

Things to think about: The Irish Famine
Ó Gráda

How did the potato blight affect farming practices and change the rural landscape of Ireland?

What was the economic role of the potato before the famine and what were some of the symbolic associations with the potato? Was there something uniquely significant about the role of the potato in pre-famine Irish history?

Was the lumper potato good to eat?

What was the staple crop that Ireland substituted for potatoes during the blight?

Was the famine a natural crisis? Was it inevitable? Why or why not? The author reviews and makes use of several political and economic arguments for the cause of famines—what are some of these (see especially Malthus, Smith, and Sen)?

What relationship does the author draw between Britain's industrial revolution and the Irish economy?

How did weather and seasonal changes in economic activity exacerbate the famine in some regions?

Besides starvation, what were the other major causes of death during the famine? How were poverty and mortality rates correlated? Did the famine have differential effects on various social groups (the poor, the propertied, merchants, moneylenders)?

How might proximity to the sea coast or regional literacy rates have influenced the likelihood of surviving the famine (pp. 133-134)?

How does the author use comparative data across time and place to assess the impact of the famine on the mid-nineteenth century Irish population (see esp. Table 3.6)? According to the author, what was unique and what was generic about the Irish Famine of the mid- to late 1840s relative to other famines in world history? Is this a reasonable approach to historical analysis?

On the whole, does the author think that an escape from Ireland (overseas or otherwise) was an escape from the death trap of the famine?

Is it important to have precise figures for the death toll of major demographic shocks?