

REMEMBERING THE FAMINE

Anna Mai Smith

THE WORD 'Famine' represents hunger to most of us. My decision to write a presentation entitled 'Remembering the Famine' was stimulated by a 'hunger' of my own, a desire to place my own ancestors during the Great Famine in Ireland. The Great Famine, An Gorta Mór or An Drochshaoil, meaning 'The Bad Life', resulted in the population of Ireland being reduced by 20% to 25%, between 1845 and 1850. It permanently altered Ireland's demographic, political and cultural landscape and due to the level of emigration during this era. It affected other countries too.

From 1845-1850, 1.3 million Irish people emigrated overseas. Of those recorded, 70% went to the USA, 28% to Canada and 2% to Australia. Tens of thousands of our impoverished ancestors also crossed the Irish Sea to land at ports in England, Scotland and South Wales. However, because Ireland and England were then part of the same country, no migration figures were documented on Irish Sea traffic.

When we speak of the Great Famine we reflect on our emigrants, those who made it to the other side and lived on with a struggle, and also those who died on their voyage on coffin ships and were buried at sea where the 'spirits' of thousands of our ancestors 'rose up' from the depths of the ocean. We remember all of the people who died of starvation here on their native land and were buried under their crumbled mud walled cabins or in mass graves. We must also think of our forefathers who stayed here in Ireland and somehow managed to survive. Both my maternal and paternal great-grandparents were children during the famine, therefore you and I are living proof of their survival because we are their descendants and we are here!

At the start of the famine over 50% of the



population of Ireland lived in one roomed mud walled cabins. The landlords or wealthy tenants lived in two storey houses or mansions, in a different world to those who suffered during the potato famine of the mid 19th Century. The potato was the staple diet of much of the country throughout the 1800s as it could be grown even in poor soils and was suitable to the Irish climate. Grown on what became known as 'lazy beds', it gave a good return per acre and a single acre could support a family of five or six people. In September of 1845, partial failure of the crop was recorded when potato stalks turned black and curled, then rotted. This was the result of an airborne fungus, a pathogenic organism, which became known as 'the blight'. In 1846 the potato crop was a total failure. 1847 was free from blight, but as result of the lack of availability of any healthy seed potatoes to plant, the famine continued. Yet, the country was producing plenty of food.

As the Irish politician, Charles Duffy wrote "Ships continue to leave the country, loaded with grain and meat". The major problem was not that there was no food in Ireland. There was plenty of wheat, meat and dairy produce,

much of which was being exported to England, but the Irish peasants had no money with which to buy the food so therefore the poor simply starved. Even with the introduction of soup kitchens and the workhouses, our famine ancestors still suffered starvation and degradation. The road to the workhouse was known as 'cosán na marbh' or 'the pathway of the dead' as many died inside. This explains an old persons attitude to the 'County Home'. To enter the workhouse was definitely a last resort. Our ancestors of famine times avoided it if at all possible: Even in the depths of starvation, our Irish peasant ancestors possessed a "Fierce Frugal Pride".

The Irish Potato Famine was preventable and avoidable; but at this time Irish peasants appear to have been a 'disposable people'. Even present day famines are often the result of war or bad political decisions; but to the poor destitute Irish peasant 'An Gorta Mór' was believed perhaps to be an 'Act Of God'. To explain a very harrowing period in our lives we often blame ourselves. In famine times the people felt that perhaps they were being punished for wrong-doings or sins; pleading to God to save them.

FAMINE SPIRIT

Anna Mai Smith

I closed my eyes so as to think; of an era long gone before
As I did, my mind did sink; to another time in days of yore
And there she was as clear as day; bent, scraping at the clay:

Oh God of heaven, what's the reason?
There's not a pratie to be found,
Nathin' but a black auld mush, Rank as corpses in the ground,
My bains and wains they will fade, from hunger to be sure,
What have I done to warrant this and bring
starvation to me door.

I look about but I ne'er can see a sight of a friendly face
Nay're word to lift the heart in me I heed in any place
They leave me now, them that pass me by,
to me lonesomeness and care
There's nay're house to draw my step, nor fire for me share!

If I can right me sins with you, will ya take away this blight
And let me have some praties,
so me bains and wains might live the night
When I looked again, she was gone,
but I know that she was there,
Like so many Mothers in famine times,
asking God to hear her prayer.

Rather than dwell on the past it is important to remember and acknowledge it. We can then move on, but it is important to bear in mind the fact that our ancestors of famine times were denied basic rights to: Food, Shelter, Freedom, Hope, Life

I say to you, Our Great Irish Famine Ancestors:
We, your descendents, honour you.
We pay tribute to the countless
who were not allowed to grow old.
Your lives were crushed by eviction and starvation,
We acknowledge your pain, hunger and your suffering,
We recognise your loss of culture and language.
We hope that you are at peace now.
Beyond the fear of death, beyond all hunger and pain.
We owe you a debt of gratitude and
you should know no shame.
You have given us strength and
we will remember you with pride because,
You who emigrated, you who died at sea,
abroad and at home in Eire,
You who somehow struggled and
lived on here on your native land
Have made us, your descendants, a stronger race of people.

YOU RAISED US UP!

SNIPPET

265KG IS A WHOLE lot of pancake in anyone's book. Following a marathon boxty-making session in Carrick on Shannon last June, a single 265kg boxty pancake entered the Guinness Book of Records as the world's largest potato pancake. Instigated by Sham Hanifa of The Cottage in Jamestown, and ably abetted by boxty meister Pádraic Óg Gallagher of Gallagher's Boxty House in Temple Bar, oceans of potato, flour, milk, water and salt were, with volunteer help, transformed into batter which filled a 4.25m x 2.75m specially constructed wheelable pan. After several hours of cooking over hot coals, the result—requiring considerable mechanical assistance to be weighed—was hailed as a world-beater.

Officially the biggest boxty ever!

Big Boxty! Guinness Book of Records

