AWESOME stories

MASS EXODUS

THE GOVERNMENT INSPECTOR'S OFFICE

This drawing—from the July 6, 1850 issue of the *Illustrated London News*—depicts a crowd of Irish emigres lining-up for medical exams at the Government Medical Inspector's Office. All individuals fleeing the famine had to pass a medical inspection before they could board a departing ship.

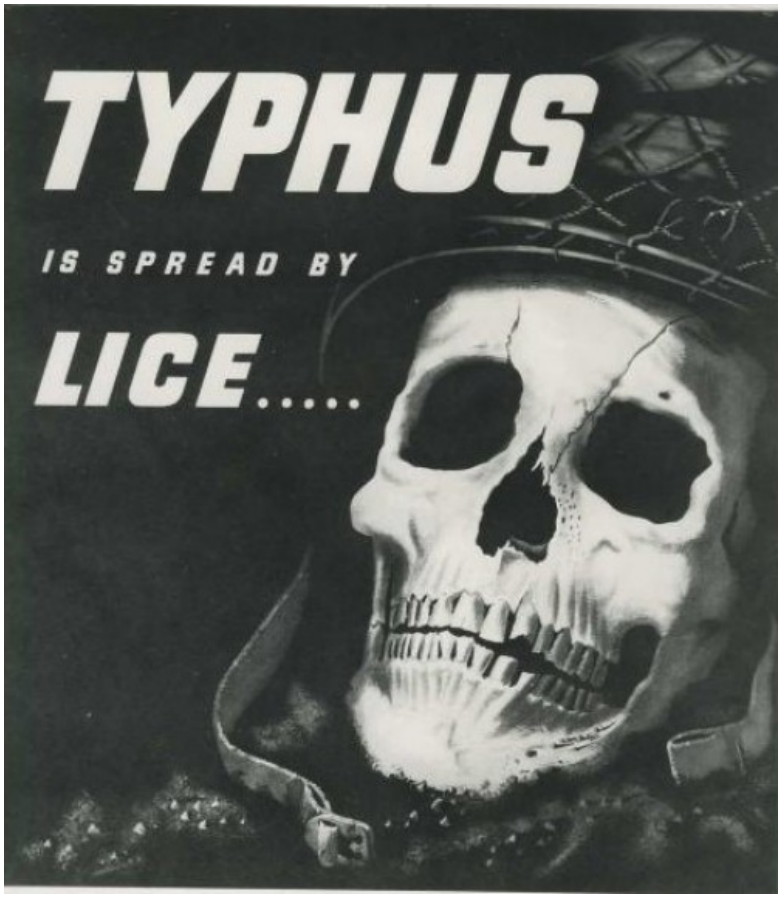
Leaving Ireland was not so simple. Where would people go? Not to any English shore (except to board a departing ship). Liverpool (later the home of John Lennon, Paul McCartney and the Beatles) became the starting point for long journeys on overcrowded sailing vessels.

Before Irish emigres could leave Liverpool (and similar ports of departure), they needed a medical exam. Passing that first medical inspection was not enough, however, to make a life in a new country.

If the ship docked at another British-owned port, any passenger on board who had become ill during the journey was subject to removal from the vessel. Such a person would have to be "re-landed" elsewhere. An article in the July 6, 1850 issue of the *Illustrated London News* tells us what happened in that event:

> *By the terms of the New Passenger Act, 12 & 13 Vict., c.33, no passenger-ship is allowed to proceed until a medical practitioner appointed by the emigration office of the port shall have inspected the medicine-chest and passengers, and certified that the medicines etc are sufficient, and that the passengers are free from contagious disease. The master, owner, or charterer of the ship is bound to pay the medical inspector the sum of £1 sterling for every 100 persons thus inspected.*
>
> *When the emigrant and his family have undergone this process, their passage-ticket is stamped, and they have nothing further to do, until they go on board, but to make their own private arrangements and provide themselves with outfits, or with such articles of luxury or necessity as they may desire over and above the ships allowance.*
>
> *All persons who may be discovered to be affected with any infectious disease, either at the original port of embarkation or at any port in the United Kingdom into which the vessel may subsequently put, are to be re-landed, with those members of their families, if any, who may be dependent upon them, or unwilling to be separated from them, together with their clothes and effects.*
>
> *Passengers re-landed are entitled to receive back their passage-money, which may be recovered from the party to whom it was paid, or from the owner, charterer, or master of the ship, by summary process, before two or more justices of the peace.*

