



THE GREAT IRISH POTATO FAMINE

● JAMES S. DONNELLY, JR



Background

- Nearly half the Irish population (3 million people) depended on the potato as the main part of their diet
 - The potato is rich in vitamins
 - An adult rural laborer consumed 14 lbs. of potatoes daily
 - Together with buttermilk, this provided all of the protein, fats, carbohydrates, calcium, and iron necessary for health
 - the staple crop because on less than one acre of land, potatoes could feed a family of 10 for a year, as well as pay rent
 - could be grown on small plots of land
 - the crop could also thrive on boggy wastelands
 - But potatoes could not be stored for more than a year

Background

- between 1722 and 1879 there were no less than twenty-nine 'famines' in Ireland
 - Deaths from the famines of 1722, 1726, 1728 and 1738 were measured in the tens of thousands
 - But in 1741 half a million people died from malnutrition and related disease from the famine
 - famines followed in 1765, 1770, 1774 and 1783
 - Again the deaths were counted in the tens of thousands
 - More famines followed in 1800, 1807, 1822, 1834, and 1836



Vincent Van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters* (1885)

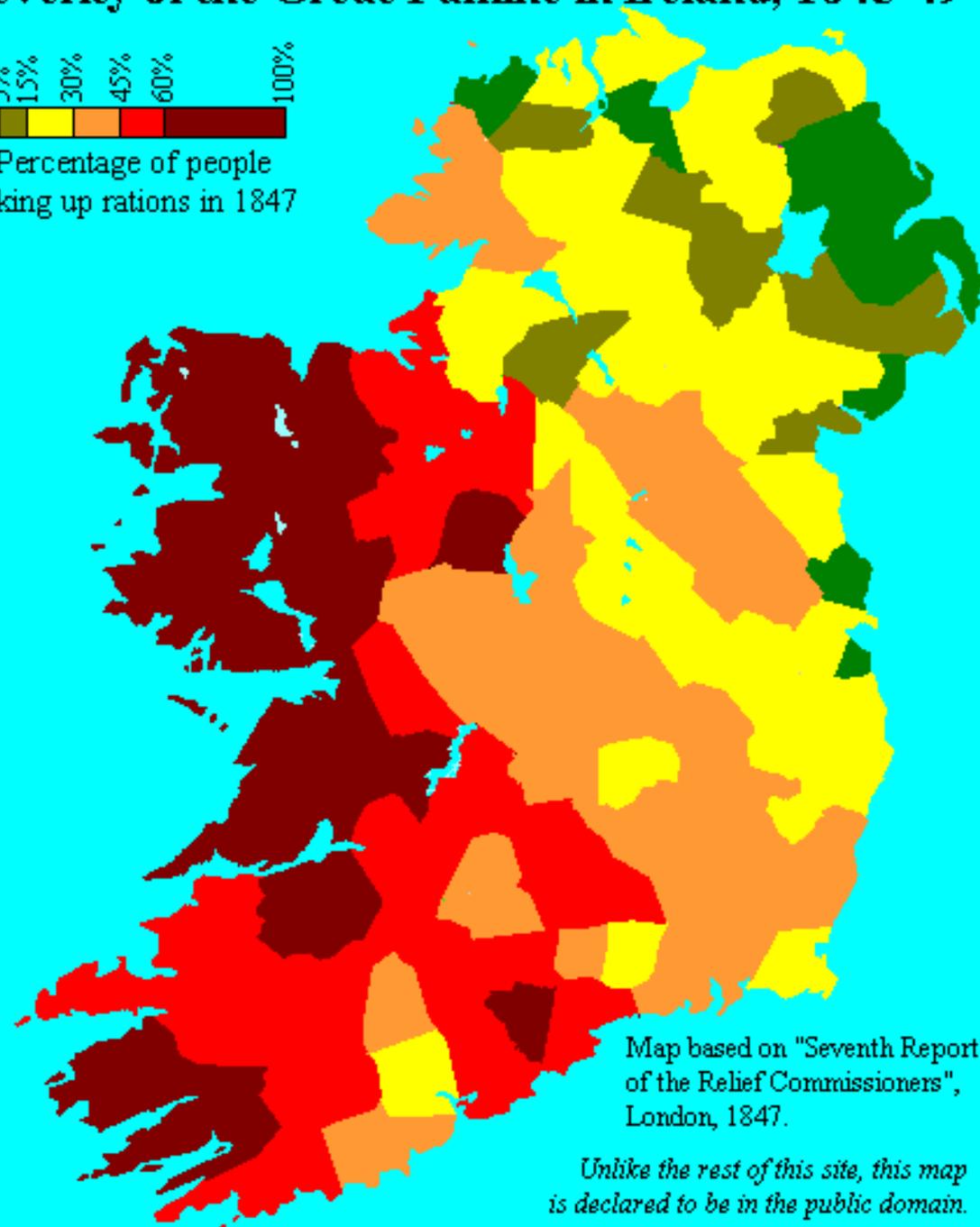
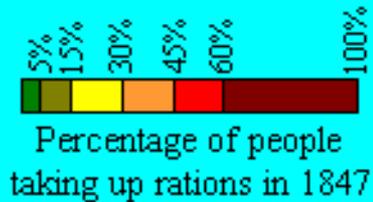
Irish potato famine 1845-1849

- In the mid 1840's a European potato blight swept across the continent into Ireland
 - *Blight* → a disease that kills plants
 - Caused by a fungus (*phytophthora infestans*)
 - produced “black spots and a white mold on the leaves, soon rotting the potato into a pulp”
 - Ireland had been hit by isolated potato failures in the early 1840s, but never a complete failure
 - hit Ireland in 1845
 - Potato vines withered in the fields
 - Potatoes in storage became moldy and inedible
 - Half the crop was lost

Irish potato famine 1845-1849

- The Irish survived the 1845 failure, but the blight reappeared in 1846
 - Destroyed the entire crop
 - Came back each of the next two years, too, in 1847 and 1848
- Without potatoes, Irish tenants couldn't pay their rent
 - most of Ireland, outside the northern area of Ulster, was Catholic and rented their land from Anglicans who mainly lived in England
 - some 1,500 absentee landlords owned 3.25 million acres of Irish land, and they lived in London
 - a further 4.25 million acres of Irish land was in the lands of another 4,500 absentee landlords who chose Dublin as their home
 - Landlords drove starving tenants from their farms
 - between 1845 and 1853 alone records show that landlords evicted 87,123 families because they could not afford to pay their rents

Severity of the Great Famine in Ireland, 1845-49



Map based on "Seventh Report of the Relief Commissioners", London, 1847.

Unlike the rest of this site, this map is declared to be in the public domain.

British response

- Britain was committed to a rigid *laissez-faire* economic policy
 - Believed that any help would hinder private enterprise
 - But in 1846, British Prime Minister Robert Peel, a Tory, took action



Peel's Reforms

- had 25,000 tons of corn imported from America for food relief in November 1845
 - But it was meant to be sold to the people, not given to them
- repealed the Corn Laws in 1846
 - allowed free imports of grain
 - opened British ports to foreign grain to feed the starving Irish
- enacted a program of public works in 1846 to **employ** the most needy
- but this help was inadequate
 - Government refused to simply provide charity
 - English landlords continued to collect rent
 - tenants were evicted if they didn't pay their rent
 - couldn't afford to buy the food England sent over because of taxes, rents, and lack of jobs, and when they protested, thousands of British troops were sent in



Turbulent opening of the store in Cork selling Peel's Indian Corn.

