

The Irish potato famine 1845-49 and the health impact in South Wales.

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It was Ireland's greatest humanitarian disaster. The recurrent failure of the potato crop in Ireland during the years 1845-49, caused by the fungus *Phytophthora infestans*, was followed by famine throughout most of the country, and the loss of some 3 million people, about 30 percent of the population, from starvation, disease, death and emigration—a loss from which the country never fully recovered.

In 19th C Ireland, the potato had become the staple diet of 3M Irish peasantry. This presentation begins with a review of the historical context in which the origins of the potato famine took place, and explains how critical decisions relating to potatoes, peasants and policies, combined to transform what would otherwise probably have been just another tragic Irish potato famine, into a cataclysmic humanitarian disaster on an unprecedented scale.

A brief resume of the inevitable lethal famine-related diseases follows, and includes the unique contributions of four Dublin Masters of Medicine, best remembered today by their eponymous medical conditions: Dominic Corrigan, Robert Graves, William Stokes and William Wilde. Despite their heroic efforts as both clinicians and as advisers to the Government Health Board, together with the selfless support of countless others, the death toll from starvation and disease escalated inexorably to reach 1 million by the time the famine ended.

In a frantic attempt to escape the horrors of the famine years, another 2 million men, women and children emigrated, mainly to America, Canada, England and Scotland, and also to South Wales and the wider world.

The presentation continues by focusing on the plight of the thousands of starving, destitute sick Irish families who sought sanctuary in Sth Wales, where they were either stranded on the beaches or mud flats of the river estuaries, or landed in the ports, mainly Newport and Cardiff. Here, they soon overwhelmed the limited, inadequate, unhygienic housing available, disrupting the social and health resources of the indigenous population. The appalling overcrowding and squalor rapidly became such a high risk health hazard to the local population, that these areas became the catalyst for fundamental reforms in public health which laid the foundations for improvements in health care with benefits that are with us to this day.

The Irish diaspora created a global famine legacy. The conclusion reflects on how the famine shaped future events in Ireland, America and in Wales. It is also a reminder that similar global humanitarian disasters today which lead to uncontrolled mass migration of refugees, pose identical political, religious and ethical dilemmas for the countries involved to those faced by the Westminster government and others between 1845-49.....food for thought for us all.