



The Graves Are Walking: The Great Famine and the Saga of the Irish People

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It started in 1845 and lasted six years. Before it was over, more than one million men, women, and children starved to death and another million fled the country. Measured in terms of mortality, the Great Irish Potato Famine was one of the worst disasters in the nineteenth century—it claimed twice as many lives as the American Civil War. A perfect storm of bacterial infection, political greed, and religious intolerance sparked this catastrophe. But even more extraordinary than its scope were its political underpinnings, and *The Graves Are Walking* provides fresh material and analysis on the role that nineteenth-century evangelical Protestantism played in shaping British policies and on Britain's attempt to use the famine to reshape Irish society and character.

Perhaps most important, this is ultimately a story of triumph over perceived destiny: for fifty million Americans of Irish heritage, the saga of a broken people fleeing crushing starvation and remaking themselves in a new land is an inspiring story of exoneration.

Based on extensive research and written with novelistic flair, *The Graves Are Walking* draws a portrait that is both intimate and panoramic, that captures the drama of individual lives caught up in an unimaginable tragedy, while imparting a new understanding of the famine's causes and consequences.

The Graves Are Walking: The Great Famine and the Saga of the Irish People Details

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Holly says

Simply devoured this non-fiction read in two days...a page turner and scholarly. This book was amazingly comprehensive in the impact of the potatoe blight on the Irish and subsequently, the rest of the world. My only complaint would have been the lack of how the Irish found themselves in the position they in the first place, that's only because I would have like to read how THIS author wrote it. Going to hunt down his previous book about The Plague.

Mary Regan says

A somber work by the author of The Great Mortality, which was a history of the Black Death. The Great Hunger is the subject of this book, a great mortality that afflicted Ireland when the potato crop, the only food for most small Irish farmers, failed again and again, from 1845 to 1852.

Kelly takes a very small slice of Irish history -- really from August of 1845 through "black '47," and adds the story of those who fled that year to Canada and to the U.S. The book is rich with detail, and it deals with the policies of English Prime Ministers Robert Peel and John Russell and of Charles Edward Trevelyan of the Department of the Treasury. Imported Indian corn could be sold to the Irish, but not given away (to avoid depriving private merchants of their profits). That the Irish had a barter system and therefore no money to pay for the corn posed a problem. The problem was addressed by a public works program which built roads and bridges to nowhere (again, to avoid competing with private enterprise), but it was much too little and much too late. Those who had any hope of emigrating boarded ships that were less than safe, in conditions that promoted the spread of typhus. They were abetted by landlords who were taxed much more than they could afford by the Extended Poor Law of 1847, which based the amount of the tax on the number of tenants living on the land and made it expedient for landlords to clear their land by eviction.

The English eventually saw the famine as the hand of Providence working to clear the land so that the Irish could advance in modern commercial farming methods. But Kelly points out that the new farming methods, which did indeed take hold, lasted only ten years. The Irish Land War of the 1870s and 1880s resulted in reforms that reversed the system of land ownership in Ireland from ownership of most of the land in the hands of a very few to ownership of most of the land by small farmers.

The cost of the English policies during the famine was the death of about a million Irish, and emigration of two million more, many of whom died on the journey. Kelly notes tha many of the Irish emigrants in later years were not capable of saying "England" without adding "Goddamn her."

Caroline says

The Irish famine is one of the most tragic and contentious periods in the long and often tragic and contentious history of Anglo-Irish relations. Talk about the famine still causes controversy and outrage today, more than 150 years later; and the mass exodus of Irish citizens fleeing the desperate situation at home has had a lasting influence on the populations of Ireland, Britain, Canada and the United States. One could quite reasonably argue that the Irish famine went further towards creating the modern state of Ireland than almost anything else in its history.

'God sent the potato blight but England sent the famine' is the traditional, and most certainly the Irish, view of the great famine of the nineteenth century - and as John Kelly points out in this admirably even-handed book this view is not entirely without merit. The British government of the time was guilty of a mass of faults and failings when it came to Ireland - to quote, 'bureaucratic delays and incompetence, shipping shortages, legislative measures and tax policy, cowardice on the part of some officials and stupidity on the part of others' - but the Irish famine was never the result of any kind of intentional policy of genocide or even wilful and deliberate neglect. The government in fact did embark upon an unprecedented programme of emergency relief: government provision of food, an extension of the poorhouse and soup kitchen scheme, funding of public labour works to employ the poor, charity drives - but in too many cases it proved to be too little and too late, and therefore cannot excuse the disappearance of nearly a third of the Irish population through starvation, disease and emigration.

The famine was a perfect storm of circumstances: the potato blight; poor weather; a worldwide food shortage; an Irish peasantry almost entirely dependent on the potato crop and living in a barter economy with almost no access to ready cash; the lack of development of the Irish infrastructure which meant there were no rural shops to supplement the potato diet and few links between town and country to facilitate emergency distribution of relief; the greed and avarice of a home-grown Irish merchant class who were more concerned with protecting their profit margins than feeding their fellow citizens; an Anglo-Irish aristocracy with no qualms about evicting tenants in order to lower their poor rates; and yes, a British government who held the Irish in contempt and who in many cases looked on the famine as an opportunity to 'remake' Ireland in England's image.