Illustrated London News - 1846

Britain's Response

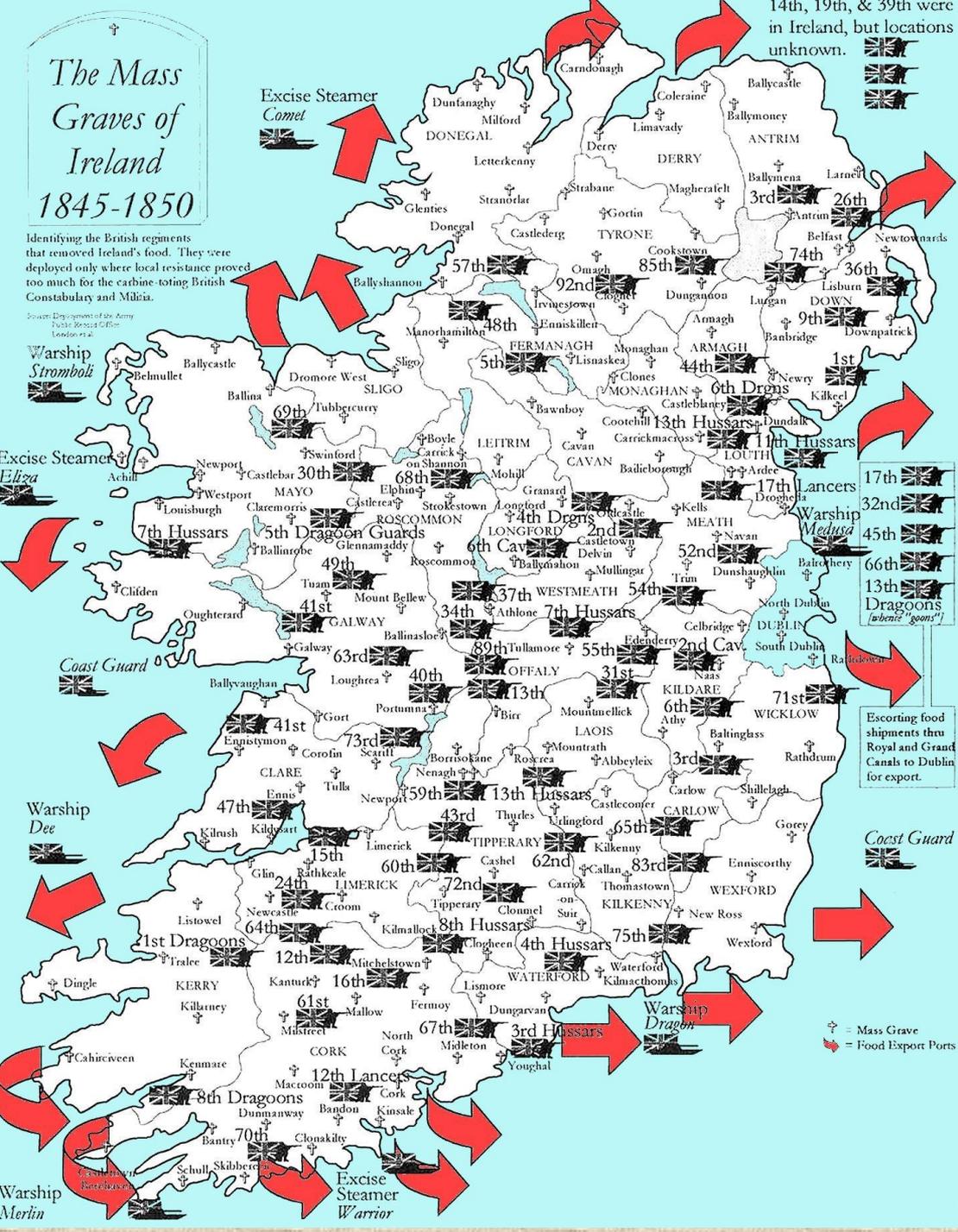
- The next prime minister was John Russell, leading a conservative Whig minority government
 - the government abandoned public works and started a new scheme
 - 1847 Irish Poor Relief Act
 - Required anyone who occupied more than $\frac{1}{4}$ acre of land to enter a gov't-run workhouse before receiving poor relief
 - His gov't was also selling food to the Netherlands while millions of Irish were starving
 - He viewed the famine as a positive as it would get the Irish to switch from growing potatoes to wheat



The Mass Graves of Ireland 1845-1850

Identifying the British regiments that removed Ireland's food. They were deployed only where local resistance proved too much for the carbine-toting British Constabulary and Militia.

Source: Department of the Army, Public Works Office, London et al.



14th, 19th, & 39th were in Ireland, but locations unknown.

The Mass Graves of Ireland 1845-1850

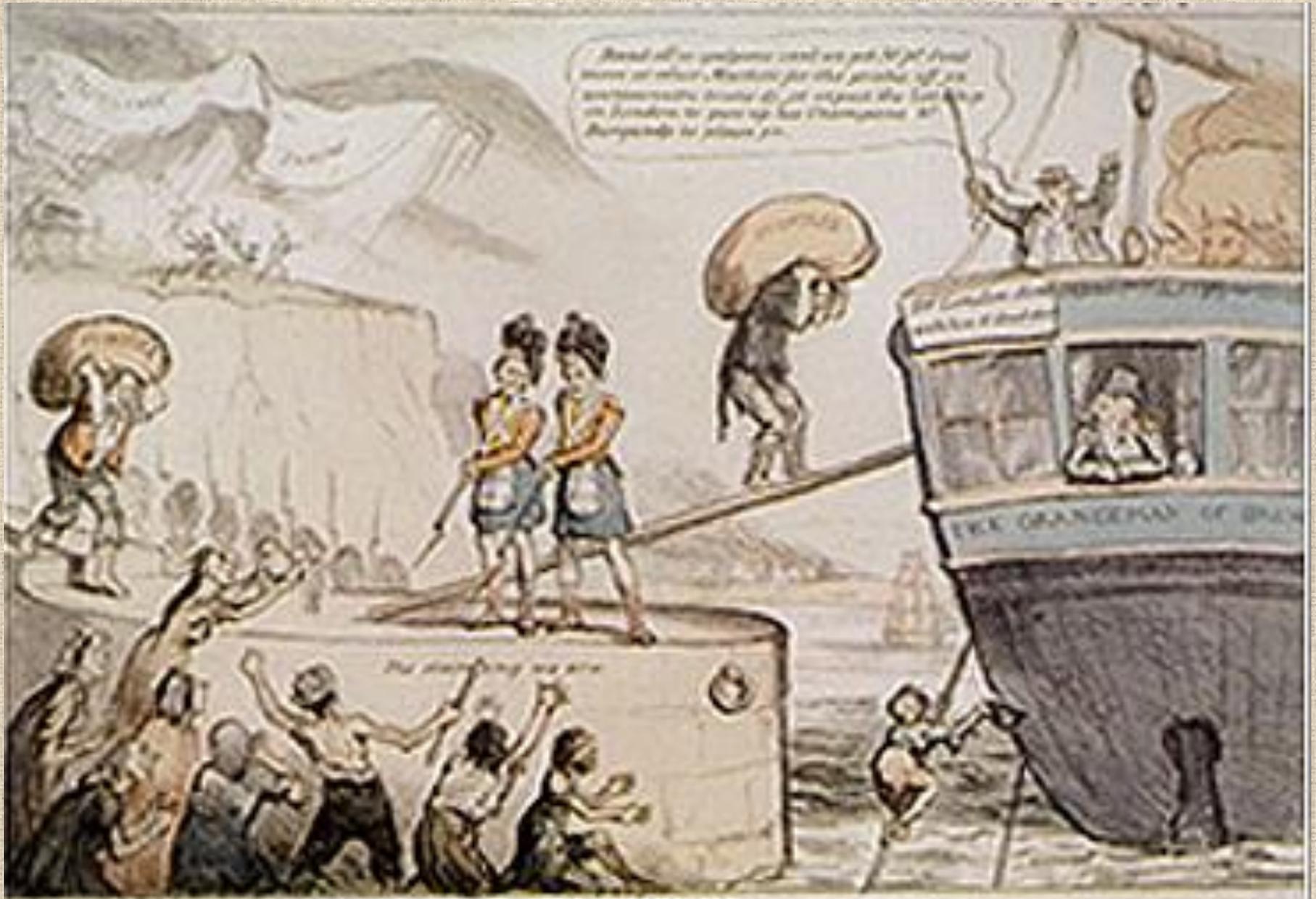
Identifying the British regiments that removed Ireland's food. They were deployed only where local resistance proved too much for the carbine-toting British Constabulary and Militia.

