

0. A NATIONAL DISASTER - Story Preface

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This image, online via the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), depicts how the Irish potato crop would have appeared during the years of "The Great Hunger." Ireland's potatoes were infested by a blight known as *P. infestans*. It was only in the 21st century, however—when molecular biologists were able to examine the dried leaves of potato plants which had been preserved in London's Kew Gardens Herbarium—that a group of international scientists could specifically identify the strain of the blight which caused the potato crops to fail. It is known today as HERB-1.

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 one plant, 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 people 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. As the *Illustrated London News* reported on the 16th of December, 1848:

The fearful system of wholesale ejection, 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.

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?

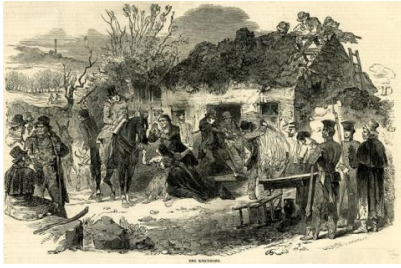
Contemporary accounts from newspapers and eyewitnesses paint a very desperate picture for the Irish people. But very little was done to help at a time when help could have done the most good.

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/A-NATIONAL-DISASTER-Wind-that-Shakes-the-Barley)

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Eviction Illustration

Image online, courtesy the vassar.edu website.

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Defending Their Home - Illustration

Image online, courtesy the Vassar.edu website.

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Building A Lean-To for 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.

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Building a Hovel in the Bog - Illustration

This image is online, courtesy Vassar College.

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