

# A Lecture on the Antecedent Causes of the Irish Famine in 1847

Delivered under the auspices of the general committee for the Relief of the Suffering Poor of Ireland, by the Right Rev. John Hughes, D.D.

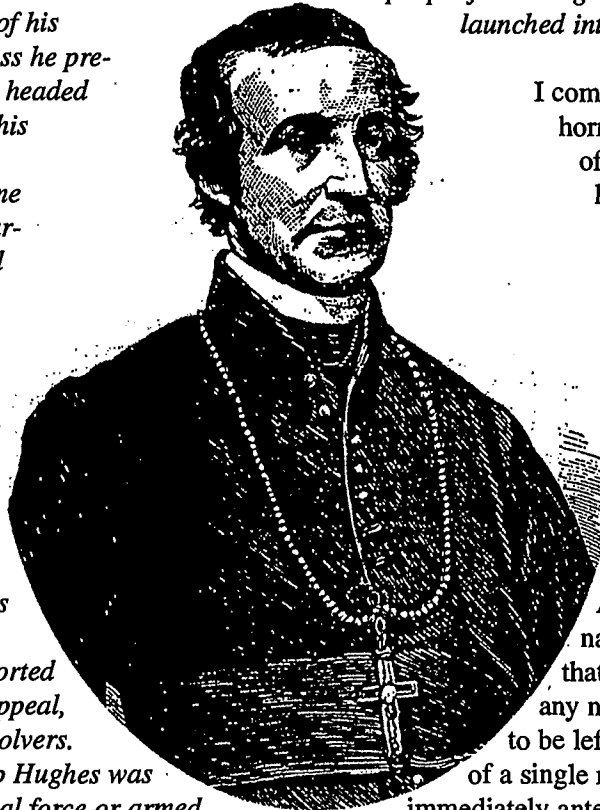
Archbishop John Hughes, 1797–1864, is one of the dominant figures in the history of the New York Irish. Nicknamed “Dagger John” by his critics because of his indomitable will and the prominent cross he prefixed to his bishop’s signature, Hughes headed the New York Diocese from 1838 until his death 26 years later.

John Hughes emigrated from Tyrone in 1818 and elevated himself from a gardener’s job on his arrival in the United States to become Bishop of the New York Diocese in 1842. (He became Archbishop when New York was named an Archdiocese in 1850.) A moving force for the construction of Catholic hospitals, colleges, and parochial schools, Bishop Hughes had the kind of following to be able to call out the men of the Diocese in 1844 to physically protect Catholic New Yorkers and Church property — when Know-Nothing rioters threatened them. A reported 3,000 Irishmen responded to Hughes appeal, armed with shillelaghs, knives, and revolvers.

Regarding Ireland however, Bishop Hughes was emphatically not an advocate of physical force or armed rebellion against English rule. In the speech excerpted below, for example, given at a New York fundraising meeting at the Broadway Tabernacle, March 20, 1847, Hughes contended that England “tricked” Irish nationalists into the Rising of 1798 in order to ram through the Act of Union which amalgamated Ireland into the United Kingdom. Although in the speech he excoriates England for engendering the Famine, Bishop Hughes made it clear that he embraced Daniel O’Connell’s gradualist, legislative approach to achieving Irish home rule.

Dr. Charles P. Connor in his 1989 essay for *New York Irish History*, “Archbishop Hughes and the Question of Ireland, 1829–1862,” notes that Hughes condemned the “Young Irelanders” when they launched their short-lived rebellion in 1848. Hughes associated John Mitchel and the other Young Irelanders with the insurgents who fostered secret societies among Irish workers in the United States and (again quoting Dr. Connor) “a type of nationalism totally inconsistent with the Bishop’s Americanizing program, [which Hughes believed] presented the Irish immigrant in a largely reckless, irresponsible manner to native Americans.” Hughes believed the method for an oppressed people to achieve their rights was not by “rashness and intemperate haste,” but rather by “patience, steadiness, and resolute purpose.”