Many people did not survive the Atlantic crossing. "Famine Ships" became "Coffin Ships." By the time the vessels arrived at Quebec, Boston or New York City, they were less crowded than they had been at Liverpool.



One of the reasons for deaths aboard ship was an illness called "ship fever." A virulent form of typhus (which is most frequently spread by lice), ship fever claimed the lives of many making the passage, as witnessed (on one vessel) by Patrick Burns:

> *My sister Margaret and myself sailed from Sligo* [Ireland] *on the 27th May 1847 and after a very troublesome and turbulent voyage landed in Quebec, on the 11th day of July, 1847. The ships name was Ellen and was commanded by Capt. Thomas Hood an Englishman and a very efficient and good man.*
>
> *Shortly after leaving Sligo with about three hundred and fifty passengers the deadly "ship fever," a violent form of typhus fever, raged among the passengers and fully one third of the passengers died of this dread disease. The disease was of generally short duration in most cases. Sometimes a person would be alright in the evening and would be taken sick at night and be dead by day break.*

For those who made it, however, the first night in America was better than the last night in Ireland. At least Irish families (who carried with them Celtic traditions, like Halloween) had a roof over their heads.

Still, arrival in America meant more hardship for many Irish immigrants.

Most were Catholics - and Catholics weren't always welcomed into American cities at the time. Anti-immigrant sentiment existed in 19th century America. Thomas Nast, the famous cartoonist, depicted St. Patrick's Day of 1867 in a way that would be scandalously offensive today. Even Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love, had anti-Catholic riots.

By the time the most damaging effects of the Great Hunger were over, Ireland's population had dropped from about 8 million (at its highest-ever level in 1845) to about 5 million. It has never recovered from that mass exodus.

Fortunately, the people of Ireland and England are working-out their longstanding differences. They have a lengthy history of enmity.

From the death of Wolfe Tone ("Ireland's George Washington") to the upheaval in Northern Ireland (during "The Troubles"), the disputes run deep and wide. But as Tony Blair, a man with Irish in his own blood, said in 1998 (during the first-ever address by a British Prime Minister to the Irish Parliament):

> *As ties strengthen, so the past can be put behind us. Nowhere was this better illustrated than at the remarkable ceremony at Messines earlier this month. Representatives of nationalists and unionists travelled together to Flanders to remember shared suffering. Our army bands played together. Our heads of state stood together.*
>
> *With our other European neighbors, such a ceremony would be commonplace. For us it was a first. It shows how far we have come. But it also shows we still have far to go.*

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/MASS-EXODUS-Great-Hunger-Irish-Potato-Famine

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/MASS-EXODUS-Great-Hunger-Irish-Potato-Famine

Questions 2 Ponder

When Government Causes a Problem Should It Also Provide the Cure?

Laws passed by the British Parliament contributed to the plight of the Irish people after the potato crops failed in the mid-19th century.

Preexisting laws had deprived many Irish people of their land when British-owned-and-controlled plantations replaced independent Irish landowners and crop-growers. Contemporary laws, like the “Poor Laws,” made conditions worse when landlords evicted their tenant farmers.

When the potato blight ruined the only crop on which Irish peasants depended for their livelihood, and government policy required that all other Irish crops would be exported (to Britain and elsewhere), the Irish people suffered even more.