It's a heart-rending period in history, and John Kelly tugs at all the heartstrings. He succeeds in presenting both views of the famine - the official government and bureaucratic records alongside the stories of a people barefoot and half-naked, diseased and desperate, greeting inevitable death with a resignation only seen in people beyond all hope. The need to blame someone, anyone, is all too understandable, reading this book, and the Victorian government deserves to shoulder the lion's share, it not entirely all, of the blame.

Chris says

The Irish potato famine is something I remember hearing about in school but never really understanding it. "The Graves Are Walking: The Great Famine and the Saga of the Irish" filled in that gap in my historical knowledge. It is incredible to me, as this book shows, how ideology and religion can blind people, and be used to justify terrible suffering.

Ireland in 1846, at the beginning of the famine, had a population of about 8 million. At the end of the famine 1.5 million were dead and at least another 2 million had fled the country for England, Canada, and the US. So in the space of about five years Ireland lost a third of its population. I had no idea of the massive scope of the famine until I read this book.

The British government at the time viewed the Irish as backward, lazy, and Catholic. Many in the British government, including the man who was assigned to lead the Irish relief efforts, believed the potato blight was God's judgment on those lazy papists. At the same time, these same officials were in the grip of a free market ideology that told them not to give away food to starving people as it will undercut the prices for the merchants who are trying to sell it. (They also didn't want the Irish to become dependent on government handouts. They actually used that language about people who are starving by the thousands every day...*plus ça change...*) This led the British to sell government corn at the market price which was more than a poor person could make in a day, let alone feed a family. Anyway, this book is a very interesting book about the potato famine and the immigration of so many Irish all over the world. It is because of the famine and the

immigration to New York that we had Tammeny hall in New York, we use the phrase "paddy wagon" for a police prison transport, (Paddy was a derogatory term for the Irish). There are all kinds of really interesting information and anecdotes in this book. I recommend it to any history buff, especially those interested in Irish history.

Natalie says

I think the title of this book is a clear sign that it is not a shiny happy story. In fact there is very little good in this book. As the author said in the second to last paragraph England has a lot of wonderful moments in history it can be very proud of. The Irish Potato Famine is probably one of the periods of history it should be most ashamed of (kind of like America's history with slavery. . .).

John Kelly did an excellent job explaining how the political responses to a crop failure lead to the death of over a million people. Add the eviction of thousands and the emigration of 2 million, and Ireland was gutted of a third of it's population. Kelly argues that England didn't come into the crisis intending to cause a genocide of the troublesome Irish poor, but he says that the government's failures could easily lead the victims to believe that. In summary there were bureaucratic delays, incompetence, shipping shortages, cowardice and stupidity. Most to blame in my opinion, were the officials that were stupidly devoted Adam Smith and Edmund Burke. It was very easy for decision makers of the time to assume poverty was a direct result of laziness, lack of character, or immorality. Sadly the famine proved to history (if not to the people of the time) that the rich are often lazy, and immoral (we have plenty of examples of this today too).

This book should be required reading for people who want to run for any major office. We can learn a lot of lessons from this period of history. The biggest lesson I got out of this book is the fact that human lives should not be used as a currency to buy your ideal way of life. The leading Englishmen of the time wanted to turn Ireland into a modern agricultural society with fewer poor, fewer small farmers, and more "English" ideals. When the potato blight arrived they didn't purposely try to starve out the inconvenient poor population, but they did use their ideological glasses to color all their decisions. They were willing to help the Irish, but not too much. Fix the poor laws, but heavens knows the Irish must pay for it! Let a man have relief, but he must give up any rights to his land to do it. Let the poor be cared for, but if they are cared for too well, they will obviously decide to rely on it forever. The result of this kind of thinking was mass deaths by starvation and disease that followed. Mass evictions also became a way of life.

I highly recommend this book, but warn it is not for the faint of heart. There are a lot of descriptions of the horrors these poor people faced. If you are devoted to the "if you are poor you must be lazy and immoral" mindset, you won't like this book either. Too many of the "villains" in this story have that same point of view. Lastly, this is a tough read because of how many descriptions of children and babies suffering. Now that I've finished I'm going to search out a fluffy happy book, and snuggle with my little girls. I will also Thank God for the blessings he has given me, and pray for the many people in the world today who are suffering.

Gerry says

In the early part of this historical account of one of the great human tragedies to affect mankind, we are introduced to the political players, local persons affected, and relief brought in earnest but severely mismanaged, as well as a plethora of good intentions seemingly gone awry. In all truth, there was an effort and attempt to diagnose, understand, and then salvage what could (or what was believed to be an ability to

salvage) for humanity with the P-infestans that afflicted the potato with this disease that hit throughout northern Europe. Ireland was hit the hardest and the author holds no punches back; however, he informs the reader through a novel type of approach. He puts blame not on the English as a nation; but where the blame was due and this within the framework in part of the political machination of the time and placed within this critical and well researched book. The event of this era of 1845-47 does not read like a text book; it reads as a story that includes real people, Priests, and Politicians with real names, real events and real efforts to correct a problem of the direst type. Stereo types in the Press prevailed during the time frame to which not only didn't help matters to the persons of the time who could read – these printed stereo types would provide verbal fodder for generations thereafter yet to come. This maybe one small reason that so many accusations followed suit with people when they later told stories of relatives that had lived long before their own existence.

