

THE IRISH POTATO FAMINE

1847

Elihu Burritt

In the 1840s many Irish lived in extreme poverty. For food, the Irish relied almost entirely on potatoes because of their nutritional value and low cost. Then disaster struck—a devastating outbreak of potato blight began in Europe in 1845 and destroyed the potato crop every year until 1849. Nearly 1 million of Ireland's 8 million people died of starvation, and another 1.5 million emigrated. The following account describes the tragic conditions in the Irish village of Castlehaven.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Recognizing Effects

What are some family and community problems caused by a famine?

We entered a stinted den by an aperture¹ about three feet high, and found one or two children lying asleep with their eyes open in the straw. Such, at least, was their appearance, for they scarcely winked while we were before them. The father came in and told his pitiful story of want, saying that not a morsel of food had they tasted for 24 hours. He lighted a wisp of straw and showed us one or two more children lying in another nook of the cave. Their mother had died, and he was obliged to leave them alone during most of the day, in order to glean something for their subsistence. We were soon among the most wretched habitations that I had yet seen, far worse than Skibbereen.² Many of them were flat-roofed hovels, half buried in the earth, or built up against the rocks, and covered with rotten straw, seaweed or turf. In one which was scarcely seven feet square, we found five persons prostrate with the fever, and apparently near their end. A girl about sixteen, the very picture of despair, was the only one left who could administer any relief; and all she could do was to bring water in a broken pitcher to slake their parched lips. As we proceeded up a rocky hill overlooking the sea, we encountered new sights of wretchedness. Seeing a cabin standing somewhat by itself in a hollow, and surrounded by a moat of green filth, we entered it with some difficulty, and found a single child about three years old lying on a kind of shelf, with its little face resting upon the edge of the board and looking steadfastly out at the door as if for its mother. It never moved its eyes as we entered, but kept them fixed toward the entrance. It is doubtful whether the poor thing had a mother or father left to her; but it is more doubtful still whether those eyes would have relaxed their

1. a stinted den by an aperture: a shack by the door, or opening

2. Skibbereen: another Irish town

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vacant gaze if both of them had entered at once with anything that could tempt the palate in their hands. No words can describe this peculiar appearance of the famished children. Never have I seen such bright, blue, clear eyes looking so steadfastly at nothing.

Source: Excerpt from *A Journal of a Visit to Skibbereen and Its Neighbourhood* by Elihu Burritt (London: C. Gilpin, 1847).

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: ANSWER

In a famine, when a parent dies, often the family cannot support itself—and other family members soon die. Also, with few people able to maintain the community, living conditions deteriorate rapidly.