[Bishop Hughes opened with warm praise for the American people for their generosity in Ireland’s crisis and then launched into the main topic of his talk.]



I come, not to describe the inconceivable horrors of a calamity which, in the midst of the nineteenth century, eighteen hundred and forty-seven years after the coming of Christ, either by want or pestilence, or both combined, threatens almost the annihilation of a whole Christian people. The newspapers tell us, that this calamity has been produced by the failure of the potato crop; but this ought not to be a sufficient cause of so frightful a consequence. The potato is but one species of the endless varieties of food which the Almighty has provided for the sustenance of his creatures; and why is it, that the life or death of the great body of any nation should be so little regarded as to be left dependent on the capricious growth of a single root? . . . I shall not enter into the

immediately antecedent circumstances or influences, that have produced this result. Some will say that it is the cruelty of unfeeling and rapacious landlords; others will have it, that it is the improvident and indolent character of the people themselves; others, still, will say that it is owing to the poverty of the country, the want of capital, the general ignorance of the people, and especially, their ignorance in reference to the improved science of agriculture. I shall not question the truth or the fallacy of any of these theories; admitting them all, if you will, to contain each more or less of truth, they yet do not explain the famine which they are cited to account for. They are themselves to be accounted for, rather as the effects of other causes, than as the real causes of effects, such as we now witness and deplore. . . .

If the attempt, then, be not considered too bold, I shall endeavour to lay before you a brief outline of the primary, original causes, which, by the action and reaction of secondary and intermediate agencies, have produced the rapacity of landlords, the poverty of the country, the imputed want of industry among its peoples and the other causes to which the present calamity will be ascribed by British statesmen. I shall desig-

The complete text of Hughes speech about the Famine, published in New York in 1847 by Edward Dunigan, is available in the 42nd Street branch of The New York Public Library.

nate these causes by three titles; first, incompleteness of conquest; second, bad government; third, a defective or vicious system of social economy.

*[Archbishop Hughes narrates the coming of the Anglo-Normans to Ireland in the 12th century during Henry II's reign, the carving out of an English "Pale," and subsequent "incomplete" efforts to subdue the Irish by force.]*

... laws for the protection of cruelty and treachery of every description were enacted, to accomplish by *piecemeal* and by *fraud*, the complete conquest which they were too feeble or too politic to refer, once for all, to the more humane decision of the battlefield.

In the minds of the invaders — in the acts of Parliament — in royal proclamations, during all those centuries down to the reign of Queen Elizabeth, the natives are designated as aliens and Irish enemies. No part of the soil of their country was recognized as theirs. They were denied all share in the benefits of English laws; the iniquities of the royal grant, supported by the iniquities of legislation, made it lawful for the invaders to kill or rob "the mere Irish," as the accidents of opportunity, or the caprice of expediency, might direct. If any of the natives appealed to the law for redress, it was enough for the defendant to prove that the would-be plaintiff was mere Irishman, and did not belong to any of the five families to whom the protection of the British laws had been, by special favour, extended. This plea arrested all farther proceedings in the court. Frequently, during this long interval, had the natives petitioned and implored to be admitted into the Pale, and under the protection of the laws; but as often was their

petition rejected. On the other hand, their own sovereignty was paralyzed and rendered impotent by the invasion, and the disorders which resulted from its incompleteness. They were broken up and divided, so that they were deprived of all opportunity for social or physical improvement, by any legislative organization of their own. This sketch conveys a faint idea of the condition of Ireland, during nearly four hundred years after the invasion. . . .

The bad policy of the incomplete conquest of Ireland had to be repaired, or rather completed, in the sixteenth century, by commencing the work anew: for, it was only under Queen Elizabeth, who was no half-way ruler, but who, whatever else she may have been, was, I had almost said, a king every inch of her, that Ireland was finally crushed, if not conquered.