In 1845 the Irish potato crop was larger than the previous years; the P-infestans affected roughly 25% of that enhanced crop. Meanwhile by comparison of the same year the Dutch had lost 75% and Belgium 87% were on record as having been destroyed. There was a complex “Corn Law” in the U.K. that seemed to compound matters; however, they worked through that and American “maize” along with wheat and oats were able to be imported and provided to Government established regions the commodities at loan rates to Ireland; imports also came from Egypt, India, and several other countries. The “Corn Law” didn't just mean “corn”; it meant other grains as well as referenced. American maize however required two grindings for the Irish and other European nations citizens to fully be able to digest the grain; for some unknown physical reason Europeans weren't physically adaptable to digest the grain as their American counterparts. At first, there was merely enough ability (due to cost) to grind the grain once – another issue that was solved with time. By all accounts, the 1846 portion of the potato famine was by far worse than the 1845 infestation. The 1846 resolve to address this continuation proved more challenging politically. The challenge arose for several reasons, first the potato crop had been studied throughout Ireland and a determined 75% failure rate was expected – within a month between August and September of that year it rose to an expected failure rate of 83% and then 87% within a week of the increase. In 1846 the resolve to financially assist Ireland during this event became heated – where PM Sir Peel worked effectively in 1845; PM Lord Russel seems to have been haunted with several factors; one of which was his physical height. I couldn't tell if the author was attempting to introduce a Napoleon complex of sorts or if he was providing the facts as they were without any complex being present. This is but one small encounter one reads along the course of this work to History.

I found myself having to put down the book during periods of passages that felt more like the Holocaust of 100 years later, than a potato famine of 1845-47. The treatment of these Irish folks for their time was at minimum unfortunate and at worse based on stereo-types of the time. One thing is for certain, the Irish economy could not withstand the devastation that this had brought, and I am curious today how better the Irish economy stands 160+ years after this tragedy. This work is important, and I recommend this book by this author for any person interested in European History, Irish History, or History of Mankind in general. Be forewarned however, the depravity of human existence is as horrific as accounts of the 20th century Holocaust of the Second World War. The prevailing myths of the Irish prevailed in the press of the time; I didn't quite care for the anti-Catholic stance of the author. Protestant faiths were as guilty of withholding food until a conversion of faith by the famine ravished person took hold – this was a practice going back many centuries and is in fact one reason why today when people in North America research their familial history, the difficulties arise because Church records hold conflicting pieces of information of family members “switching” over to the “other side.” Still, this is an important accounting and one that should be read by persons interested in the resulting failure of a crop; that forced an emigration to many locations around the globe. The impact on Montréal, Quebec City, New York, Boston, and though not reported was also an effect upon places like New Orleans and other Southern American cities was quite devastating.

Jennifer says

3.5*

So many factors contributed to the Irish potato famine in the 1840s. Weather, geography, government, religion, and the class system all played a role in making a terrible situation worse. In *The Graves Are Walking*, we get a brief overview of Irish history before the 1840s and how the landed gentry played a role in exacerbating a horrible situation.

This is the first book I've read on the Irish potato famine, so I have nothing to compare it to. Because I know little of Irish history, I learned a lot, and it made me excited to learn more about Ireland and her people. The weak sentence structure and inconsistent time line detracted from my otherwise enjoyment of the book, hence the 3.5 stars.

Meaghan says

Although I didn't like this as much as Kelly's previous book on the Black Death, *The Great Mortality*, it was certainly an absorbing read and a sobering one. I hadn't known much about the potato famine before reading this, but it wasn't one of those kind of books where prior knowledge was required to fully understand the text.

The saddest thing of all about the story, I think, is that it wasn't anything evil that doomed the Irish. Contrary to what some people believe, no one was deliberately trying to starve the Irish to death. The British weren't practicing genocide like the Soviets did to Ukraine during the Holodomor. Rather, it was a kind of Hurricane Katrina like situation: the government was trying to help, but it didn't have a clue what it was doing and ignorance and self-interest and misplaced priorities prevented any real progress from being made. And so millions died.

Well worth a read for anyone interested in this kind of thing, though I prefer straight-out plagues to famines.

Elia Princess of Starfall says

Tell me, have you ever wondered why there is such a wide-ranging and entrenched Irish diaspora throughout the world? Have you ever thought about why there has been great bitterness between England and Ireland in the past? Or why the Irish were so determined to achieve national independence through the 1916 Rising, the War of Independence or the Irish Civil War?

