

0. THE BACKDROP - Story Preface

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The backdrop to the Irish potato famine—which the Irish people call “The Great Hunger”—is the Irish land itself. Before the time of the Tudor dynasty, in England, the Irish people owned their own land. But the Tudors (starting with Henry VIII and increasing under the rule of his daughter, Elizabeth I) changed ownership of Irish land (and the commensurate well-being of the Irish people) when they allowed British-owned-and-controlled plantations to dominate the farmland of Ireland. This photo depicts Irish pasture land near the town of Bantry (in Southwestern Ireland). Photo by Pam Brophy; online via Geograph Ireland. License: CC BY-SA 2.0

A contemporary comment by John Mitchel polarizes how many people felt then and now:

The Almighty Indeed sent the Potato Blight but the English Created the Famine. (See Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps), by John Mitchel, page 324.)

In 1997, Prime Minister Tony Blair acknowledged the British government failed to effectively help. On the 150th anniversary of what the Irish call *An Gorta Mor* (The Great Hunger), Blair said:

Those who governed in London at the time failed their people through standing by while a crop failure turned into a massive human tragedy. We must not forget such a dreadful event.

The Irish aren’t likely to forget.

At the time, in 1845, people in Ireland no longer owned most of their land. Hundreds of years before, Queen Elizabeth I finished what her father, Henry VIII, had started. The Irish countryside, with its green pastures and wonderful farmland, had been turned into English plantations.

Land-owning Irishmen who worked for themselves became English tenants overnight. The only money that changed hands, of course, was the rent that was now paid to the new landlords.

Worse, "Penal Laws" governing the conduct of Irish Catholics were enacted. Over the years, those restrictive laws diminished the ability of the Irish people to flexibly manage their own affairs.

Perhaps the laws were not enacted to render an entire population "ignorant." But the list of what was forbidden makes one wonder how the English expected the Irish to function as a cohesive nation.

- The Irish Catholic was forbidden the exercise of his religion
- He was forbidden to receive an education
- He was forbidden to enter a profession
- He was forbidden to hold public office
- He was forbidden to engage in trade or commerce
- He was forbidden to live in a corporate town or within five miles thereof
- He was forbidden to own a horse of greater value than five pounds

- He was forbidden to purchase land
- He was forbidden to vote
- He was forbidden to keep any arms for his protection
- He was forbidden to hold a life annuity
- He could not be a guardian to a child
- He could not attend Catholic worship
- He could not himself educate his child

Laws like that set in motion a disaster-in-the-making.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/THE-BACKDROP-Great-Hunger-Irish-Potato-Famine>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/THE-BACKDROP-Great-Hunger-Irish-Potato-Famine>

Questions 2 Ponder

What Gives a Government the Right to Take Land from Landowners?

During the Tudor era, particularly during the reign of Elizabeth I, Irish land became part of British-owned-and-controlled plantations, turning Irish landowners into tenant farmers.

Land-owning Irishmen who had worked for themselves became English tenants overnight. They were not paid for the taking of their land. The only money changing hands was the rent which the tenants were now forced to pay to the new landlords.

Under what circumstances could anyone justify the taking of a person's land without paying a fair price for that land?

What would have caused Henry VIII and his daughter, Elizabeth I, to believe they had the right to allow British people to own and control plantations in Ireland ?

Why do you suppose the Irish people did not rebel against the taking of their land during the time of the Tudor dynasty?

If such a taking occurred today, do you think it would cause a rebellion? Explain your answer.

How Can a Foreign Country Establish Penal Laws in Another Land?

As Britain consolidated power over Ireland, Parliament passed "Penal Laws" suppressing the rights of Irish people in multiple ways.

Known more formerly as "Laws in Ireland for the Suppression of Popery," the "Penal Laws" effectively dictated that Irish people could be Catholics only if they were willing to give-up scores of civil rights.

For example:

Irish Catholics could not get an education, enter a profession, hold public office, vote, own a horse worth more than five pounds (in British currency), buy land, own a weapon for their own protection, be a guardian to a child or attend worship in a Catholic church.

Why would the British Parliament pass such laws?

Why would anyone in Britain think that its Parliament had the right to establish penal laws in another country - such as Ireland?

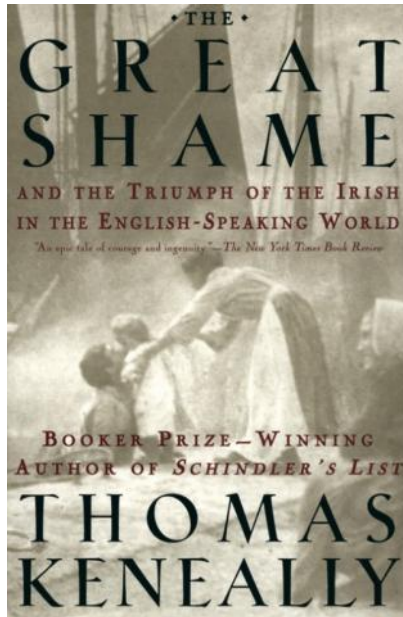
Suppose - just for purposes of this question - that Britain had the right to pass such laws. Why ever would they

do so?

In your view, what is the impact of such penal laws on the people ordered to follow them?

If you were forced to live under such laws, how would you react?

Media Stream

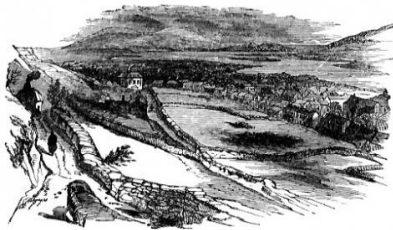


The Great Shame - by Thomas Keneally

Image online, courtesy the [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) website.

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View of Irish Farm Land in 1846

Image online, courtesy [Vassar College](https://www.vassar.edu).

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