It would have been, however, too humiliating to British sovereignty to supply the original defect, under the original name, of conquest. It was, therefore, now to be accomplished under the title and form of "reducing insubordinate and rebellious subjects:"—although it required the help of a strong legal fiction to regard as rebels, those who had hitherto been repulsed from the protection of the law. But even this reduction could not be accomplished, it seems, without cruelties, for which the annals of mankind, in the most barbarous ages of the world, furnish no parallel. It is a singular coincidence and full of admonition, that in this second conquest, British statesmen recommended and military officers employed — and lords deputies approved of — FAMINE — as their most effectual instrument and ally in the work of subjugation. The occupation of the troops, from year, to year, was to prevent the cultivation of the land, to destroy the growing crops already

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London Illustrated News, courtesy: Famine Museum, Strokestown, Roscommon

## Bishop Hughes on Antecedents of the Famine

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planted—for “famine,” says the English historian who records the fact, “was judged the speediest and most effectual way of reducing the Irish.” The consequences were, that whole provinces were left desolate, without an inhabitant, except in the towns and villages; that those whose misfortune permitted them to escape the sword, sometimes offered themselves, their wives and children, to be slain by the army, rather than wait for that slow, horrid, death of famine and starvation, which had been reserved for them; for we can all conceive that, compared with the deliberate use of this instrument of war, against a rural and scattered agricultural population, the Indian’s tomahawk becomes a symbol of humanity. Meantime, the old chieftains of clans, the owners of the soil, the leaders of the people, the “great rebels,” as they were called, were becoming fewer and fewer. Some perished on the battlefield, they were the most fortunate; others gave themselves up on the word of honour and protection, and were then impeached and executed. Some were slain at the festive board of the invading commander, whose invitation to the banquet they had accepted, thinking foolishly, that the laws of truce and hospitality made all their rights not only secure, but even sacred, under the tent of a true soldier; and thus, in few years, the Irish aliens, the Irish enemies, or the Irish rebels if you will, were indeed reduced; and now there was a prospect of the invaders being permitted to enter into peaceable possession of those estates which, birthright of conquest, as *they understood it*, had been theirs from the first invasion.

Elizabeth proposed to colonize the whole province of Ulster with English settlers, but she did not live to accomplish her project.

The plantation of Ulster remained to be carried into effect by her successor, James I. He secured to himself a new and better title; he confiscated to the crown six entire counties of Ulster, in one day; and parcelled them out, chiefly among his *Scotch* rather than his *English* friends—the native, the hereditary population having been, of course, sent adrift. . . .

After James came Charles I and the civil wars in England. When other resources failed the monarch, the fragments of property, real and personal, that still remained to the Irish people, were strained into the supply of his empty coffers. He

obtained from them, by royal promise, £120,000 sterling, for what was called “Graces”; the principal of which was, what every American inherits by birthright — liberty of conscience. He pocketed the money, but I am sorry to say he refused the “Graces.” His deputy in Ireland projected and carried out a system for the confiscation, in detail, of private estates, under a “Commission for inquiry into defective titles. The jury that refused to find a verdict for the crown, under this system, was punished and ruined. . . .

Under the Commonwealth, Ireland is the scene of new exterminations, new confiscations, new foreign settlers, amidst the wrecks and ruins of the native population. On the Restoration, the loyalists of England and Scotland were reinstated in their rights; but in Ireland, the loyalists were abandoned by the crown; and the followers of Cromwell confirmed in their possessions. . . .

Finally, that country which had been conquered so often, submitted at last to William III, successor to James on the English throne—submitted, but still not to the *sword* of a conqueror, but to the faith of a *king*, stamped on a written instrument, mutually agreed upon by him and the last representative of unconquered Ireland, called the “Treaty of Limerick.” But every article of it, autograph, royal seal, and all, was repudiated the moment it was safe to do so.

The enactment of the entire penal code, soon afterwards, is evidence of the entire and deliberate violation of all the articles of the Treaty of Limerick. By that code, the inhabitants of Ireland were again divided into two classes; the one consisting of those whose conscience would allow them to take the State oath, on the subject of religion, to them high privileges were secured. But penalties were enacted against those who could



Skibbereen, Co. Cork, February 1847

not, or would not, swear that oath. The great overwhelming majority of the Irish people refused the test; and the penal law came quickly to punish them. . . .

