

**Subject : Junior Cycle History**  
**Teacher : Niall Lenehan**

**LESSON 13**  
**The Famine in Ireland**

## Learning intensions

1. Investigate and understand the causes, course and consequences of the Great Famine.
2. Understand the Irish diaspora and its long-term impacts.

**2.7** investigate the causes, course and consequences, nationally and internationally, of the Great Famine, and examine the significance of the Irish Diaspora.

**1.1** develop a sense of historical empathy by viewing people, issues and events encountered in their study of the past in their historical context.

**1.2** consider contentious or controversial issues in history from more than one perspective and discuss the historical roots of a contentious or controversial issue or theme in the contemporary world.

## Key words - define these

Famine

Conacre

Workhouse

Blight

Coffin Ship

Empathy

Landlord

Subdivision

Government relief

## Ireland in the 1840s

- 8.2 million population – The majority lived in the Countryside.
- Only 50,000 of these lives in cities of Dublin and Belfast.
- Very high birth rates due to high marriage rates.
- Catholics could not own land due to the Penal Laws. Protestant landlords rented land to tenant farmers.
- Cottiers rented a small patch of land off tenant farmers called a conacre. Cottiers were the poorest people in Irish society at the time.

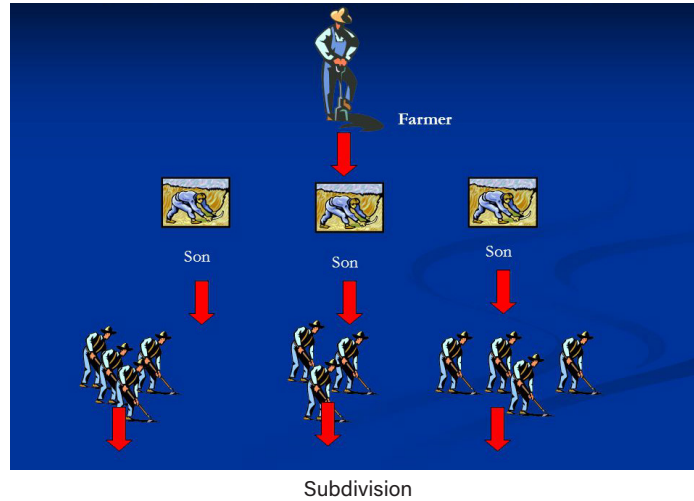
## What was the famine?

- The Irish Famine was a period of mass starvation and disease in Ireland which lasted from 1845 to 1852.
- It was mainly caused by the potato blight which wiped out Irelands potato crop.



## The Causes of the Great Famine

1. **Increase in Population:** By 1841, Ireland's population had reached 8.2 million people. Most lived in poor rural areas such as Connaught.
2. **Subdivision of farmland:** Farmers in Ireland would divide up their land between their sons as a result of the Penal laws. This resulted in farms becoming small and unproductive.



3. **Over reliance on the Potato:** Most families in Ireland were completely dependent on the potato as it could be grown in large quantities in the Irish climate.
4. **The 'Blight':** The Blight was a disease that rotted Ireland's potatoes and made them inedible, wiping out our main food source in the process.



Potato Blight

## An Irishman's diet before the famine

*'On a typical day in 1844, the average adult Irishman ate about 13 pounds of potatoes. At five potatoes to the pound, that's 65 potatoes a day. The average for all men, women, and children was a more modest 9 pounds, or 45 potatoes.'*

## The Course of the Famine

- **1845:** The blight struck destroying half of Ireland's potato crop.
- Few deaths as farmers had stockpiled enough potatoes from the previous year.
- **1846:** The entire potato crop was wiped out.
- There was mass starvation throughout the country, particularly the West of Ireland.
- **1847:** Many people ate their potato seeds instead of planting them.
- This resulted in a second year of almost no potato harvest. There were mass starvations, evictions and emigration.



A family whose potatoes were infected with blight.

- **1848:** The Blight returned and infected the potato crop.
- The mass starvations continued.
- **1849:** Malnutrition becomes widespread.
- Diseases such as cholera were widespread and killed many people.
- **1850:** The potato harvest begins to improve as the blight dies out.

### British relief efforts

- Ireland was ruled by Britain, so it was their responsibility to provide aid to Ireland.
- In 1846, British PM Robert Peel sent **Indian Corn** to Ireland. Many Irish tried to eat it raw as they did not know how to prepare it.
- **Famine relief work schemes** were set up. People worked on public work schemes such as building roads in return for a small wage.



Indian Corn

- British PM John Russell decided on a '**Laissez faire**' (let it be) approach, meaning he would not interfere. It resulted in more deaths.
- **Soup kitchens** were set up in 1847 and fed 3 million starving Irish per day. These were closed prematurely as Britain believed the blight had gone in August.

