

# Introduction

If anyone asks if your ancestors came over at the time of the Famine, answer: "Which one?" Devastating famines rocked Ireland in 1715, 1727, 1740, 1800, 1807, 1816, 1822, and 1839. The worst of these lesser-known famines, "the Year of the Slaughter," 1740-41, caused 200,000 to 400,000 Irishmen and women to die of starvation. And each one of these catastrophes caused thousands more people than usual to emigrate to America from Ireland.

The focus of this issue of *New York Irish History* is the impact on New York City of *An Gorta Mor*, the Great Hunger, the successive failures of the Irish potato harvests between the years 1845-1850. The 1840s of course were the turning point in Irish history. As Irish President Mary Robinson said in her speech for the International Hunger Conference in May, the Famine was "an event which more than any other shaped us as a people."

Ireland's population today is just three-fifths what it was at the beginning of the 1840s. Between a million and 1.5 million people died of hunger and related diseases. Between 1845-1855, over two million Irish—about one-quarter of Ireland's pre-Famine population went overseas. More people left Ireland in 11 years than during the preceding two and a half centuries.

More than a third of these emigrants came to New York City. Manhattan and Brooklyn at the beginning of the 1840s had less than 400,000 inhabitants. At the end of the decade the population had jumped to nearly 700,000, one quarter of whom were Irish-born. The Great Hunger truly can be said to have transformed New York City as well as Ireland.

If you read the Famine Survivors section of this journal, which begins on page 15, you will glimpse hints of resurrection from the tragedy of the Great Hunger. Amid grim reports of immigrants who died of pneumonia a year or two after landing, amid the orphaned Irish refugee children "raised by a music teacher" or "raised by an aunt," you will find the mothers and fathers of New York City judges, labor leaders, and building contractors.

The first generation of Famine immigrants to New York City lived in unspeakable squalor in neighborhoods like the Five Points District (modern-day Chinatown). Thirty thousand New Yorkers, many of them Irish, were living in cellars at the time of the 1850 census. Famine Irish immigrants filled the almshouses, the lunatic asylums, and pauper's fields.

Yet in a dozen genealogical vignettes of Famine-Irish success stories you can read between the lines playwright William Alfred's Famine Irish injunction: "TAKE POWER!" No

longer disenfranchised, no longer British subjects, the Famine Irish began "building a row of 12 brownstone houses on East 50th Street," allying themselves to Tammany Hall, forming the 69th Regiment, and "drilling with the Fenian reserves in Grand Army Plaza." They struck silver and gold out West. Their descendants became millionaires, presidents of universities, and heads of religious orders.

This issue will attempt to describe the transformation the Great Hunger wrought on New York City. It is intended to be a resource issue, full of primary source documents, case histories of Famine-era immigrants, reviews, and suggestions for further reading. The issue revolves around John Ridge's essay on the impact of the Famine. It includes historical letters, a contemporary speech on the causes of the Famine by Archbishop John Hughes, poems, and illustrations of landmarks which greeted the Famine Irish upon their arrival in the 1840s. Some of these New York landmarks were mournful sites — quarantine stations, jails, and charity hospitals. Some of the immigrants never lived to see any other sights in America.

Do not put this issue down without reading John Teahan's dramatic story of the Catalpa rescue. It takes the reader several decades ahead in the story of the Famine's impact on New York City. Yet the base of support for the Fenian prisoners was rooted in the horrors of the 1840s.

Just as all of us are scarred by World War II and the Holocaust — even though for the "baby boomers" among us, it happened before we were born — all Irish Americans, no matter which famine drove us here, have been shaped, scarred, and steeled in the crucible of the frightful events in Ireland of the 1840s.

**Joe Doyle**  
Editor

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