

by Christopher Murphy

An Gorta Mór

THE HISTORY OF MY ANCESTORS is bleakly tinted by an event that occurred in the middle of the nineteenth century. Known in Irish Gaelic as *An Gorta Mór*—The Great Hunger—the potato famine that caused a million men, women, and children in Ireland to die of starvation and disease and another million to flee the country (beginning a long trend of emigration that only recently ended), was a classic example of the sort of perfect storm that can result from a combination of crop failure, poor agricultural planning, lack of emergency preparedness, and an almost incredible attitude of callousness on the part of the people charged with providing relief to those in need.

At the height of that crisis, Sir Charles Trevelyan, the man assigned by the British government with administering relief efforts in Ireland wrote, “The judgment of God sent the calamity to teach the Irish a lesson, that calamity must not be too much mitigated.... The real evil with which we have to contend is not the physical evil of the famine, but the moral evil of the selfish, perverse and turbulent character of the [Irish] people.” In another place he noted that the famine was an efficient “mechanism for reducing surplus population.”

During *An Gorta Mór* Trevelyan allowed grain and other foods to be exported from Ireland to add to the already ample food supplies in Great Britain. This sort of thing seems almost unbelievable today, but similar problems abound even in our modern world. For most of the last hundred years there have consistently been sufficient supplies of food to feed all of the world’s people. But economic, political, infrastructure, and other factors have often allowed for severe famines to strike hard at poor populations in less developed nations while in countries like the United States an epidemic of obesity has become a major public health problem.

Our cover story in this issue, “Feeding Mouths and Minds,” examines some excellent efforts underway at colleges and universities to mitigate the scourge of hunger in many places where famine is a consistent threat. As Carol McLaughlin, research director for global public health at the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for High Impact Philanthropy notes in the article, hunger is an area where multiple academic disciplines can contribute. Coordinated efforts like these among academic organizations can help focus minds and bring resources to bear that can alleviate much avoidable suffering in our world.

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