✠ = Mass Grave
 ↗ = Food Export Ports

“...no issue has provoked so much anger or so embittered relations between the two countries (England and Ireland) as the indisputable fact that huge quantities of food were exported from Ireland to England throughout the period when the people of Ireland were dying of starvation.”

-Cecil Woodham-Smith

Potatoes being exported to Holland, which was also experiencing a blight



- Sinead O'Connor's *Famine* (1994)
 - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVf2NCGkgTU&feature=related>
 - *OK, I want to talk about Ireland
Specifically I want to talk about the "famine"
About the fact that there never really was one
There was no "famine"
See Irish people were only allowed to eat potatoes
All of the other food
Meat fish vegetables
Were shipped out of the country under armed guard
To England while the Irish people starved*
 - *Schools go on about "Black 47"
On and on about "The terrible famine"
But what they don't say is in truth
There really never was one*

**‘... the change from an idle,
barbarous isolated potato cultivation,
to corn cultivation, which enforces industry,
binds together employer and employed in
mutually beneficial relations, and, requiring
capital and skill for its successful prosecution,
suppose the existence of a class of substantial
yeomanry who have an interest in preserving
the good order of society, is proceeding as
fast as can reasonably be expected.’**

**Charles Trevelyan,
Secretary of the Treasury**

‘The great evil with which we have to contend is not the physical evil of famine but the moral evil of the selfish, perverse and turbulent character of the people.’

Charles Trevelyan (1807-86)



- shows the Irish as obese, wasteful, violent monkeys
- John Bull (Britain) shows Uncle Sam that he will take care of the troublemaker



- "The workingman's burden"
- shows a gleeful Irish peasant carrying his famine relief money while riding on the back of an exhausted English laborer



THE FIG AND THE PEER.

"THE 'PEER,' MURDER, AND IS IT MERELY THAT TO BE EVICTED?"
"YOU EXPECT! NO, NO. WE'LL TAKE THE GREATEST CARE OF THE 'PEER' WHO PAYS THE RENT."

- "The Pig and the Peer"
- This cartoon shows a life-size pig with pleading with the English Prime Minister
- During the Famine thousands of Irish peasants were evicted to make way for animals that could "pay rent"

Black '47's *Black 47*

God's curse upon you Lord John Russell*

May your black hearted soul rot in hell

There's no love left on earth

And God is dead in heaven

In these dark and deadly days of Black '47

God's curse upon you Lord Trevelyn**

May your great Queen Victoria rot in hell

'Till England and its Empire

Answer under heaven

For the crimes they committed in Black '47

*British Prime Minister 1846-1852

**head of the British Treasury; dealt with Irish relief; accused Catholic priests of provoking an uprising

The Fields of Athenry

- the tale of a fictional Irishman in prison, reporting the story he could hear through the prison walls of another prisoner who has been sent to Botany Bay, Australia, for stealing food to feed his starving family
 - *Michael, they are taking you away.
For you stole Trevelyn's corn,
So the young might see the morn,
Now a prison ship lies waiting in the bay.*
 - *nothing matters, Mary when you're free
Against the famine and the crown,
I rebelled, they cut me down,
Now you must raise our child with dignity.*

Fields of Athenry by Pete St. John

- Dubliner's live version (about 3 minutes)
 - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLZRWNdGCUc&feature=related>
- Fields of Athenry by Pete St. John
 - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qpTkOY18Lkg>
 - This is a compilation video documenting the Famine (about 6 ½ minutes)

By a lonely prison wall, I heard a young girl calling. Michael, they have taken you away, For you stole Trevelyan's corn, So the young might see the morn. Now a prison ship lies waiting in the bay.

**Low lie the fields of Athenry Where once we watched the small free birds fly
Our love was on the wing, we had dreams and songs to sing It's so lonely 'round
the fields of Athenry.**

**By a lonely prison wall, I heard a young man calling. Nothing matters, Mary, when
you're free
Against the famine and the Crown, I rebelled, they cut me down. Now you must
raise our child with dignity.**

**Low lie the fields of Athenry Where once we watched the small free birds fly
Our love was on the wing, we had dreams and songs to sing. It's so lonely 'round
the fields of Athenry.**

**By a lonely harbor wall, she watched the last star falling. As that prison ship sailed out
against the sky
Sure she'll live and hope and pray, for her love in Botany Bay It's so lonely 'round
the fields of Athenry.**

**Low lie the fields of Athenry
Where once we watched the small free birds fly
Our love was on the wing, we had dreams and songs to sing
It's so lonely 'round the fields of Athenry.**



THE EJECTMENT.



Homeless family, the day after eviction.

Illustrated London News - 1848



Bridget O'Donnell and her children after their eviction.

Illustrated London News - 1849

- “Pen cannot dictate the poverty of this country at present...For God’s sake, take us out of the poverty, and don’t let us die with the hunger.”

- Mary Rush, 1846



*A starving boy and girl in
Cork hoping to find a potato.*

Illustrated London News - 1847



BEGGAR-WOMAN AND CHILDREN.



Holding her dead child, a mother begs for enough money to get a coffin.

Illustrated London News - 1847

THE PEOPLE WERE GAUNT

Starvation and disease spread across the Irish landscape, claiming one million lives. Half a million people were ruthlessly evicted from their homes. Many died on the side of the road, their mouths stained by grass in a desperate attempt to survive. "The features of the people were gaunt, their eyes wild and hollow, and their gait feeble and tottering. Pass through the fields, and you were met by little groups bearing home on their shoulders a coffin," wrote Irish novelist William Carleton.

