

0. A NATIONAL CATASTROPHE - Story Preface

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Daniel MacDonald, an Irish-School artist, created this painting entitled “Irish Peasant Family Discovering the Blight of their Store,” circa 1847. The work is now part of the National Folklore Collection at University College Dublin (UCD). Click on the image for a better view.

When the potato crop failed in 1845, people did not expect widespread famine would result. It’s not like Ireland had no rain that year. The blight had infected some plants, not all plants.

The news of the crop failure was first reported on September 9, 1845. No one could have predicted that the report was just the first episode in a years-long tale of national misery.

Winter was particularly harsh the year after the blight. Families who had no money to buy food certainly had no money to buy clothes. *The Times* (on December 16, 1846) reported people were dying as a direct result.

It wasn't just a lack of proper clothes, however. Many had no houses in which to live. When they could not pay rent to their landlords, family after family were evicted from their homes. It did a family little good to defend their home. To make sure the evicted would not return as squatters, landlords tore off the thatched roofs and burned them.

The London Illustrated News, in its 16 December 1848 issue, depicts such an event. Called “The Ejectment,” the drawing shows two men destroying the thatched roof of a tenant-farmer’s home. The image has this description:

The fearful system of wholesale ejectment, of which we daily hear, and which we daily behold, is a mockery of the eternal laws of God—a flagrant outrage on the principles of nature. Whole districts are cleared. Not a roof-tree is to be seen where the happy cottage of the labourer or the snug homestead of the farmer at no distant day cheered the landscape.



THE EJECTMENT.

Turned away from their former homes, some of the homeless tried to build a lean-to or dig a hovel in the bog. But such efforts were fruitless. Sickness and death touched nearly every family.

Was there no one to help? What did the government in London know about the plight of the Irish? Did the landowners try to convince the British Parliament to do something?

Contemporary accounts from newspapers and eyewitnesses paint an increasingly desperate picture for the Irish people. But very little was done to help at a time when help could have done the most good.

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

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/A-NATIONAL-CATASTROPHE-Irish-Potato-Famine-The-Great-Hunger>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/A-NATIONAL-CATASTROPHE-Irish-Potato-Famine-The-Great-Hunger>

Questions 2 Ponder

What Can Explain Man's Inhumanity to Man?

During the mid-19th-century, landowners in Ireland evicted families from their homes, then destroyed the houses to be sure they could not return, after the potato blight destroyed crops throughout Ireland.

Because of the widespread crop failures, potato-growing families had no income. Parents could not provide food for their children, let alone pay the rent on their homes.

Why would the landowners ruin their own property to prevent evicted Irish families from returning to the homes in which they had lived before the potato blight infected their crops?

Could we view the landowners' actions, toward their tenants, as an example of man's inhumanity to man? Explain your answer.

Can you think of other instances, in the 21st-century, during which the actions of human beings, toward each other, are unexplainably harsh? Explain your answer.

When Do Governments Need to Help Starving People?

When the "potato famine" descended on Ireland, causing many people to starve, little was done to help at a time when help could have done the most good.

Should a national government help its own citizens who are starving for whatever reason? Explain your answer.

When people are suffering on a wide-scale basis, who else can help but the government? Explain your answer.

Is one of the purposes of government to help citizens in need? Why, or why not?

In your judgment, how bad do the needs of citizens have to be before government officials step-in to help?

If a national calamity is the reason for the suffering, does that make a difference in the government's responsibility to help the people?

Media Stream



Illustration of Irish Family Ejectment from Their Home

Image online, courtesy Vassar College website.

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View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Illustration-of-Irish-Family-Ejectment-from-Their-Home>

An 1847 Home Ejectment in Ireland

During the time of Ireland's "Great Hunger," Irish potato-growing families endured more than any single family could bear.

When the potato blight destroyed their crops, families had no income.

When parents had no income:

- They couldn't buy food;
- They couldn't pay their bills (including their rent);
- They couldn't keep their children warm (with suitable clothes and fuel).

Non-payment of rent led to catastrophic consequences.

Not only were people evicted from their homes, they couldn't even come back to them for any reason since the landowners either destroyed the homes completely or tore-off the thatched roofs and burned them.



In its 16 December 1848 issue, *The London Illustrated News* depicts such an event. Called "The Ejectment," the drawing shows two men destroying the thatched roof of a tenant-farmer's home.

The image has [this description](#):

The fearful system of wholesale ejectment, of which we daily hear, and which we daily behold, is a mockery of the eternal laws of God—a flagrant outrage on the principles of nature.

Whole districts are cleared. Not a roof-tree is to be seen where the happy cottage of the labourer or the snug homestead of the farmer at no distant day cheered the landscape.

Put differently, the description of this image tells us that evictions, with catastrophic consequences, were not isolated events. The situation was widespread and, as a result, the suffering of people was also widespread.

Illustration and quoted passage from The London Illustrated News, in its 16 December 1848 issue.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/An-1847-Home-Ejectment-in-Ireland>



Irish Farming Family Defending Their Home

Image online, courtesy the Vassar College website.

PD

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<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Irish-Farming-Family-Defending-Their-Home>



Ejected Irish Family in Earthen Shelter

Image online, courtesy The Wild Geese Heritage Museum and Library, Galway, Ireland. This illustration was originally published in the *Illustrated London News*, December 16, 1848.

PD

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Ejected-Irish-Family-in-Earthen-Shelter>



Digging a Hovel in the Bog

This image is online, courtesy Vassar College.

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A NATIONAL CATASTROPHE

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