Growing up in Ireland, I often heard vague and quiet references to the Irish Famine of 1845-1851. When you're Irish, it's a given that at some stage of your life, you will hear about "the Great Hunger" be it from your relatives, your school or trawling through any decent Irish history book. In a weird way it both talked about and not talked about. At times, an uneasy silence hangs over the Irish Famine and how it was handled.

It's a subject of deep, entangled emotions and frustrated anger to some. Look at what happened to Channel 4's attempted sitcom *Hungry*!

A catastrophe both natural and man-made, the Great Famine saw between a million and a million and a half die from hunger or disease and a further million and a half emigrate to England, Australia or North America leaving behind "Old Ireland" in its death throes. The famine may have happened over 150 years ago but its effects still linger on be it in Ireland or the wider world. My point is that because I'm Irish and am aware of the crippling impact of the famine Ireland this is a subject that will inevitably stir up emotions of anger, horror, resentment and despair.

The Great Famine, also known as the Irish Potato Famine, was a time of widespread starvation, disease and emigration in Ireland when the potato crop which feed the poor peasantry failed successively due to presence of Blight. Unable to buy alternate food or even to earn sufficient money as there nearly no employment to be found, the peasants died in the ditches, in their cabins, in the fever sheds, the workhouses, on the roadworks, in alleys, in fields or by the sea side. During this period, Ireland was under the control of Great Britain and a part of the United Kingdom thanks to the Act of Union passed in 1801. Therefore, as Ireland was being ravaged by famine and disease, the decisions that literally concerned the life or death of the Irish peasants were being made by a government in another country, run by high-minded, moralizing, laissez-faire fanatics and bigoted men who clung to term "political economy" and "the Will of Providence" as a drowning sailor clutches a life raft. The result was death, despair and devastation for Ireland.

Prior to the Famine, Ireland was a desperately poor, run-down, badly managed and squalid nation with no industry, no regular employment, no Poor Law or national government. With very little steady employment, a piece of land on which to grow nutritious and high-yielding potatoes meant the difference between life and death for the wretched poor of Ireland. Visitors to Ireland were appalled at the prevalence and depth of Irish poverty with Gustave de Beaumont noting that although paupers were found throughout all countries, an entire nation of paupers was not found until it was found in Ireland. Before 1845, and thanks to the potato, Ireland's population stood at around nine million. To put that in context, Ireland's population in 2011 was around six million and four hundred thousand.

The heavy reliance on the potato, and the fact that the very poorest of the poor (3 million) subsisted entirely on potatoes and nothing else , meant that the introduction of blight caused widespread hunger and disease with the most common being typhus, dysentery, relapsing fever and scurvy. The truly awful thing about the famine is that Ireland was full of food be it corn, wheat, oats, vegetables, meat, fish and other products; no only the potato failed. But the people of Ireland were so poor and had no access to money or employment that the food available in Ireland might as well have been on Mars. A famous quote by John Mitchell, a passionate devotee to Irish freedom and a rigid anti-abolitionist, stated that "the Almighty sent the blight, but the English sent the famine". In reading about the narrow-minded and highly restrictive famine relief policies of the ruling Whig party of the English government, you cannot help but feel that these men saw the famine as a brutal but effective means of revolutionizing Irish agriculture, improving the supposedly lazy and degenerate Irish character through decreased potato dependence and in decimating the unprofitable small-farmer class. At the end, John Kelly states that the intentions of English policy may not have been genocidal but their aftermaths were in reality.

John Kelly has written a hugely insightful and well written narrative history on the Great Famine and the amount of diligent research and thought that has gone into it is keenly felt by the reader. Kelly describes in detail how the famine contributed to the beginning of the Irish diaspora as desperate, starving hordes fled Ireland in droves for the slums of New York, Montreal or Liverpool, how it deepened the chasm between Irish and English and why the famine still lingers on in Ireland till this day. This is not by any stretch of the

imagination an easy or cheerful book to read: readers are confronted by tales of fathers forcing their young sons to die neglected by the roadside to die of fever, of mothers who abandoned infants with typhus in Ireland as they journeyed to America, of entire families fighting with crows over the rotting remains of a week dead horse, of families when the potatoes ran out closing their cabin doors to die unseen of hunger, of relief workers encountering the grotesque and swollen bodies of infants three times their natural size and of wailing mothers holding up their dead children and begging not for food but for a coffin.

Readers will painfully aware that famine is sometimes not about lack of food but about access to it in times of want.

This is not a book for light reading and several times during my reading I felt a distinct antipathy to the English politicians and civil servants who wreaked such horrible cruelty and callousness on a starving people. It is eloquent, sparse and visceral in its language; Kelly describes in disturbing detail the three stages of starvation and they are beyond harrowing. *The Graves are Walking* is chronological in its layout and follows the events of the famine from the years 1845-1851 looking at Ireland, Canada, England and North America in detail. I would recommend it but beware: this is a difficult and serious read that will stay long in your mind.