Memorial in Dublin

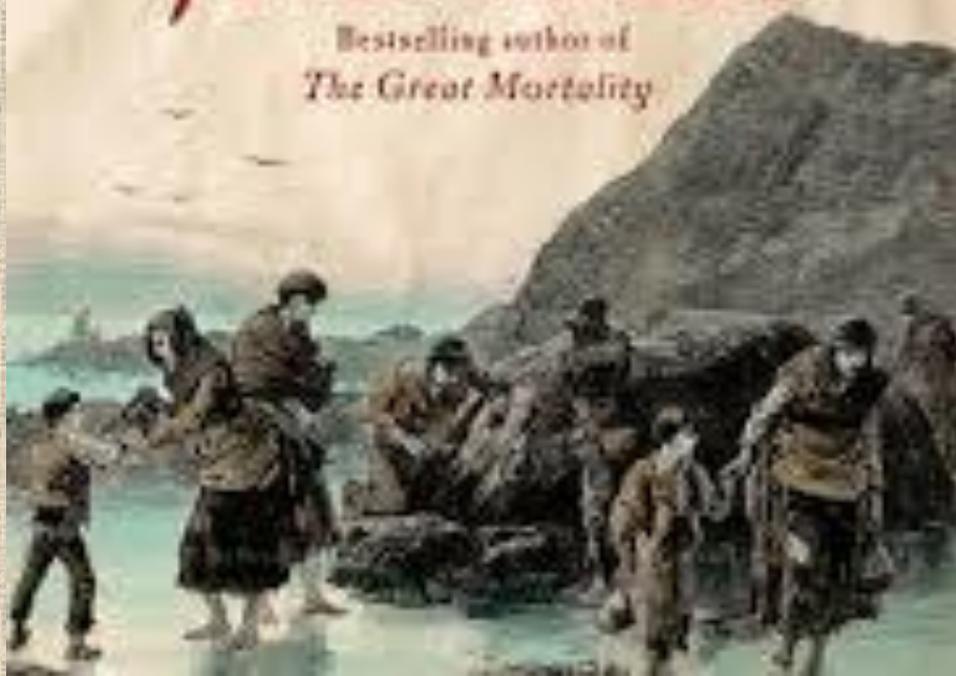


The GRAVES ARE WALKING

*The GREAT FAMINE and the
SAGA of the
IRISH PEOPLE*

JOHN KELLY

*Bestselling author of
The Great Mortality*

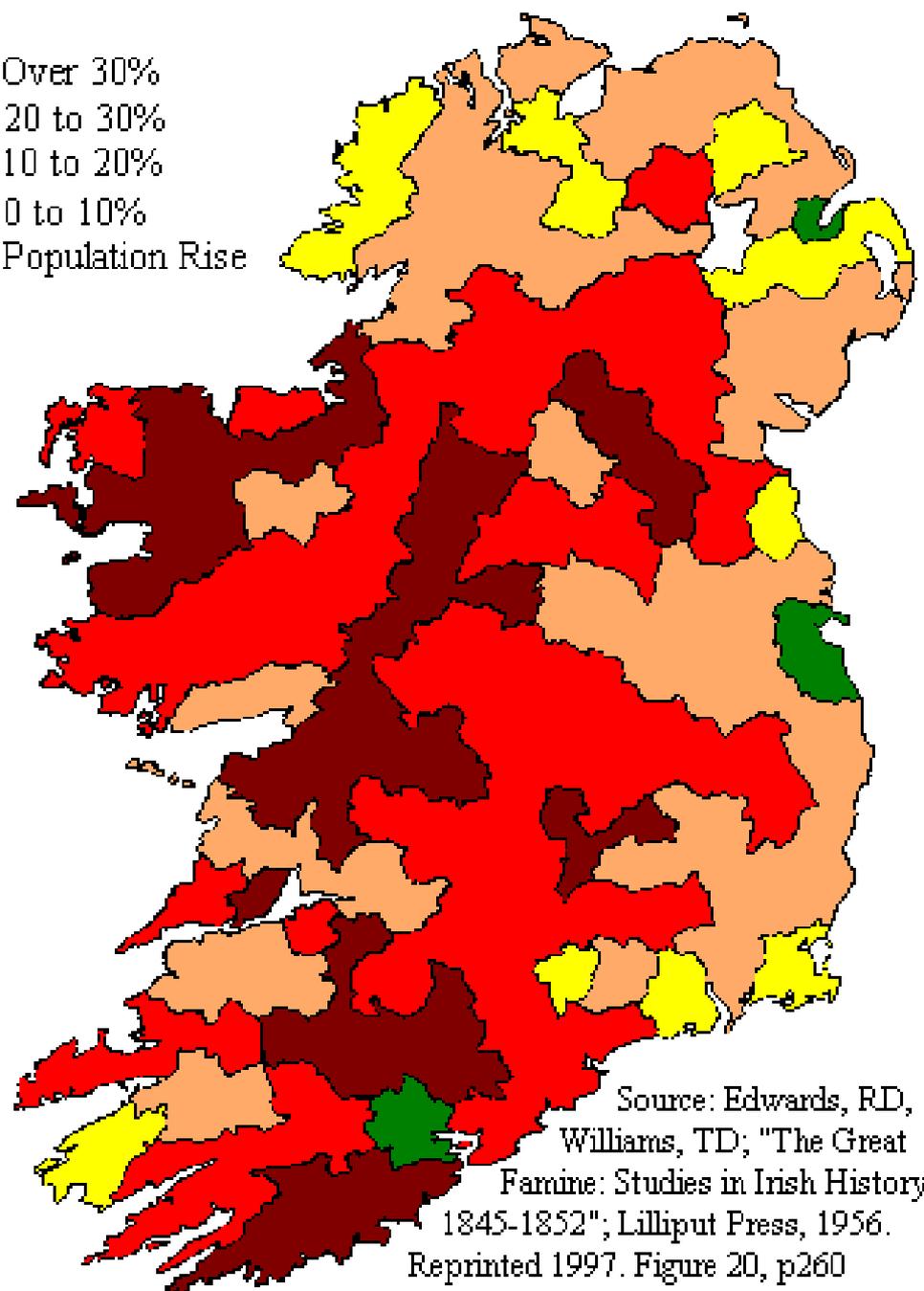


Results

- The worst natural disaster to strike 19th century Europe
- killed over 1 million people
 - both from starvation and from disease, like typhus and cholera
- nearly 3 million Irish would flee Ireland in hopes of finding a better life
- eliminated 25% of Ireland's population in a mere 6 years
 - 1841 census: 8,197,000 people
 - 1851 census: 6,600,000 people
 - 1901 census: 4,459,000 people

Population Fall in Ireland 1841-1851

- Over 30%
- 20 to 30%
- 10 to 20%
- 0 to 10%
- Population Rise



Source: Edwards, RD,
Williams, TD; "The Great
Famine: Studies in Irish History
1845-1852"; Lilliput Press, 1956.
Reprinted 1997. Figure 20, p260



The people of Ireland call the period *An Gorta Mór*
- 'The Great Hunger' in Gaelic