- **Workhouses were set up.** Starving Irish flocked to these as food and shelter were provided in return for work.
- Many families were split up in the workhouses.
- Conditions were harsh and children were often beaten.



Crowds trying to get into a workhouse

### 13.1 Recap

- Q1.** What was Ireland like before the famine?
- Q2.** Which do you think was the main cause of the famine? Explain your answer
- Q3.** Create a short timeline of the course of the famine. Include at least 4 years.
- Q4.** Name and explain two British relief efforts.
- Q5.** Do you think the British put in enough effort into their famine relief schemes? Explain your answer

### The Consequences of the famine

1. **Decline in population:** The population dropped by about two million people as a result of the famine.
  - **About one million people died** as a result of starvation, disease and malnutrition.
  - **About one million people emigrated** to places such as the USA, Canada, Australia and Britain.
2. **Farming practices changed, and Subdivision was ended.** Land was now handed down to the eldest son which forced the rest of children to emigrate.
  - Cattle rearing also began replacing tillage and crop farming.
3. **Anti-British sentiment** spread throughout Ireland.
  - Many Irish believed that Britain did not do enough to help Ireland during the famine.
  - This would result in rebellions against British rule in later years.





What evidence of anti-British sentiment can be seen in the mural?

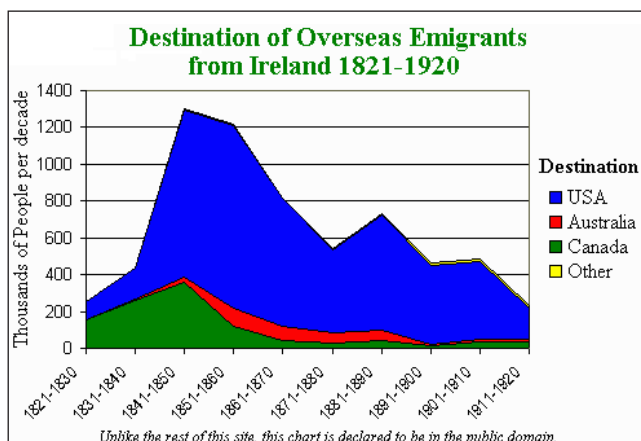
#### 4. A trend of mass emigration began in Ireland as a result of the famine.

- This trend continued for over a century due to 'chain migration' as well as the economic hardships that existed in Ireland.
- The journey to the US was a particularly hard one. Irish were crammed into ships where disease spread rapidly and many died on the journey.
- These became known as '**coffin ships**'.



### The Irish diaspora

- The Irish diaspora refers to **emigrants from Ireland and their descendants from around the world**.
- During the famine, most Irish emigrants went to America, living in places such as New York and Boston.
- They lived in cramped conditions where disease was rampant.
- They experienced diseases such as typhus and cholera.



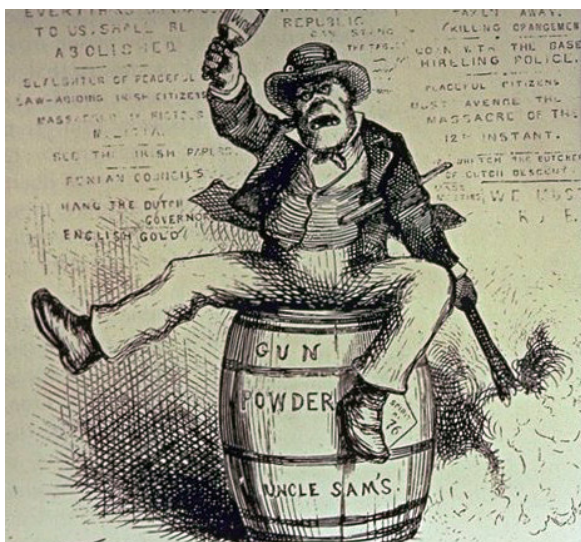
- Irish people worked very dangerous jobs such as **building canals and high-rise buildings** as nobody else would. Women worked as domestic servants.
- Irish people also experienced **racial discrimination** from Americans as **anti-Irish sentiment grew**.



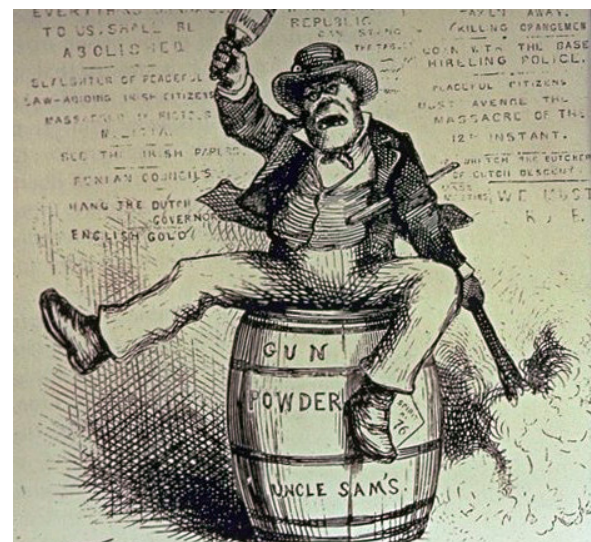
Two of these men are Irish. What does this tell us about the work that Irish immigrants did?