Jud Barry says

There was some warning that the potato blight was on its way--the fungus worked its way across Europe in a westerly direction--but the questions uppermost on the minds of laissez-faire public officials were "How can we 1.not allow relief to encourage a lifestyle of dependency 2.make the Irish landord (as opposed to the English taxpayer) bear the cost of relief and 3.enable the Irish agricultural export market to continue as usual?"

When the blight hit, producing two years of near-total potato crop failure, the result was famine and, in its train, an epidemic of typhus. The scale of human loss was enormous. The severity of the famine was particularly bad due to overwhelming Irish dependence upon the potato as its food staple and the attendant economic effect on landholding patterns. The considerable number of farmers with a large families and small potato plots were rendered suddenly penniless and without food--and with very little understanding among their socio-economic betters that the situation of the blight victims should be remedied in any effective way.

The almost-complete absence of an effective relief effort was exacerbated by religious, class, and ethnic attitudes that understood the famine to be God's will or the result of Irish backwardness. In Ireland, landowners tried to evade any financial responsibility for the provision of relief and used the catastrophe as an excuse to expel tenants (unable to make rent payments without a crop) and clear their land for more profitable uses. The more "charitable" ones made the financial calculation that it was cheaper to pay tenants' passage to England or Canada than it was to pay to keep them alive with food. Of course, in their weakened condition in the disease-choked holds of ships, emigrants died in droves.

A functioning system of soup kitchens was not in place until three/fourths of the way through the **second** year of the famine.

A gripping story, powerfully told.

Lorri says

This took me well over a month to read, which is never a good sign. I enjoyed learning more about the political part of the Irish Potato Famine but I felt Kelly overdid it. I studied history in college so I understand that all historical writing has some sort of bent and I've read a few accounts of the Irish Potato saga told from a pro agricultural reform side as well, warning against growing just one variety of one crop, in this case potatoes. I like reading books from all political views so I can understand how different people think but an author can take it too far. I felt like Kelly spent more time playing the blame game than actually painting a clear picture of the famine victims. In fairness, I hoped to get more stories about how people survived or the result the famine and upheaval had on Ireland, not a pedantic retelling of political and ideological battles in England so perhaps this is just a case of unmet expectations.

Also, Kelly's use of ellipses bothered me. They seemed excessive - sometimes four or five in one quote!

Peter Mcloughlin says

Up to date history on the Irish Potato Famine of 1845-55. Not the worst famine that British maladjusted social policy created. A famine in India during WWII caused more destruction and death but the Irish case was significant in that brought about the Irish diaspora and planted the seeds of one of the earliest resistance to British Empire and would lead to the easter uprising 70 years later. In fact, it seemed to be a harbinger of the greater de-colonization of the mid-twentieth century. It is also a lesson of history one of many, that of haughty power in far away capitals planting the seeds of resentment and resistance in callous policy over the relatively powerless on the receiving ends politicians plans for "improvement" that would blow back generations later. I will not make a special case for the Irish even though my ancestors were the ones involved in this case. I will say that colonial administrators will always be breaking eggs for their omelets and the spatter doesn't always wash off the mighty.

Marks54 says

This is a history of the potato crop failures in Ireland in 1845-46, the famine that went with those failures, and the additional struggles of the Irish people with disease and emigration during this period. It is a well written and well organized history that holds a reader's attention fairly well.

I had read about this period before and had heard about it since I was young, as grandparents relayed what they had heard from their grandparents, who spoke in detail of the poverty, disease, and even nakedness of the new arrivals from Ireland. One is tempted to think that "it couldn't have been that bad". Well, this book will disabuse you of any thoughts in that direction. It really was that bad and once the famine and epidemics get going, it is a taxing book to read in terms of the horrible situation faced by so many people. This book is often as horrifying as the book on the 1918-1919 "Spanish" Influenza. It is also comparable in horror to accounts of Nazi atrocities against the Jews and Russian prisoners or of Soviet atrocities against the Ukraine. A side effect of this is that the book is literally difficult to read, as each chapter leads one to cringe over a different aspect of this massive crisis.

My biggest takeaway from the book comes from Kelly's consideration of British policy towards Ireland during the period of the famine. The British at this time had a strong limited government rhetoric that they employed wherever possible. This implied not providing too much assistance to the starving Irish nation because it would cultivate an over dependence on government. Food was used as a tool of ideology to

experiment with politics while tens of thousands starved or succumbed to fever. The accounts of such rhetoric in the book sound strangely familiar to the rhetoric of conservatives today.

Kelley's book is also interesting for the light it sheds on how the Irish moved into the mainstream of American life and came to dominate urban big city politics.

It is an excellent and rich book to read, although stressful and saddening to complete.

David says

Available as a two-part, 14-hour audio book download.

Honor the suffering of millions of now-still voices and forgotten names of Ireland by listening to or reading their story in this narrative or one like it. It's more appropriate than drinking cheap beer in a green cardboard hat.

Just like certain problems of today, the cause of the Irish potato famine (a fungus) was known, but the people who knew were insufficiently media-savvy and charming, so their voices were drowned out by people with wrong ideas but better communications networks.