AN
SORTA MÓR

BRITAIN'S
GENOCIDE
BY
STARVATION

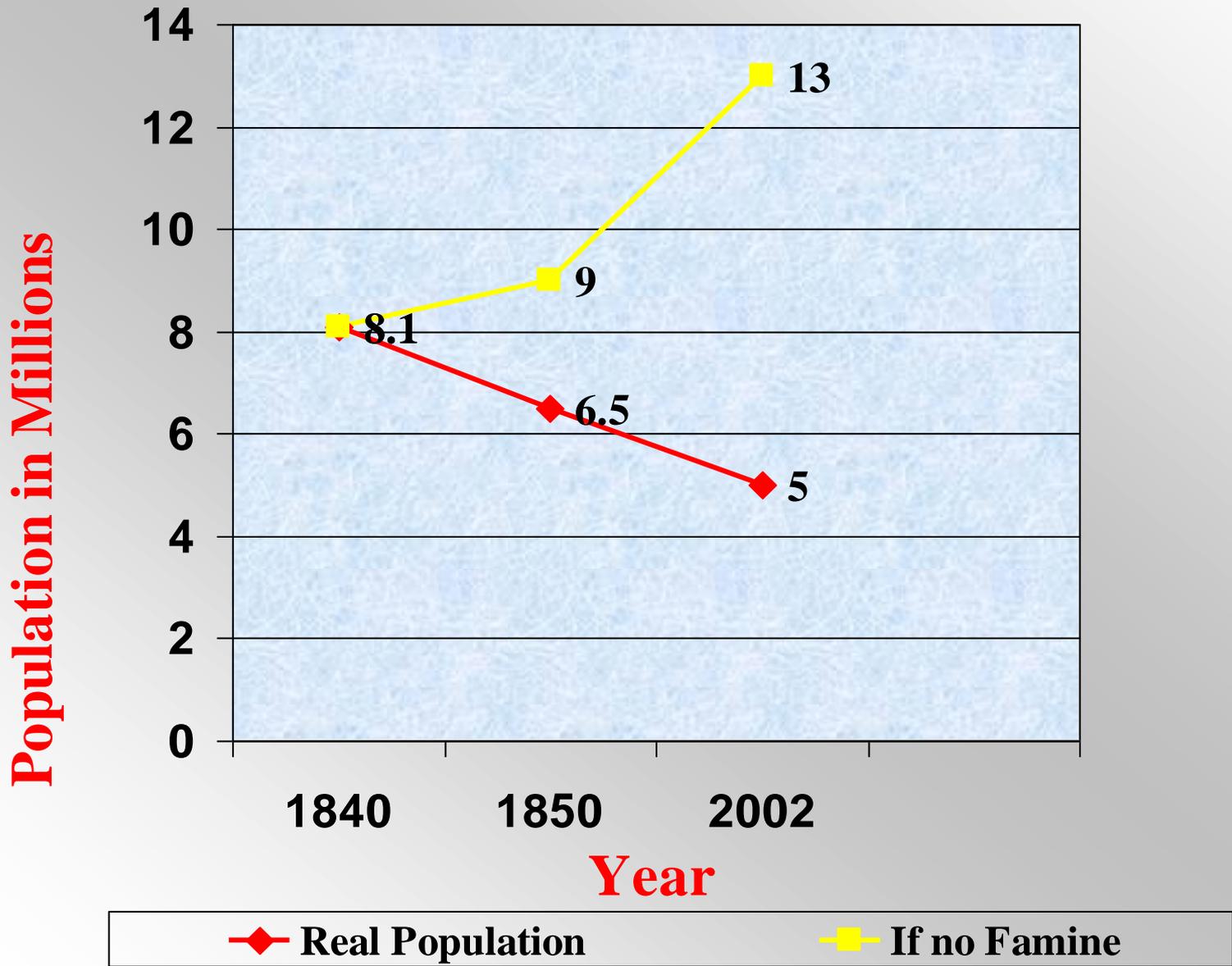
IRELAND'S
HOLOCAUST
1845 1849



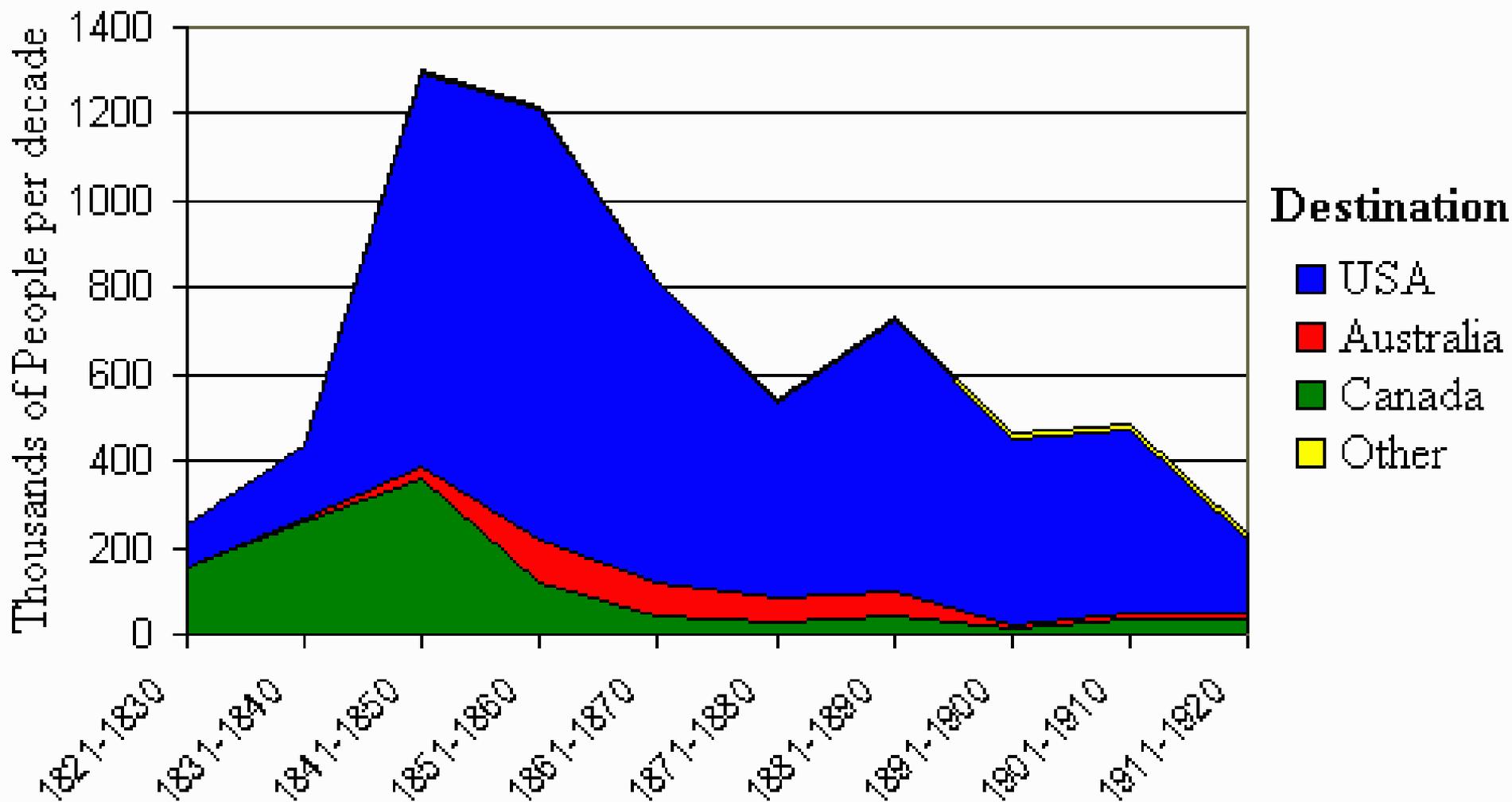
1,000,000 DEATHS

- John Mitchel, in his 1861 book *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, was the first to argue the case for genocide:
 - “A million and a half men, women and children were carefully and peacefully slain by the English Government. They died of hunger in the midst of abundance...”