If any of those who had refused to swear, purchased an estate for any amount of money, any of the others, who had taken the oath, could dispossess him without paying one shilling for such estate. If any of the former class owned a horse worth fifty or one hundred pounds, any of the latter class had a right, by law, to tender five pounds and tell him to dismount. If any of the former class, by his skill and industry in agriculture, raised the value of his land, so as to yield a profit equal to one-third of the rent, any of the latter could enter on the profits of his labour, and take possession of his land. These laws continued for between eighty and ninety years, down to the period of American Independence. And in this enactment we see what a penalty was inflicted on the agricultural industry of the Irish — what a premium was held out to encourage that indolence which British statesmen now impudently complain of.

The same system has been continued to the present day: as if some cruel law of destiny had determined that the Irish people should be kept at the starving point through all times; since the landlord, even now, claims the right, and often uses it, of punishing the industry of his tenant, by increasing the rent, in proportion to the improvement the tenant makes on his holding. If then it be true, that the Irish are indolent, which I deny, the cause could be sufficiently explained by the penalties which a bad government has inflicted upon them, in their own country, for the crime of being industrious. Then, if it be said, as a reproach, that the Irish are ignorant, let it be remembered that this same code of penal laws closed up the schools of popular education; that the schoolmaster was banished for the crime of teaching, and if he returned he was liable to be treated as a felon. If ignorance of the people, then, be the cause of the famine. Enough has been said to point out the cause of the ignorance itself. . . .

The rest you are acquainted with; it has occurred in our day, and within our memory. It will be manifest from what has been said that the causes which have prevented the prosperity of Ireland, the development of her material resources, the cultivation of her mind, have existed from an early date; and, under one form or another, have been in perpetual activity. She has hardly been permitted to enjoy repose sufficient even for a fair experiment of improvement. During the first four hundred years after the invasion, her people were outlawed because they were mere Irish. Afterwards, when the English laws were extended to her, in 1610, her people were again outlawed or worse, not now because they were Irish, but because they were Catholics . . . the law required them to attend the church and service of the State religion. If they attended they did not understand a syllable of that service, which was conducted in the English language. If they did not attend, their property was seized by fines for their non-attendance, £20 a Sunday. . . . Then, either by grants or conscientious, under Charles the First, to whose cause they were loyal, their property was still diminished. Under Cromwell, they were punished and plundered both as idolaters, and because

they had been faithful to their king. Under the Restoration, all preceding iniquities as regarded the ownership of property were confirmed. Under William III and his successors, the penal laws were applied in the same way, not to the body politic at large, but with an ingenuity of detail, to every joint, and sinew, and muscle, as if the object were to paralyze all effort at national amelioration. Just in proportion as the struggle of these colonies for independence was successful, in that proportion did the policy of the British government relax the pressure of this weighty bondage of the Irish people.

We sometimes hear comparisons instituted between the prosperity, industry, and moral, or at least, intellectual condition, of the Scotch, and the poverty of all kinds of the Irish; I have ventured to suggest a defective or vicious system of social and political economy as the other great cause of Ireland's peculiarly depressed condition. By social economy I mean that effort of society, organized into a sovereign state, to accomplish the welfare of all its members. The welfare of its members is the end of its existence—"Salus populi, suprema lex." It would be a reproach to say that Christianity conceived a meaner or a lower idea of its obligation. This idea, it may not, perhaps, be possible to realize fully in practice under any system; but it should never be lost sight of. The system which now prevails has lost sight of it, to a great extent. It is called the free system, the system of competition — the system of making the wants of mankind a regulator for their supplies.