And, just like certain problems of today, certain broad clues pointing to the cure for the Irish potato famine (a chemical compound containing copper) hid heartbreakingly in plain sight. A non-expert wrote into a Welsh newspaper to note that the potato fields downwind of a local copper-processing plant remained strangely untouched by the blight. At the time, however, it was just an odd detail in a time of chaos and calamity. The signal was lost in the noise.

Memo to self, inspired by this book: Listen to the people whom others are not listening to. It's patience-trying, but they might know something.

Allison says

An amazing book. My knowledge of the potato famine was naive enough to believe that the major problem was the blight that caused the famine. It was the impetus, but what transpired afterward was heartbreaking and maddening. Between the governmental abuses of power and their ineptitude in handling the situation, the "moralist" attempts to use the famine and ensuing pestilence to show God's punishment on these "lower people", and the overall prejudice toward the Irish, it is amazing that any survived. John Kelly's writing keeps you turning pages with his easy style.

Suzanne says

Remarkable and stinging assessment of England's role in the tragedy of the famine. Eminently readable, which is not always the case with these scholarly works, while devoid of easy but spurious appeals to pathos, e.g., accusations of premeditated genocide. There are many grim descriptions of the deep suffering inflicted upon the Irish during this period of terrible governance, but it would be pretty hard to tell the story without

these.

I find myself quite frustrated by the English government's misreading of Adam Smith, which having read it quite recently, I can only conclude must be willful.

Colleen Browne says

I wanted to like this book. I had planned to read it for quite a while but there were many books ahead of it. I recall listening to a program on RTE radio which featured Tim Pat Coogan, John Kelly, a descendant of Trevelyan, and another woman author whose name escapes me. At the time, Kelly came off as rather conservative on the issue of genocide but I wanted to read what he had to say before passing any judgment. I have studied the Famine, written papers on it, and read other books, including *The Great Hunger* by Cecil Woodham Smith. I have not read Coogan's book because I know his ideas on it. I had also read Kelly's other book on the Plague.

Unfortunately, I found this book to be a great disappointment on several levels. First, although many reviewers commented on how well documented the book was, and to all outward appearances it would seem to be, when one takes a closer look, it is not. Second, the book relies on anecdotal evidence to make historical points, all too often. Third, in addition to jumping around in time, Kelly also goes off on subjects only tangentially related to the Famine. Fourth, the story he is trying to tell is incomplete (maybe because of all his tangents). Finally, Kelly's conclusions are not supported by the facts.

While the book is interesting and Kelly is obviously quite clever, much of his documentation is of anecdotal information and not statistics. For example, on page 318, Kelly provides a collection of statistics about public aid during 1846 and 1847. This is immediately after he made mention of the ship that carried the remains of Daniel O'Connell back to Ireland. If one goes to his notes, the only documentation is for the boat but there is nothing documenting the statistics. In the course of my reading, I noticed this on several occasions. Even his claim toward the end of the book (I cannot recall the page) that Ireland imported more food than she exported during the Famine is unsupported.

My second problem with the book is Kelly's reliance on anecdote to tell the story. Anecdote is a great thing- it's purpose is to provide examples of documented evidence. In this case, the author relied on newspapers of the time to do this. Unfortunately, he frequently used the anecdotes without any documentation that they are accurate. I was struck by his inclusion in a Cork paper, when describing men working building roads which gave an example of a couple Kerry men, supposed to be building roads who were lazy and doing nothing. This may not be a big deal except that it feeds the stereotype that Brits had of the lazy Irish. Moreover, there is no way of knowing if it was true. For all the reader know, the men could have been starving and unable to work or maybe they were just lazy. We do not know. The author may also be unaware that there has always been a rivalry between the counties of Kerry and Cork that might have led to it. In any case, it had no place in the book without some support.

Kelly also seemed unable to stick to the timeline and placeline in writing the book. He went off on tangents that were inconsequential to the Famine. What immigrants encountered when they reached new shores is very interesting and might have been appropriate but it really belongs in another book or at least a much longer book. Substantial amounts of information was left out of this book- presumably to share those details and it weakens the book.

My fourth complaint is the fact that Kelly did not finish the book- or at least the story of the Famine. What he said about crop failure in 1848 was not complete. 1848 was probably the worst year of the famine and the

crop failures were total. After the partial failure of the crop in 1845, the crop in 1846 totally failed, as he said. His information about 1847 was incomplete. In 1847, the crop was disease free- for the most part. A large part of the reason for that was that many farmers hadn't planted potatoes out of fear of another failure. In 1848, potato planting was way up but the crop failed- completely. By then the British had grown tired of the Irish and decided they would no longer help. The Quaker organizations that had been trying to help the desperate people grew tired of fighting with Whitehall and finally gave up. After that, the Irish were basically on their own. It is hard to understand why Kelly decided to devote so little time to this part of the disaster. I can only surmise that perhaps going into too much detail might undermine his conclusion.