‘While he could perform all simple, less exact work, any work that required long training and application, the dissolute unsteady drunken Irish man was on too low a plane.’

Description of Irish famine immigrants by German industrialist, Frederick Engles.



industrialist, Frederick Engles.



Anti-Irish propaganda

## The Irish diaspora today

- Despite early hardships, the next generation of Irish **climbed the social ladder in America**.
- They got better paid jobs such as **policemen, firemen, doctors and lawyers**.
- The link between America and Ireland remains strong today – More than **31.5 million American residents claim to have Irish ancestors**.

## Joe Bidens Irish roots

- His great-great grandfather Patrick Blewitt was born in Ballina, Co Mayo, in 1832. Patrick left Ireland in the autumn of 1850 to settle in America.
- Biden's other great-great grandfather was Owen Finnegan, from the Cooley Peninsula, Co Louth. He married Jean Boyle in 1839. The family moved to America in the late 1840s and settled in Seneca, New York.

**13.2 - Exam questions**

**Q1.** Give two reasons why Irish emigration rates remained high after the Famine ended.

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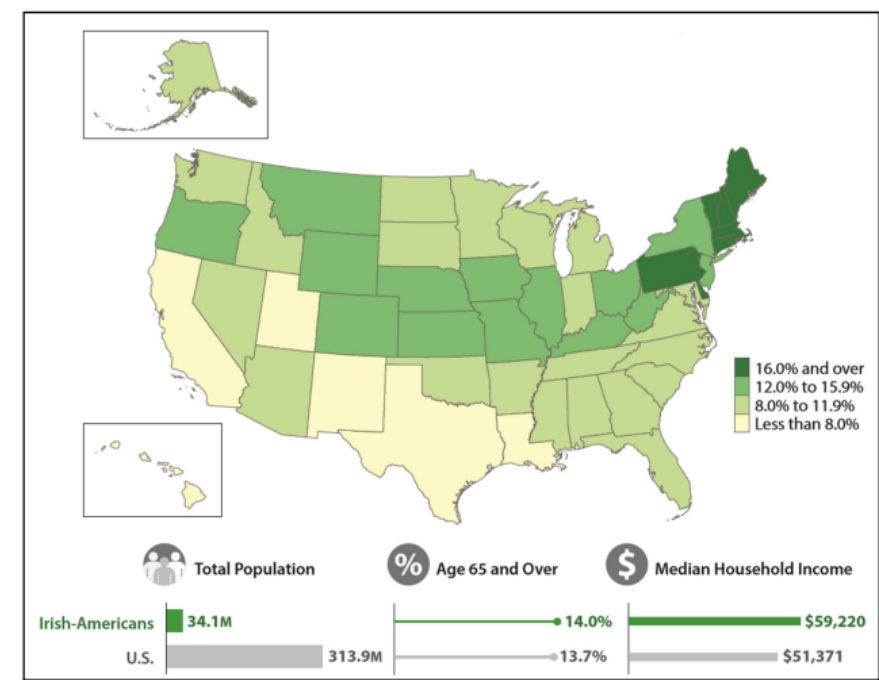


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Study this infographic which was produced by the United State Census Bureau in 2014. The map shows the percentage of people in each US state claiming Irish ancestry.



**Q2.** How many Irish-American’s were there in the United States in 2014, according to this source?

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**Q3.** In the dark green areas of the map above, the proportion of people claiming Irish ancestry is 16% or higher. What was one reason why Irish immigrants tended to settle in the northeastern corner of the United States?

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*In 1886, Parnell joined with the Liberals to defeat Lord Salisbury's Conservative government. Gladstone became prime minister and introduced the first Irish Home Rule Bill. The Bill split the Liberal Party and was defeated in the House of Commons. Gladstone's government fell soon afterwards.*

*In April 1887, the Times published a reproduction of a letter, allegedly bearing Parnell's signature, that excused the Phoenix Park murders. Proof that the letter was a forgery transformed Parnell into a hero in the eyes of English liberals and he received a standing ovation in the House of Commons. It was the peak of his career.*

*In December 1889, William O'Shea, filed for divorce from his wife Katherine on the grounds of her adultery with Parnell. Kitty had in fact been Parnell's mistress for some years and Parnell was the father of three of her children. The scandal provoked a split in the party and Parnell was replaced as leader. He was politically sidelined and died in Brighton on 6 October 1891.*