

*BLACK 47 AND BEYOND: THE GREAT IRISH FAMINE
IN HISTORY, ECONOMY, AND MEMORY.* BY CORMAC
Ó GRÁDA. PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1999.

The subject matter of this book is one of the great tragedies in human history. During the late 1840s more than one million Irish died and many more emigrated, with the Irish population not returning to its former level for over a century. Author Cormac Ó Gráda would appear to be well suited to write about this tragedy. He is professor of economics at the University College in Dublin and is considered Ireland's premier economic historian and a leading authority on the Great Irish Famine.

Despite his credentials and the fascinating nature of his subject matter, this book will be a big disappointment for many economists. *Black 47 and Beyond* is a work of history, not economics. It recounts the history of economic phenomena, but rarely are these phenomena subjected to economic analysis. The author shares the interests of the "new economic historians" or cliometricians who attempt to provide a statistical documentation of history. Consequently, he is less concerned with answers to the economic questions of cause and effect and often ignores the broader historical context of the phenomena he is writing about. Ó Gráda tells us how many people died, where they died, and how they died, but he does not investigate what really caused the Great Irish Famine to occur.

The author is not sympathetic to the economic theory of famines. From the ancient fathers of economics, Richard Cantillon and Adam Smith to Amartya Sen, last year's Nobel Laureate in economics, economists have generally found that famines are not natural disasters. Economists generally view famines as a result of government intervention such as war, civil war, manipulation of money and trade, or the theft of property.

Contrary to this tradition, Ó Gráda accepts the historical view that the famine was just a natural disaster. Furthermore, when he does discuss causation and blame he concludes that the English did not do enough to help their Irish neighbors. In fact, he says that the deaths and suffering should be placed on the classical-liberals and free markets for influencing the policymakers not to intervene.

Indeed, the English classical liberals should share in the blame for the famine, but not in the manner proposed by our author. In order to understand the real causes of the famine we have to look much deeper into the historical context of the times. Ireland was a conquered land, its people were without property rights, and the English were committed to a policy of suppressing a Catholic population that continually threatened to rise up and expel their oppressors.

Prior to the famine, Ireland had been subject to invasion, war, and hegemony by the English for hundreds of years. All of the good land was taken from the Irish and given to Englishmen who were often absentee landlords. The political basis of land ownership meant that landlords held precarious property rights, which, in turn encouraged the landlords to exploit the land, rather than invest in and improve their estates.

Irish Catholics were prohibited from owning weapons and from becoming constables and were thus discouraged from accumulating capital because they could not effectively protect it. They also had no property rights or incentives to improve the land because only in Protestant-dominated areas did tenant farmers have any rights over capital improvements to the land. This may explain, in part, the Irish's over-reliance on the potato. The potato did not require capital investment, did not deplete the soil, and produced enough food to sustain families on the ever-shrinking land given to tenants.

The English had long debated the "Irish Question" prior to the famine and had concocted every imaginable charge against the integrity and nature of the Irish people. They charged that the Irish were lazy and not as industrious as the English or even the Irish who lived in Britain or America. This last observation should have led English commentators and Ó Gráda to the conclusion that Irish indolence was due not to their nature, but to English rule. Unfortunately, it did not.

Malthus led the charge that the Irish were promiscuous and married too young, which resulted in too many children, and thus a population too large for Ireland to sustain. Malthusians viewed the famine as the Irish paying for their sins. However, there is a perfectly logical explanation for Irish population carefully overlooked by Ó Gráda, Malthusians, and other English commentators. The population of Ireland grew rapidly after being incorporated into Great Britain in 1801. Populations increased throughout Europe during this period of Industrial Revolution, but the Irish population increased slightly faster than the English and European population.

This rapid population growth was caused by the protectionist Corn Laws that kept grain prices high and prevented prices from falling during years of large harvests. Originally the Corn Laws served to keep Irish grain out of

English markets, but after incorporation in 1801, they served to keep Irish grain prices high and made Ireland the breadbasket of England. High prices brought new lands under cultivation and increased the demand for farm labor. This is when Ireland's population boomed, not before and not after. In fact, the population growth rate had already diminished substantially in the decade prior to the famine in response to reduced levels of protectionism.

