

Irish Emigration to America I: The Famine's Role in Irish Emigration

Between the years 1845 to 1855, the rate of Irish emigration to the United States rose to the highest it has ever been, with about one and a half million Irish people leaving for America. Irish people were already emigrating at a steady rate to the US and United Kingdom, but this sharp increase in numbers was largely caused by famine, along with other factors.

During the nineteenth century, potatoes were vital to the Irish population, being by far their most important source of food. When potatoes in Ireland were hit by a disease known as potato blight that destroyed much of the potato crop, famine followed. The Great Irish Famine, lasting from 1845 to 1852, had caused the death of around a million people between starvation and diseases. On top of this, many people rented land from British landlords because Ireland had already been colonised by England at that time. When these Irish tenants could not pay the rent, they were often evicted, in other words, they were forced to leave their home.

Wishing to escape famine, disease and homelessness, many chose to emigrate to America which promised jobs, prosperity and freedom. About another two million Irish people came to America during the rest of the nineteenth century, and the rate of emigration remained high throughout the 20th century.