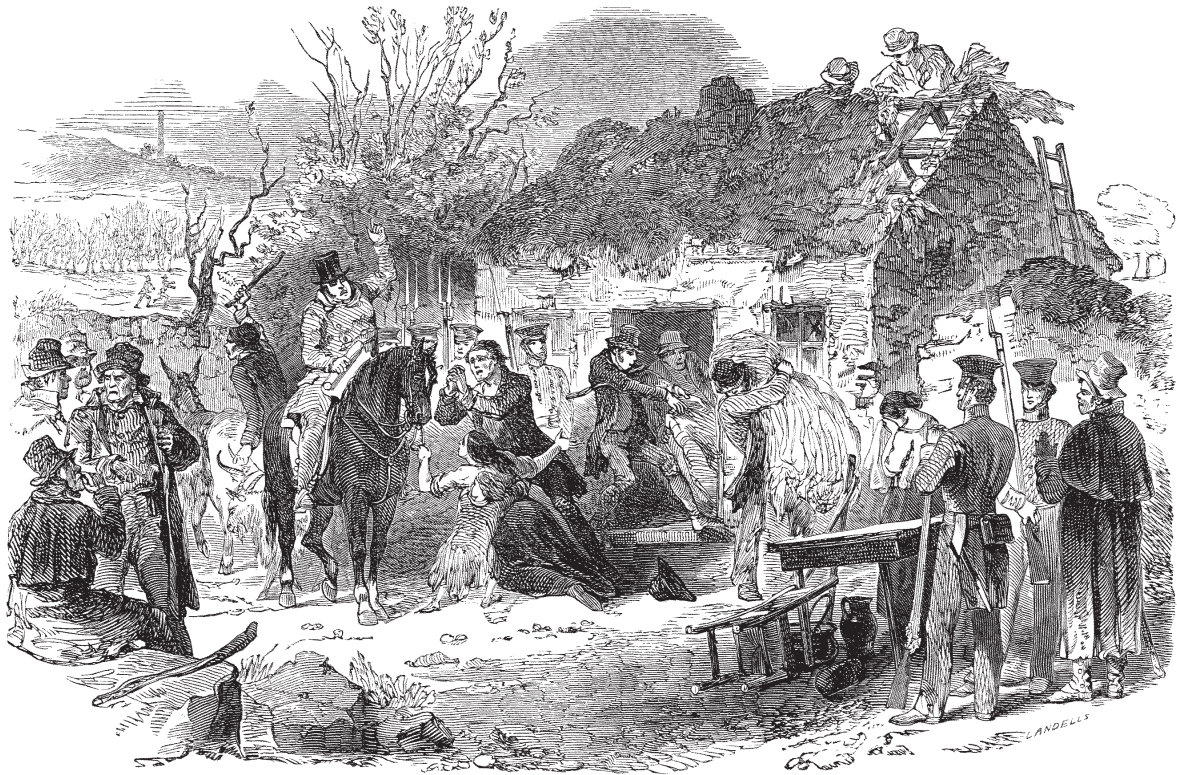
You are charged with the murder of one and a half million Irish peasants who died in the famine years of 1846 and 1847. These were needless deaths. Even without the potato, there was more than enough food produced in Ireland during those years to feed everyone in the country and still have plenty left over. The action—or lack of action—taken by your group led to untold misery. You are to blame.

Students come to see that hunger is less a natural phenomenon than a political and economic one.

Role Play Set Up

I used this role play with my 11th-grade global studies classes at Franklin High School in Portland, Ore., as part of a broader unit on colonialism and the history of global inequality [see chapter two of *Rethinking Globalization*, “Legacy of Inequality: Colonial Roots”]—but it could also be used in a U.S. history course, looking at the roots of Irish immigration to the United States. One reason I appended a short unit on British colonialism in Ireland to this unit is because I wanted my classes of largely working-class European American students to see that colonial exploitation affected “white” people, too—although “white” deserves quotation marks because the British constructed the Irish as a separate race from themselves [see Noel Ignatiev’s book, *How the Irish Became White*].

I opened the unit by bringing to class a potato—an extraordinary food contribution from Native America to the rest of the world. I told students that the word potato comes originally from the Taíno word, *batata*, for what we know today as the sweet potato. The Incas in



Courtesy of Views of the Famine

To support the famine relief effort, British tax policy required landlords to pay the local taxes of their poorest tenant farmers, leading many landlords to forcibly evict struggling farmers and destroy their cottages in order to save money.

South America had cultivated more than 3,000 varieties of potato, ingeniously working out a way to freeze-dry potatoes to make storage and transportation easier; Incan freeze-dried potatoes could be stored for up to five years. An acre planted in potatoes produces twice as many calories as an acre planted in wheat, requires less labor to tend, is less prone to damage from storms, and produces less tooth decay. Its introduction to Europe led to a population boom.

I explained to students that potatoes would be at the center of a role play that examined British colonialism in Ireland. Because there were so many poor people in Ireland—seven out of every eight people on the island—and because they had so little land, the Irish poor relied on the potato. But beginning in 1845, they began to notice the arrival of blight. It turned the potatoes black, gooey, and bad smelling. But the blight afflicted only the potato crops. There was no drought, and three quarters of Ireland’s cultivable land was planted in crops other than potatoes, so there was no need for anyone to go hungry.