Finally, Mr. Kelly's conclusions are not supported by the facts. He seems to underplay that many of the Irish never dealt in money. They grew potatoes to sustain their own families but grain to pay the rent with. Kelly never mentions this fact. He does quote people many times talking about the Irish being lazy because they had to worry only about the potato crop which has a short growing season. By failing to include the facts about grain, he allows the argument of Irish laziness to stand. He never discusses the importance of Ireland being a barter economy plays in the famine. If people bartered to pay rent and other expenses, it doesn't matter how little the British government charges for corn, it is too expensive. Moreover, he makes little mention of the terrible effects the corn had on people. When it wasn't milled at least twice, it punctured the intestines of people. Trevelyan ordered that it not be milled at one point because it wasn't good for the morals of people. Given the evidence that the author himself put forward, saying that the British government meant well just doesn't cut it. It is odd that Kelly left out the comment of the economist Nassau Senior who expressed his worry that the famine might not kill more than a million people and that would hardly be enough. [http://schillerinstitute.org/economy/...](http://schillerinstitute.org/economy/)

Could it be that statements like that weaken his arguments? Kelly always fails to mention that at a time when the British argued that the government didn't have enough money for aid to Ireland, they did have enough money to send 15,000 British troops there.

I am not arguing that the Famine was a genocide based on the narrow definition used to convict Hitler. The British did not cause the blight. Kelly makes mention of the fact that ports in other parts of Europe were closed during the entirety of the blight. It is not good enough to argue that Britain didn't because of their zeal for laissez faire economics. The deep rooted hatred of the Irish certainly had something to do with it. They hated the religion of the Irish and never understood them. After so many years, one would think that the English might have learned something about the Irish but they hadn't. As late as the 1980's when IRA prisoners went on hunger strike the British did not believe that the prisoners would actually starve themselves. There can be no question that Britain was guilty of cultural genocide. Since the days of Cromwell it had been an objective of the British to get rid of the language, the religion, and all identifiable traits of the Irish making them quasi British. While it may not be as straight a line to draw between the British and genocide during the Famine, there has to be some question of the intent of the British by their policies. Maybe they did not intentionally commit genocide but Kelly has certainly not proven that.

This book is interesting. Kelly is witty and an able writer but the flaws aforementioned makes for disappointing reading. There are interesting details in this book which may not be found elsewhere so I might suggest reading it- but not until after reading a more thorough, better researched book. *The Great Hunger* remains, in my opinion, the best book available on the subject.

Jim Gallen says

“*The Graves Are Walking*” is another of the current histories of the Potato Famine that places much of the blame on British governmental policy, but this work goes much farther.

Author John Kelly shows how a potato blight, opportunistic disease and social policy combined to turn a natural disaster into a deadly famine. From 1845 to 1847 Ireland was transformed from a poor, overcrowded country into a living hell. The blight began on the continent whence it spread to Ireland and Scotland. What made the Irish devastation unique was the dependence of the population on potato cultivation and the lack of industry to soften the economic blow. One thing led to another. People, weakened by famine, succumbed to disease. Driven to despair, those who could chose emigration to escape the horror that surrounded them. By the time it had passed, a majority of the Irish were dead or overseas, in England, the United States, Canada or Australia.

This book's particular contribution to famine studies is its focus on the people who influenced the famine and were influenced by it. As is the common saying, God sent the blight, but England made the famine. Kelly corrects the misconception that Ireland remained a net food exporter during the famine and gives credit to those who did provide relief to the suffering. He examines the changing policies of British politicians, most prominently the Prime Ministers, Sir Robert Peel and Lord John Russell and a civil servant, Sir Charles Trevelyan. Policies were influenced by deliberate attempts to reform the Irish economy, prevailing economic theories espoused by Thomas Malthus and Adam Smith, whose invisible hand directed the famine response so as not to disturb food markets, and the belief that the famine was God's punishment for Papists. The greed of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy who evicted their tenants shows that not all of the blame is directed toward England. The last initiatives of The Liberator, Daniel O'Connell, are given ample attention.

The story is not as clear as myth would have it. In many cases the shortage was less one of availability than one of payment. Even Indian corn and other foodstuffs that were imported were generally offered for sale, often to people without the means to pay. The relief work projects, through unwise incentives, left the landscape marred by roads to nowhere rather enriched by infrastructure that would have provided the basis for a modern economy.

Kelly has crafted a well written book. My only reservation about this work is the frequent detailing of the horrors of the Famine era. While some is sufficient to shock the reader into an appreciation of the extent of the tragedy but, at times, I felt that he had overdone it.

"The Graves Are Walking" compels reflection. As much as we resent the Famine England made, would we really want to be the heirs to an overcrowded island of subsistence farmers? Do our ancestors, who we remember and, to some extent idealize, deserve the esteem in which we hold them? When I read about the starving, illiterate and pathetic emigrants I think were Matthew Gallen and Thomas English like that? Did the Maher sister really leave, not the idyllic isle we visit, but a disgusting, filthy village visited by the Angel of Death? When you think about the conditions they left you can understand why the early generations were so anxious to assimilate, and why it took generations for love of and pride in Ireland to rise again. We now think of Ireland's loss as America and Canada's gain, but such was not the view at the time. Our ancestors were real dregs on the countries into which they fled. It makes anti-Irish prejudice of the time more understandable and should make us stop when we think about our views of contemporary immigrants. Over all, we of the Diaspora have done pretty well, which suggests that there was real quality beneath the degraded conditions of our forebears. Our cousins whose families stayed have inherited an Ireland that is better suited to compete in the world economy than the one of the 1840s. The price was terrible, but the Irish survived and emerged from the Famine stronger than they entered it. Well, I have mused enough. Read it for yourself, contemplate our people's place in history and draw your own conclusions.