It had its origins in the transition of Society from that state of mitigated slavery which was called feudalism and serfage, as, they prevailed in England. As regards the mere physical position, food, clothing, lodging, of the entire people of England, there is no doubt that the old System provided better for it than the present one. The old Barons never allowed their serfs to die of a hunger which they were not willing to share. . . .

There were not, indeed, those Colossal individual fortunes which now exist, but neither were there on the other hand those abysses of physical and moral destitution, which are now yawning on every side for the new victim, whom the pressure of the present system is pushing, every day, nearer and nearer to their fatal brink. . . .

It is an appalling reflection that out of the active and productive industry of Great Britain and Ireland, provision must be made for the support of between four and five millions of paupers. This number will be increased by every depressing crisis in commerce and in trade; by every blight of sterility which Providence permits to fall on the fields of the husbandman . . . .

I know that no living man is accountable for the system of which I am about to complain; it is older than we are, it is the invisible but all-pervading divinity of the Fiscal, the unseen ruler of the temporal affairs of this world. Kings and Emperors are but its prime ministers, premiers and parliaments but, its servants in livery; money is the symbol of its worship, we are all its slaves without any power to emancipate ourselves; the dead and the dying in Ireland are its victims.

It will not be disputed, I presume, that the present system of social and political economy resolves itself, when analyzed,





Neighbors of the Quarantine Hospital in Staten Island — the first (and final) stop in America for many Famine refugees — torched the buildings, September 1, 1858. They were angry that yellow fever victims were being cared for in the hospital buildings, after a periodic outbreak of the disease. Illustration from *Harper's Weekly*, September 11, 1858

away the harvest of his labour, and this, whilst it imposes on him no duty to leave behind at least food enough to keep that poor man alive, until the earth shall again yield its fruits. The fault that I find with it, is, that it provides wholesome food, comfortable raiment and lodgings for the rogues, and thieves, and murderers, of its

into a primary element of pure selfishness. The principle that acts, the main-spring that sets all its vast and intricate machinery in motion is self-interest. . . . unfortunately this system leaves us at liberty to forget the interest of others. The fault which I impute to it, however, is that it values wealth too much, and man too little; that it does not take a large and comprehensive view of self-interest; that it does not embrace within its protecting sphere, the whole entire people, weak and strong, rich and poor, and see as its first and primary care, that no member of the social body, no man shall be allowed to suffer or perish from want, except by the agency of his own crime. The fault that I find with it, is, that in countries of limited territorial surface and dense population, by a necessary process it works down a part of the community, struggling with all their might to keep up, into a condition not merely of poverty, but also of destitution; and then treats that poverty, which itself had created, as a guilt and an infamy. . . .

The fault that I find with the system, then, is, that it not only allows but sanctions and approves of a principle, which operates so differently in two provinces of the same State, divided only by a channel of the sea. It multiplies deposits of idle money in the banks, on one side of that channel, and multiplies dead and coffinless bodies in the cabins, and along the highways, on the other. The fault that I find with it is that it guarantees the right of the rich man, to enter on the fields cultivated by the poor man whom he calls his tenant, and carry

dominions, whilst it leaves the honest, industrious, virtuous peasant, to stagger at his labour through inanition, and fall to rise no more! O! if this system be all in all, why did he not, in his forlorn state, entitle himself to its advantages? why did he not steal or commit murder? for then the protection of our modern Christian governments, would be extended to him, and he would not be allowed to die of want. I may be told that I avail myself unfairly of an extraordinary calamity to prove the defects of our present system; I may be told that the famine in Ireland is a mysterious visitation of God's providence, but I do not admit any such plea. I fear there is blasphemy in charging on the Almighty, what is the result of man's own doings. Famine in Ireland is, and has been for many years, like the cholera in India, indigenous. As long as it is confined to a comparatively few cases in the obscure and sequestered parts of the country, it may be said that the public administrators of social and political economy are excusable, inasmuch as it had not come under their notice; but in the present instance, it has attracted the attention of the whole world. And yet they call it God's famine! No! No! God's famine is known by the general scarcity of food, of which it is the consequence—there is no general scarcity, there has been no general scarcity of food in Ireland, either in the present, or the past year, except in one species of vegetable. The soil has produced its usual tribute for the support of those by whom it has been cultivated; but politi-