Irish Population After Famine



Destination of Overseas Emigrants from Ireland 1821-1920



Unlike the rest of this site, this chart is declared to be in the public domain.

Emigration

- nearly 3 million Irish fled Ireland in hopes of finding a better life
 - 250,000 migrated to England
 - 2 million fled to Canada, the US, and Australia
 - Immigrants were packed into “coffin ships” bound for ports in English speaking countries
 - 400,000 died in the long journey across the Atlantic succumbing to disease and starvation only to have their bodies thrown overboard



Irish emigrants depart Liverpool for North America.

CROSSING THE BOWL OF TEARS

In a frantic attempt to outwit death, nearly two million people fled Ireland. "Many thousands of peasants who could still scrape up the means fled to the sea, as if pursued by wild beasts, and betook themselves to America," wrote Irish patriot John Mitchel. The emigrants boarded vessels so unseaworthy they were called Coffin Ships. So many passengers died at sea that poet John Boyle O'Reilly called the Atlantic Ocean upon which they journeyed "a bowl of tears."

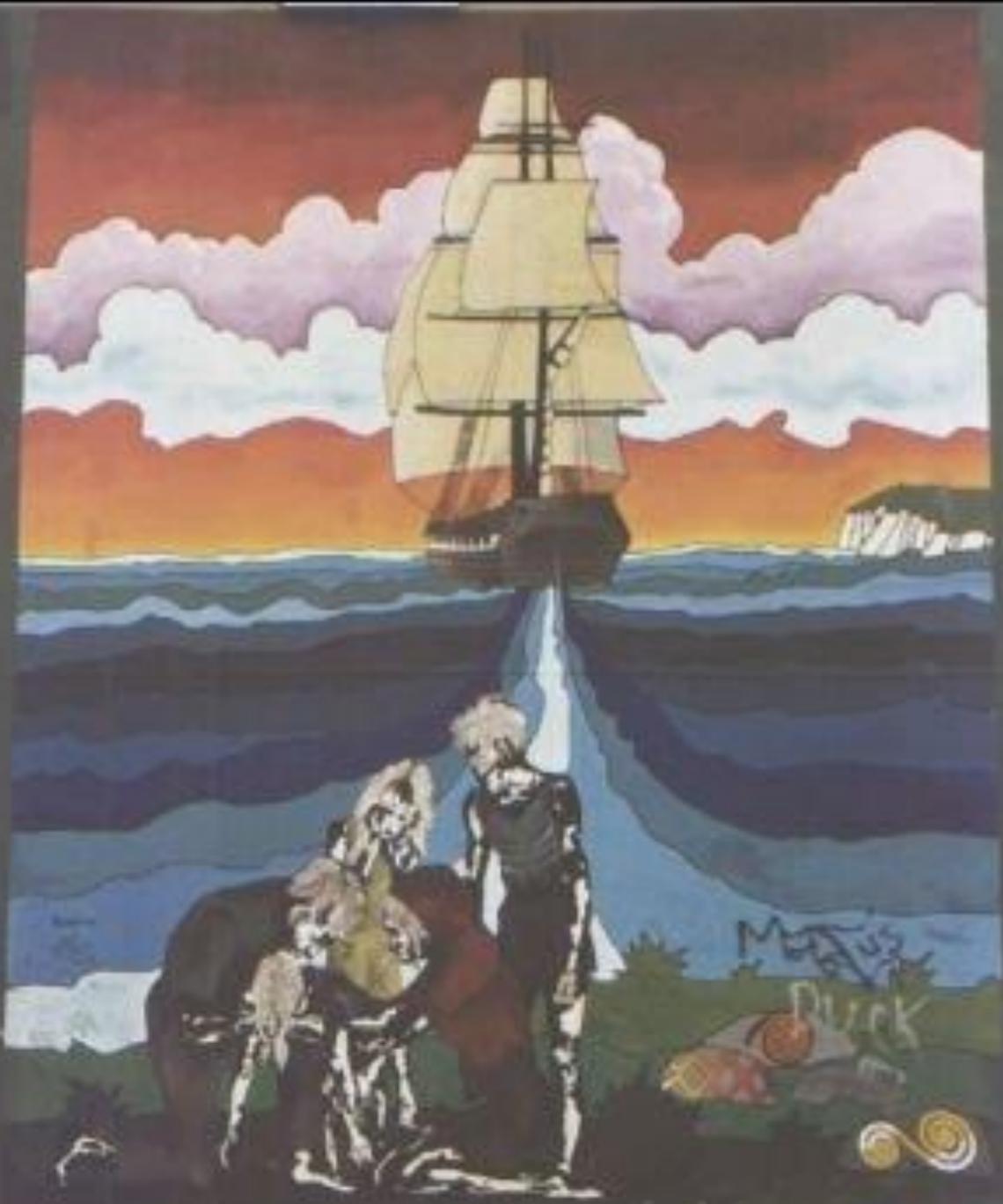
- The Pogues' *Thousands Are Sailing*
 - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEz5mS_XQcQ
 - *The island it is silent now
But the ghosts still haunt the waves*
 - *On a coffin ship I came here*
 - *Thousands are sailing
Across the western ocean
To a land of opportunity
That some of them will never see
Fortune prevailing
Across the western ocean
Their bellies full
Their spirits free
They'll break the chains of poverty*