The Anti-Corn Law League succeeded in 1845 in overturning the Corn Laws and establishing free trade in grain just prior to the onset of the famine. By 1847 the price of wheat had plummeted to a sixty-seven-year low. Naturally the capital value of farmland fell and the demand for labor collapsed as estates switched from grain production to pasture land for raising animals. Clearly, it was English protectionism that was responsible for Irish "promiscuity" and, in part, the massive amount of death and suffering that occurred during the famine.

Another major policy change, the Bank Act of 1844, ignited a financial crisis as the money supply shrank and credit became more restrictive. The Bank Act, no doubt, had an impact on the landlords who were often heavily in debt. While it may seem that sound money and free trade precipitated the famine, it was protectionism and government manipulation of money and banking that ultimately laid the basis of the suffering. These issues are either ignored or dismissed by Ó Gráda.

There is an implicit recognition by the author that the English are somehow responsible for Irish suffering. In fact, one of the book's strengths is the detailed information concerning the ineptitude, inefficiency, and corruption of the English-imposed Irish Poor Laws. Austrian economics, historical evidence, theory and policy analysis could have informed the author that government welfare programs are bad policy medicine, but Ó Gráda seems convinced of the mainstream view, even in the face of his own evidence, that welfare is good for poor people. In his view, English welfare policy towards the Irish needed only to be reformed, strengthened, and expanded to improve society.

The English seemed to be obsessed with policy reform and welfare measures during the nineteenth century. Real problems did exist but they had real causes that could not be addressed with reform and welfare measures. The English would have been better served if they simply had maintained peace and property rights and had stuck to a policy of sound money and no taxation.

This "reform" obsession was combined with another obsession of the English economist-philosophers to make welfare as distasteful as possible so as to discourage people from becoming dependent on public assistance. The

English imposed a “poor law” on Ireland that called for workhouses and public works in direct opposition to its own commission that recommended investment and private charity as the remedy to poverty.

The national system of workhouses was completed just prior to the onset of the famine. Conditions in the workhouses were poor and they were often overcrowded. Food was meager and pay was very low by design. Ó Gráda even hints that they may have contributed significantly to the high death toll because deadly diseases spread quickly in the crowded workhouses.

The public works system also failed to stop the famine. People would often have to lose or forfeit all their property and possessions before becoming eligible for jobs on public works. Pay was set so low that it would not pay for enough food to make up for calories lost from the hard manual labor. Jobs were limited to one per family and the work was carried out in winter months when the poorly clothed Irish normally stayed inside to avoid the cold, wind, and moisture. As a result, the public works system further weakened the Irish people. It brought family leaders together to work under harsh conditions where they could be exposed to deadly disease, and then sent them home to expose their families to the diseases.

The public works themselves were almost entirely make-work, New Deal-style projects that provided no lasting benefit for the already capital-poor economy. To the extent that welfare was financed by local taxes, the programs further weakened the local economy. To the extent the programs were financed by England, the programs crowded out private charity from abroad. Just as is true today, people give less money to charity when they think the government is taking care of a problem with their tax dollars. Indeed, our author found that the most effective welfare measure occurred in 1847 when the English temporarily set up soup kitchens similar to those private charity had successfully provided the rural Irish poor during past crop failures. The program was quickly scrapped.

Taken as a whole (invasion, war, theft of property, disenfranchisement, barriers to entering into certain professions and bans on owning weapons, forced hard labor in camps under horrible conditions—based largely on race and religion—with millions either dying or fleeing the country) the Irish famine has much in common with the German Holocaust.

Of course, there is no convincing evidence that the English did all of this on purpose. Pro-Irish accounts of the famine are not considered academically reliable. However, Ó Gráda does provide evidence that Catholics were more likely to die than Protestants and, more pointedly, that fighting-aged men died in large numbers during this famine, while in all other famines it is usually the

young and old that die in large numbers while the adult men are more likely to survive. It should also be remembered that these were revolutionary times and that the English were always worried about an Irish revolt. Ireland had risen up against England before and would do so again after the famine.

This is the economic background of the Irish Famine and this story is not told by the author. Many of the historical aspects of the famine are examined in significant statistical detail, but ultimately these refined empirical results paint no clearer or more certain a picture of the famine than the ballads, folklore, and newspaper accounts that the author dismisses. The important point to be remembered is that the free market did not cause the famine nor did the potato blight that struck around the world during the 1840s. Like other famines in history, the Irish genocide was the result of government at work.

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