cal economy found the Irish people too poor to pay for the harvest of their own labour, and has exported it to a better market, leaving them to die of famine, or to live on alms; and this same political economy authorizes the provision merchant, even amidst the desolation, to keep his doors locked, and his sacks of corn tied up within, waiting for a better price, whilst he himself is perhaps at his desk, describing the wretchedness of the people and the extent of the misery; setting forth for the eye of the first lord of the treasury, with what exemplary patience the peasantry bear their sufferings, with what admirable resignation they fall down through weakness at the threshold of his warehouse, without having even attempted to burst a door, or break a window.

. . . still the rights of life are dearer and higher than those of property; and in a general famine like the present, there is no law of Heaven, nor of nature, that forbids a starving man to seize on bread wherever he can find it, even though it should be the loaves of proposition on the altar of God's temple. But, I would say to those who maintain the sacred and inviolable rights of property, if they would have the claim respected, to be careful also and scrupulous in recognizing the rights of humanity. . . .

It is manifest that the causes of Ireland's present suffering have been multitudinous, remote, and I might almost say, perpetual. Nearly the whole land of the country is in the ownership of persons having no sympathy with its population except that of self-interest. Her people are broken down in their physical condition by the previous calamity to which I have directed your attention. Since her union with England, commerce followed capital, or found it in that country, and forsook the sister island. Nothing remained but the produce of the soil. That produce was sent to England to find a better market, for the rent must be paid; but neither the produce nor the rent ever returned. It has been estimated that the average export of capital from this source has been equal to some 25 or perhaps 30 millions of dollars annually, for the last seven and forty years; and it is at the close of this last period, by the failure of the potato, that Ireland, without trade, without manufactures, without any returns for her agricultural exports, sinks beneath the last feather, not that the feather was so weighty, but that the burthen previously imposed was far above her strength to bear. If it be true that the darkest hour of the night is that which immediately precedes the dawn, may we not indulge the hope that there are better days yet in store for this unfortunate people. They have been crushed and ruined in all the primary elements of their material happiness, but yet they have never forfeited any of the higher attributes of a noble, generous nature. They might, perhaps, have shared with the other

portions of the empire in the physical comforts and improvements of modern civilization, if they had renounced their religion, at the period when the others saw fit to change theirs; but after the present famine shall have been forgotten, the high testimony which the Irish people bore to the holiness of conviction within their soul, at all risks, and through all sacrifices, will be considered an honour to humanity itself. They believed whether rightly or not is not now the question, but right or wrong, they believed that to profess a religion which had no hold on their conviction, would offend God, and involve them in the double guilt of falsehood and hypocrisy—that it would degrade them in their own minds—that it would entitle them to the contempt of the world and sooner than do this, they submitted to everything besides. There was this one sovereignty which they never relinquished—the sovereignty of conscience, and the privilege of self-respect. Their soul has never been conquered; and if it was said in Pagan times that the noblest spectacle which this earth could present to the eye of the immortal gods, was that of a virtuous man bravely struggling with adversity; what might not be said of a nation of such men who have so struggled through entire centuries? Neither can it be said that their spirit is yet broken. Intellect, sentiment, fancy, wit, eloquence, music and poetry, are, I might say, natural and hereditary attributes of the Irish mind and the Irish heart; and if no adversity of ages was sufficient to crush these capacities and powers, who will say that such a people have not, under happier circumstances, within themselves a principle of self-regeneration and improvement, which will secure to them at least an ordinary portion of the happiness of which they have been so long deprived? The charity of other countries, and among them preeminently of England herself, the sympathy of distant and free states, on this occasion, will themselves have an effect. They will show Ireland that she is cared for; they will inspire her with the pleasing hope that she is not to be always the downtrodden and neglected province, the outcast nation among the nations of the earth.



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