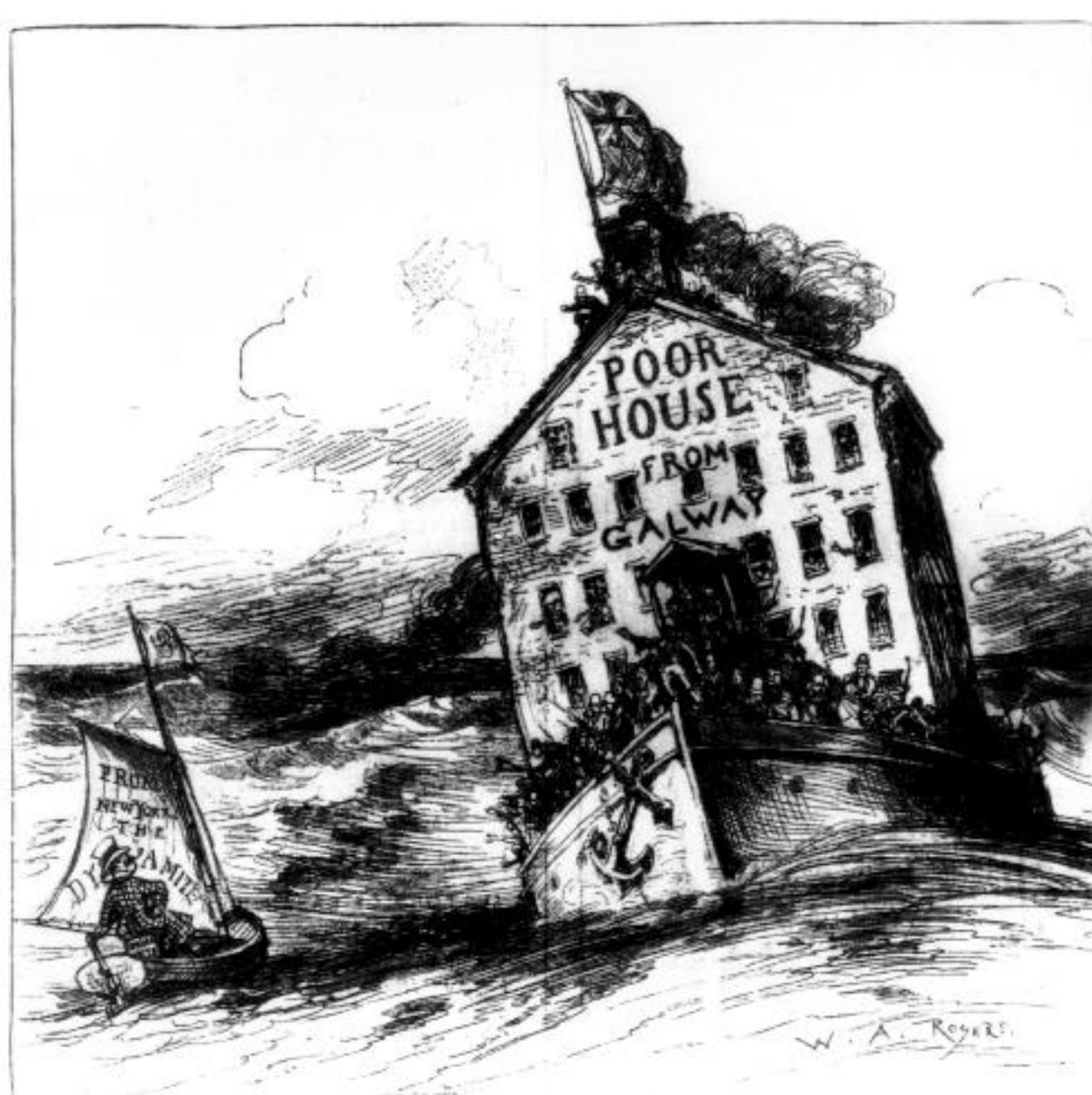




POPULATION OF
IRELAND

1841	8,196,297
1851	6,574,278
1861	5,798,997
1871	5,409,246
1881	5,159,267
Decrease in 40 years	
3,036,748	





-This political cartoon from *Harper's Weekly* ran with the caption, "The balance of trade with Great Britain seems to be still against us."



IRISH FAMINE MEMORIAL BOSTON

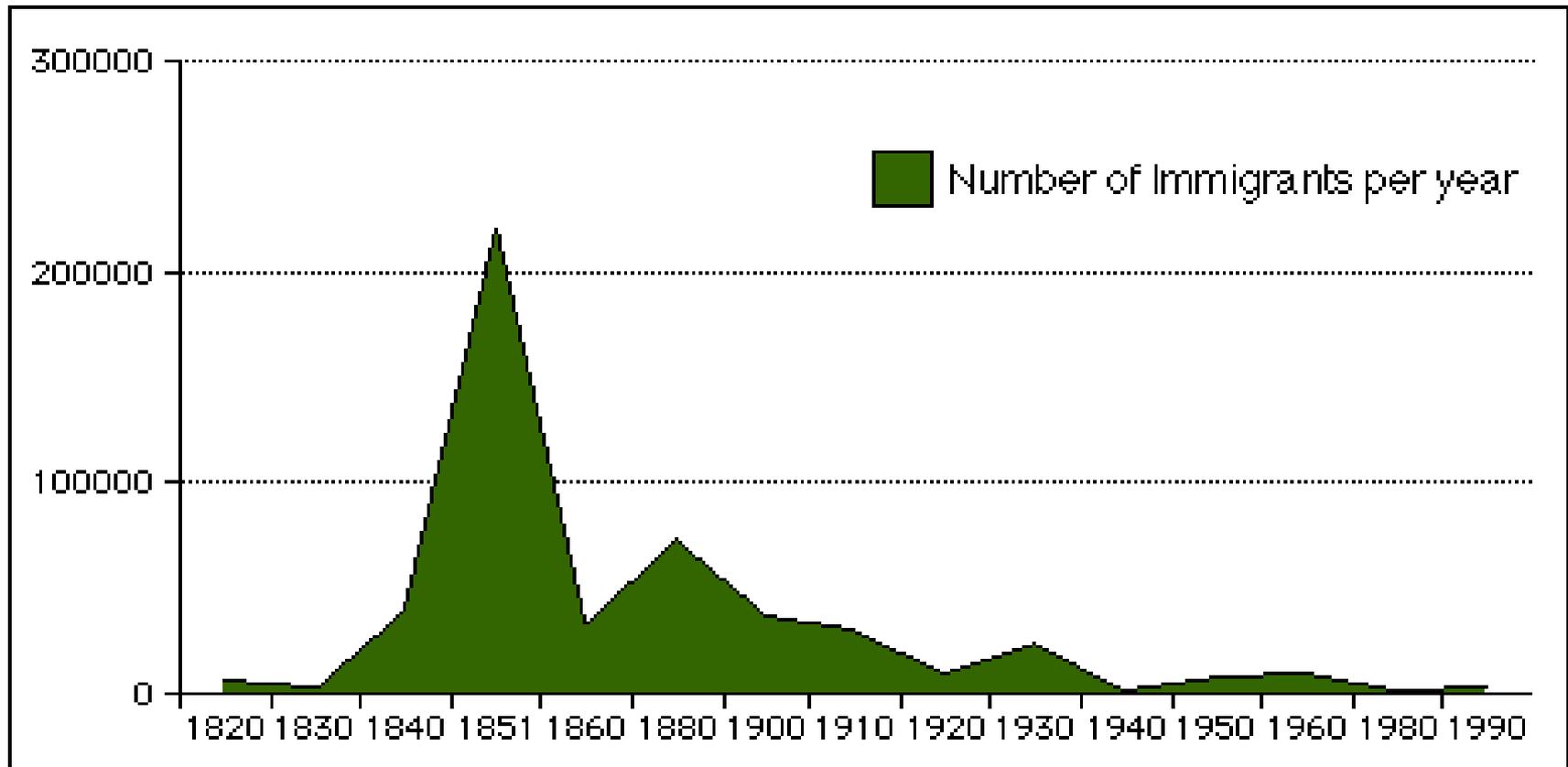
Boston's Irish Famine Memorial



Irish in the US

- The large number of new arrivals strained the cities' resources
 - the 37,000 Irish immigrants who arrived in Boston in 1847 increased the city's population by more than 30%
 - Many unskilled workers feared being put out of work by Irish immigrants willing to work for less than the going rate

Irish Immigration to the United States(1820-1990)



This is a graph of the number of Irish Immigrants that entered the United States from 1820 to 1990. The climax of the migration was in 1851 when 221,253 Irish Immigrants entered the United States. This was around the time when the potato famine was infesting the majority of Ireland. As the famine faded the number of Irish Immigrants decreased. It's gone up and down over time, and is low today. This is because of the laws on European Immigration. It takes many years before a citizen of Ireland can enter the United States.