Before we began the trial, students read excerpts from chapter five of *Paddy’s Lament*, watched parts of the PBS video *The Irish in America*, and listened to Sinéad O’Connor’s haunting version of the song, “Skibbereen,” a mother’s expression of grief offered to her son about why she left Ireland, with verses like:

*Oh, son, I loved my native land, with energy
and pride
'Til a blight came over on my prats, my
sheep and cattle died,
The rent and taxes were so high, 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 cursed
English spleen
And that’s another reason why I left old
Skibbereen.*

I wanted to humanize the effects of the famine, but at the outset I tried not to offer any material that explored its causes. Thus, I saved Sinéad O'Connor's hip-hop-influenced song "Famine," from *Universal Mother*, until the conclusion of the role play.

After introducing students to some of these voices of the famine, I reviewed the charges that confronted the class and then divided students into five groups representing the defendants and a sixth for the jury. Each indictment "role" detailed the specific charges against the group but also indicated the outlines of a possible defense. I distributed packets of all the roles to each group. Students were free to read only the role for their group or, if they wanted more evidence on each group, they could read the entire packet. Their responsibility was to fashion a defense to their group's indictment. They could plead guilty, but in their defense, they had to accuse at least one other group. The jury received all the roles and was responsible for preparing at least three pointed questions for each of the defendant groups.

After preparing their defenses, students sat in a large circle for the trial, each defendant group sitting together. I played the prosecutor and passionately delivered the charges against the first defendant group. Immediately following presentation of the charges against a group, members of that group defended themselves and accused other groups. The jury posed questions to the group on the hot seat, and then I opened the floor to other groups who could also question the defendant. We repeated the process until all groups were charged, had defended themselves, and had been questioned. [Full instructions for teaching the trial are at http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/20_04/inst204.shtml.]

The aim of the trial is not to lead students "Law and Order"-like to some definitive guilty party for the Irish Potato Famine—although I do want them to recognize that the *potato* is not guilty and *nature* is not guilty. I hope instead to nurture a pattern of questioning: Who holds a

society's wealth and power? What determines how resources are used? What human-created institutions and behaviors are at the root of suffering? Too often, the curriculum promotes the notion that we all share a "national interest," as if our students and the CEO of Exxon lived in the same family. But countries are not families, as Howard Zinn says often; and it miseducates students to suggest that they are. Societies are stratified, especially by race and class (and by immigration status). "Ireland" didn't starve; the poor of Ireland starved—needlessly.

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Helping students think clearly about the past can equip them to think clearly about the present. As in Ireland 160 years ago, hunger is rampant today. And like 160 years ago, the cause has little to do with genuine scarcity. If one aim of the

curriculum is to help students imagine solutions to social problems, then such imagination needs to begin with an eyes-open analysis of the root causes of those problems. ■

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Illustrations in this lesson are from the Views of the Famine website: <http://adminstaff.vassar.edu/staylor/FAMINE/>



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Famine Trial Indictments

Here is the first paragraph from each of the Irish Potato Famine Trial indictments.

The full indictments can be found at http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/20_04/fami204.shtml.

Anglican Church

In some ways it could be said that the Anglican Church is the most to blame for the starvation of the Irish. Supposedly, you are God's representative on earth. The Bible says to love your brother as yourself. Yet how did you respond in those two fateful years, 1846 and 1847? You knew that the English landlords forced the Irish to live on the worst land—land that was only good for growing potatoes. The landlords used the best Irish land to get rich, by growing wheat, barley, and oats; by raising pigs; and by grazing cattle and sheep. Did the landlords keep any of this food in Ireland, even when people began to starve? No. They exported it to England. The government enforced the will of the landlords with military might. And how did the Anglican Church respond? Did you protest? Did you tell the landlords that they were too greedy, that they were not doing their Christian duty? No. You did nothing.

“Political Economy”—

The System of Colonial Capitalism

There really are no evil people here. Sure, people did evil things, but it was really the capitalist market that was mostly to blame. Yes, the British landlords exported lots and lots of food while the Irish starved. But why? Because they were devils? No. They did it because that's what people do in a capitalist economy: They sell their produce where they can get the best price. Hardly anyone in Ireland had any money. So the landlords sent their wheat, barley, oats, cattle, sheep, and pigs to England. Not bad people, a bad system: you, capitalism.

British Landlords

You are directly responsible for the terrible famine resulting from the potato blight. You owned the land that the Irish peasants worked. When the potato crop failed, you had a choice: You could either allow your tenants to stop paying rent temporarily and allow them to eat the crops grown on other parts of your land, or you could force them to pay rent even if they would starve as a result. You chose this latter course, which resulted in so much starvation, disease, and death.

Irish Tenant Farmers

It's true that the British landlords, backed up by the British government, turned the potato blight into a famine that killed probably a million and a half Irish. However, what did you do to stop the crimes committed by the British? By not organizing massive resistance to the British, you are also to blame. And you knew that the solution was simple. There was a saying in Ireland at the time: “Sure, this land is full of barley, wheat, and oats. The English have only to distribute it.” What a foolish hope. You had to *take* it from them. You must have known that they wouldn't just give it to you. The most that the Irish did in the way of “redistributing the wealth” was to steal a few sheep.

British Government

In the first winter of the famine, while 400,000 Irish starved to death, English landlords continued to export food from Ireland to England. The British government could have outlawed the export of food while people starved. However, the government allowed the landlords to export 17 million pounds sterling worth of grain, cattle, pigs, flour, eggs, and poultry—food that could have fed 12 million people over the winter months, twice the number of Irish tenant farmers dependent on potatoes.