Carl Williams says

This is a well-written, well documented, history of an Gorta Mór, the Great Famine, in the middle of the 19th century—its causes, the suffering, and the lack of compassion that exacerbated the whole tragedy.

The potato blight was a Europe-wide phenomena, not solely Irish, but in Ireland the potato was the major food source for the majority of the population and so hit there the hardest. Once in need, the Irish were met with a combination of mismanagement and hard hearts. As the famine worsened in its early years the English and the predatory large property owners continued to collect rents through food crops and ship them out of Ireland. They fretted about their taxes, and seized the opportunity to drive people from the land in order to “modernize.” A handful of people and organizations, like the Quakers, worked valiantly but could not stem the tide of starvation.

Many of those driven from their homes—by famine or by landlords—immigrated to America, to Canada, or to England. Weak and sick they inadvertently carried diseases that enhanced prejudices, and, unfamiliar with the culture they were entering, they were at the mercy of charlatans and thieves.

Kelly underlines the culture class the Irish were thrust into, finding themselves unexpectedly in the midst of the industrial revolution where a persons worth and their finances were the equal. “Irish peasant culture...was good at...affording a deeply impoverished people with a sense of dignity and worth. Every Irish townland had its wise man, its storyteller, its keeners, every district its school master, its traveling poets and its songsters. Under the sheltering umbrella of peasant culture, even the most humble could be esteemed.” (264-265) That, of course, was not the way of the industrialized world in the 1840s.

A sad story. The image of a starving woman knocking at the manor house door begging—not for food for herself, but for a coffin for the dead child in her arms (191) will stay with me for a long time.

Lisa M. says

When I added this to my to-read list, I realized I knew very little about the Irish potato famine. All I really knew was that it inspired many Irish to emigrate to America, where they were discriminated against. I wasn't sure if the title - "the graves are walking" - would be appropriate. I wondered if this book was capitalizing on the overly-used zombie fad to get sales. I was wrong. If you are considering reading this book and are of weak of stomach, this may not be for you. The Irish potato famine was the deadliest event in the nineteenth century across the world, and it caused a lot of horrific suffering.

Overall, John Kelly did a great job with this book. He reviewed the culture of Ireland, and why it was so easily destroyed by the potato blight. He reviewed the political reaction in 1845 when the blight only killed 25% of the crops, as opposed to 1846, when 80% of the crops were destroyed. We learn about what people would do to fight off starvation. We learn about the widespread disease that occurs in the middle of poverty and starvation.

One thing I enjoyed about this work was that it was complex. John Kelly really digs into the issue, and we learn about why each party acted the way they did. It was interesting to watch the British politicians - they were those who primarily driven by a moral desire to use social relief, in the time of a famine, to teach the Irish poor a lesson. But there were also tough economic decisions to make, decisions that could provide relief in the present, but could provide more economic suffering in their wake. This book did not make me envy the difficult decisions politicians have to make at all. As I read, I found myself thinking, "No! That is the wrong policy decision to make ... but what would the right one be, in this cultural climate?" I didn't know then and I certainly don't know.

Because this was the first book I read on the famine, I didn't know what other theoretical arguments were out there about it. John Kelly did a great job of placing his arguments in the light of what came before them. He stated that following the blight, many Irish academics in the 1850s believed that the blight was purposefully caused - the British created the disease and had a typhus lab where they infected people, so they could obliterate a race they hated so much and use their land. John Kelly asserted that this was not the case; that unfortunately, 1.5 million people can be killed through bad legislative decisions alone. Kelly's argument was in no way overdone, and could primarily be found in one-liners throughout the book. He got snippy with the English, and chastised them for their treatment throughout the book. His tone made me trust him as an author, but wasn't distracting from the historical review itself. It was very balanced.

Overall a great book, but I felt like John Kelly needed to make a decision. While a lot of things in the book were covered with great detail, certain things were barely covered that should have been - can I get more than a paragraph about what caused the blight itself, and what could have cured it? It would have fit fine in the aftermath. I would have also liked more than a chapter about what was occurring in Ireland while people were immigrating to America and Canada. My only other complaint was the notes. It's my pet peeve when they don't notate it throughout the actual text, but only include a list in the back. If I was reading this for research purposes, it would frustrate me to no end to have to look up the sources that way. Also, I wish an Index was included with some of the important players. The book is so long and time consuming, and so many people and politicians are introduced I was able to keep up with the main ones, but I got confused about a few others. It would have been cool to get a guide about them.