November 12, 1998

ARRIVING IN BOSTON

In 1847 alone, 37,000 Irish refugees landed in Boston, on the edge of death and despair, impoverished and sick. "Native Bostonians might have been willing to send money and food to aid the starving Irish as long as they remained in Ireland," wrote historian Thomas H. O'Connor, "but they certainly didn't want them coming to America." The newcomers moved in along Boston's waterfront, packed together in damp cellars and overcrowded hovels. "Children in the Irish district," wrote Bostonian Lemuel Shattuck, "seemed literally born to die."

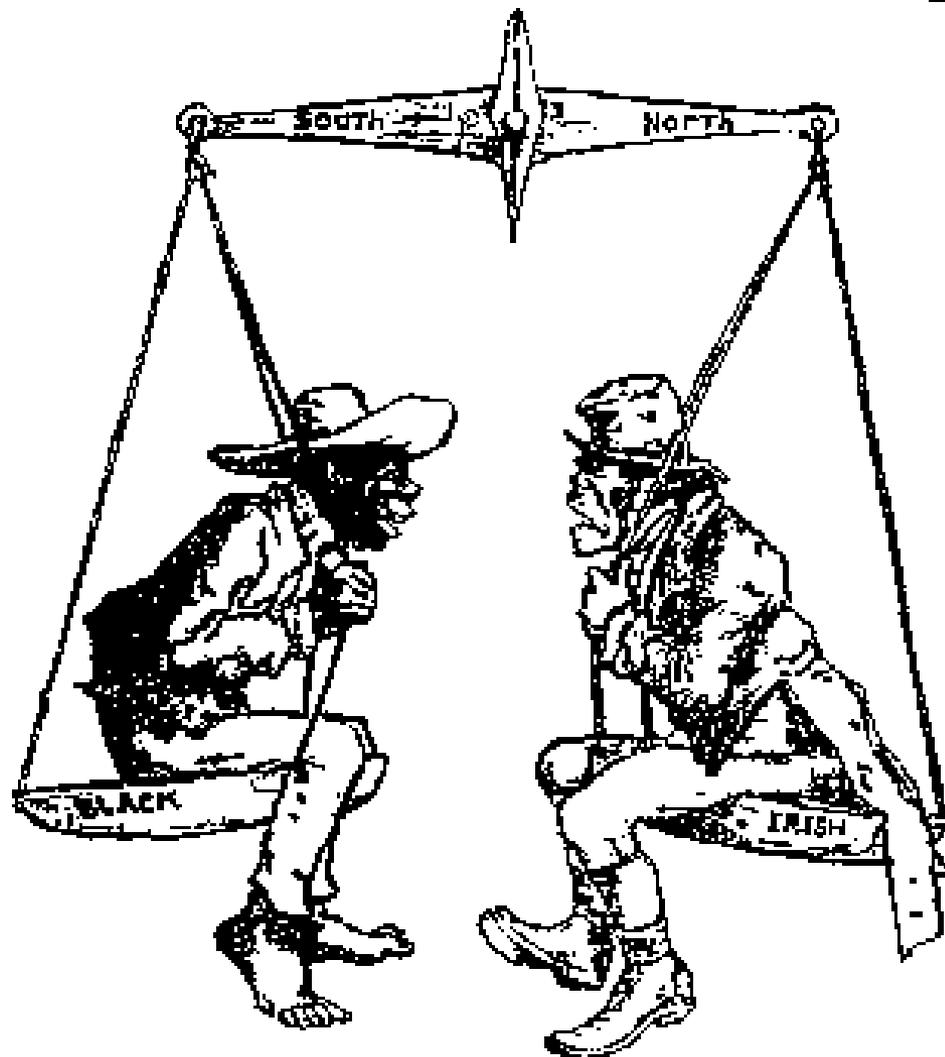
HARPER'S WEEKLY

JOURNAL OF CIVILIZATION

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NEW YORK, SATURDAY, OCTOBER 1, 1887

NO. 1011





IRISH IBERIAN



ANGLO-TEUTONIC



NEGRO

The Iberians and the negroes have been of generally an African race, who thousands of years ago spread themselves through Spain into Western Europe. Their remains are found in the barrows, or burying places, in various parts of these countries. The skulls are of low prognathous type. They came to Ireland, and mixed with the natives of the South and West, who themselves are supposed to have been of low type and descendants of savages. The Scotch race, who in consequence of isolation from the rest of the world, had never been out competed in the healthy struggle of life, and thus made was according to the laws of nature, far superior races.

Harper's Weekly showing that the Irish are similar to Negroes



HELP WANTED
NO IRISH NEED APPLY

1432H STREET S.W. D.C.

OCTOBER 12, 1916

- British Prime Minister Tony Blair, on the eve of the 150th Famine commemoration in 1997, issued the first apology by the British government for the famine:
 - "The famine was a defining event in the history of Ireland and of Britain. It has left deep scars. That one million people should have died in what was then part of the richest and most powerful nation in the world is something that still causes pain as we reflect on it today. 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 Poor Law

1838

The Poor Law is passed.

The Government responds to the Poor Inquiry commission's report with an act 'for the More Effective Relief of the Destitute Poor in Ireland', modelled on the English Poor Law system, which had been in existence since the 16th century. Ireland is divided into 130 Unions. A Union consists of groups of parishes in which local property-owners and rent-payers of a certain valuation are obliged to pay a 'Poor Rate' towards the maintenance of the destitute poor.

Providing relief is seen as potentially dangerous. It is believed that relief will discourage the poor from 'honest industry' and self-sufficiency as they become dependent on government 'handouts'.

To prevent the poor from becoming idle on welfare, relief is made subject to arduous and humiliating conditions, taking the form of manual labour for the lowest possible wages or of confinement in prison-like institutions known as workhouses.

The Poor Law

- The British government did take some steps to help the poor
- Before the famine, in 1838, the government passed the Poor Law Act
 - It established 130 workhouses for the poor around the country, funded by taxes collected from local landlords and farmers
 - Families lived in crowded and miserable conditions, and men were forced to work 10 hours a day cutting stone
 - The government also established a public-works program
 - to be run by local committees that would employ workers to build railroads and other public-works projects
 - The British government advanced money for the projects, but the local committee members had to sign a contract promising to repay the British government in two years (plus interest)
 - The projects were too few to support the hundreds of thousands of desperate families that needed help
 - Most of the workers—including women and children who were put to work building stone roads—were malnourished and weakened by fever, and many fainted or dropped dead as they worked

Irish potato famine 1845-1849

- Britain's shift to free trade from the 1840s onwards mainly benefited the industrial north-east of Ulster
 - Protestants made up a majority of the population in Ulster
 - but the rest of the country, which was more reliant on agriculture, suffered badly from falling global food prices

AN GORTA MÓR

The great famine which ravaged Ireland between 1845-50 was the major catastrophe of the 19th century. It brought horrific suffering and loss to Ireland's 8.5 million people. Over one million died of starvation and disease. Another two million emigrated, seeking sanctuary in Boston and other North American cities. Those remaining in Ireland suffered poverty, eviction, and the decimation of their culture. This memorial remembers the famine, known in Irish as AN GORTA MÓR (THE GREAT HUNGER). It depicts

Effect on Ireland

- A fungicide for blight was not discovered until 1882, when it was found that spraying a solution of "bluestone" (copper sulphate) prevented the disease from taking hold
 - Prevented future potato famines
- Resulted in the rise of Irish nationalist movements, drawing much of their support from the Catholic south