

# “The Great Hunger” on the Internet

By Gerald A. Regan

**I ventured through that parish this day, to ascertain the condition of the inhabitants, and although a man not easily moved, I confess myself unmanned by the extent and intensity of suffering I witnessed, more especially among the women and little children, crowds of whom were to be seen scattered over the turnip fields, like a flock of famished crows, devouring the raw turnips. . . .**

**Capt. Wynne, Inspecting Officer, West Clare, 1846**

A few years ago, finding an eyewitness account of the ravages of the Famine required a trip to the library. Then came the Internet computer network, the highly-touted “information superhighway.” Now you can find such vignettes “online” at <http://www.infi.net/~cksmith/PotatCom.html#History>.

Today, armed with only a personal computer and a “modem” (a device which transmits electronic data over an ordinary telephone line), you can learn a great deal about the Famine. You can find a recollection like Capt. Wynne’s on the Internet, along with dozens of similar accounts and period illustrations. You can find a 26-item bibliography, listings of commemorations worldwide, folklore, songs, poems, and even recipes (including an 1840s recipe for Famine Soup). You can even “download software” (copy a computer program to your own computer) allowing you to simulate potato-growing conditions in Ireland during the Famine.

The information is contained on the World Wide Web, a rapidly growing part of the Internet. “The Web” also offers “Usenet groups” where one finds discussion on specific topics. To discuss the Famine the place to go would be the Usenet group *soc.culture.irish*.

Famine-related information that can be found on the Web includes: text of a speech by President of Ireland Mary Robinson on the Irish diaspora; production notes on “The Hanging Gale,” a BBC miniseries on the famine; historical resources available at The National Archives of Ireland; and information about the Famine Museum in Strokestown,

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County Roscommon. New information is constantly being added as Internet users — around the world — contribute new bits of research and reprints of articles.

Information-providers on the Web establish a Web “site” where Internet users can find them. Also called “home pages” or “Web pages,” sites usually feature eye-catching logos and on-screen option buttons for more information. Currently, the best Web site for reading about the famine is one titled “A Commemoration of the Great Famine (Ireland 1845)” compiled by Conrad J. Bladey of Linthicum, Maryland.

Bladey’s famine commemoration typifies the grace which is the Web. With the click of a button, you can view on your computer screen another Web site featuring articles and haunting illustrations from famine-era issues of *The Illustrated London News*. With another click of a button, you can send “e-mail” (electronic mail), almost instantly readable on the computer screen of an addressee who can be on the other side of the world. You can make comments to the producer of a Web site. Or you can connect (again, with the click of a button) with more Web sites discussing related topics: “Hunger Web,” “Science of the Famine,” a tourist brochure for Northern Ireland, and *Ceoltas* (“Celtic Music on the Internet”). One caveat, however: Satisfy yourself that the historical information offered by a Web site is authentic. Just because a citation appears on the Web does not guarantee its historical accuracy.

Because of the rapid advances in information technology, an up-to-date computer system today can effortlessly bring the glories — and tragedies — of history to your desk top. Tools such as the popular Yahoo! Search Engine can help you navigate through the rapidly growing number of Web sites. Go n-eiri an bothar leat! (“Happy voyaging!”)

## An Internet Sampler

On the opposite page is a composite of two different “sites” on the Internet relating to the Famine. The first, courtesy of PRODIGY Web Browser, can be found at <http://user-www.service.em...Store/Soup Depot.html>.

The second is a Web site promoting the recent film “The Hanging Gale,” which tells the saga of four brothers’ efforts to keep their families alive in the depths of the Famine. Internet users can access nine different topics with the click of a button.

# An Internet Sampler

Note: The following article is taken from *The Illustrated London News*, March 13, 1847.

## SOUP STORE AT CORK.



The benevolent attempts to alleviate the present scarcity are specially worthy of illustration. The spot where this large Depôt has been fitted up was, until this year, one of the principal potato markets, and is, therefore, well calculated for the purpose; it being well walled in, and surrounded with sheds, which afford shelter to the poor applicants. The food is cooked in an upper building, and handed down for distribution, as shown by our artist. Previously to this, an equally large quantity of capital meat soup is distributed at one halfpenny per quart, to such as choose to purchase it. It is worthy of remark, that, from the opening of this Depôt to the present time, not an act of dishonesty has been known to take place; Alderman Roche stating that not a spoon or vessel to be missing.

We quote these additional details of the mode of distribution, from the *Southern Reporter*:

"It is impossible to overrate the valuable services rendered by the gentlemen who attend here, and undertake the arduous duty of administering the daily rations of food to the famishing and clamorous crowds who beset the gates. The average number supplied every day at this establishment for the past week ...

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## THE HANGING GALE

In 1845 Ireland was an overcrowded country of over 8 million people. Most lived on the land as subsistence farmers, paying high rents to their landlords. Some landlords were fair but others, both English and Irish whether absent or living in Ireland, tried to extract the maximum rents from their beleaguered tenants. Half of all farms were under 5 acres, and the system of sub-division and sub letting led to total dependence on the potato.

Tenant farmers usually held a very short lease. The landlord was able to hold the threat of eviction over the tenant especially as the rent was payable 6 months in arrears. This system of rent in arrears was the notorious "Hanging Gale". These rental agreements were often nailed symbolically to the rafters over the heads of the tenant.

In the event of eviction, tenants were forced to leave the estate. Many died on the roads. Others went to the poor-houses, badly run and debilitating institutions, where families would be separated.

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- How it started
- Further reading
- Genealogical resources
- The cast
- The Great Hunger
- Family history on-line

# The Great Hunger: A Selected Bibliography

by Trish Little Taylor

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