The British government, which effectively ruled Ireland in the mid-19th century, did not cause the potato blight, but historians claim that government policies caused the famine. The Irish people still refer to the famine as “The Great Hunger.”

Why do historians make that claim?

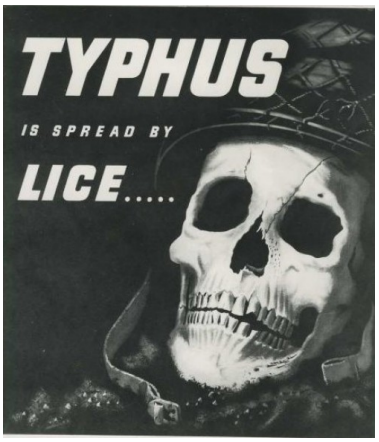
Do you think it is a fair claim? Explain your answer.

If government causes a problem, should it also provide the cure for that problem? Explain your answer.

What do you think the government could have done to help the Irish people get through the years of the potato blight?

Why do you think the government didn’t help in that way?

Media Stream



Typhus is Spread by Lice

Irish people attempting to find better lives elsewhere—during and after the years when potato blight was ruining their crops—had to endure yet-another adversity.
Sailing ships sometimes became "coffin ships" when hopeful Irish emigrés contracted a serious disease known as "ship fever."
A virulent form of typhus (which is most frequently spread by lice), ship fever claimed the lives of many making the passage, as witnessed (on one vessel) by Patrick Burns:
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Shortly after leaving Sligo with about three hundred and fifty passengers the deadly "ship fever," a violent form of typhus fever, raged among the passengers and fully one third of the passengers died of this dread disease.
The disease was of generally short duration in most cases. Sometimes a person would be alright in the evening and would be taken sick at night and be dead by day break.
This WWII-era poster warns that typhus is spread by lice. It is caused by bacteria, not a virus, which is then spread by fleas, lice and chiggers.
Although not the problem it once was, the World Health Organization (WHO) tells us that lice-spreading typhus is still a killer. It can spread, with disastrous consequences, in overcrowded places like refugee camps and prisons.
Image of poster online, courtesy U.S. National Archives (NARA).
View this asset at: http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Typhus-is-Spread-by-Lice

As I Was

Image, described above, from *Work & Wages; or, the Penny Emigrant's Guide to the United States and Canada, for Female Servants, Laborers, Mechanics, Farmers*, Etc., Fifth edition, by Vere Foster. Published in London, by W. And F.G. Cash, during 1855.

Online, courtesy Library of Congress.

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As I Am

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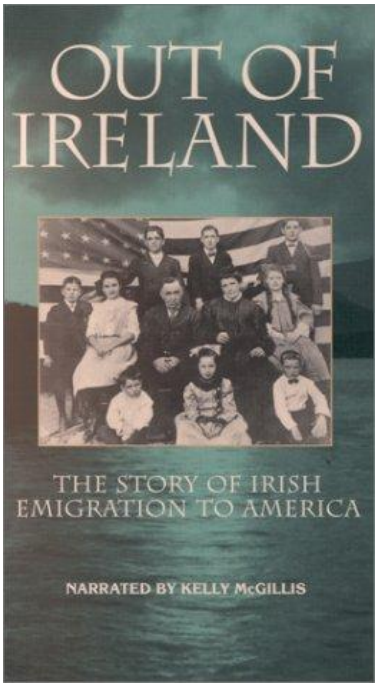

Out of Ireland

Image online, courtesy amazon.com website.
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MASS EXODUS

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Halloween and Its Celtic Roots

Clip from "Halloween Unmasked," online courtesy National Geographic.
Quoted passages, as noted above.
View this asset at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Halloween-and-Its-Celtic-Roots

John Lennon - Last Interview, December 8, 1980

Excerpt of John Lennon's last recorded interview, with Dave Sholin from RKO radio, online courtesy The Beatles Interviews channel at YouTube.
View this asset at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/John-Lennon-Last-Interview-December-8-1980