

# Potato Blight 1845

You become a member of a family forced to leave your home and by making choices at the end of each page you discover your fate...



# Potato Blight 1845

Developed first in 1983 by Emma Thornton and Stuart Scott. Like many booklets we produced in those days, this one is handwritten and has now been scanned. If you would prefer a typed version please let us know. The drawings were commissioned for the project by the ILEA and are by Carol Ross. There are two booklets here. The Potato Blight booklet involves the readers making choices at the end of each page to provide a range of possible outcomes. At the end of the book those who reach Cork throw a dice for their 'fate'. The Emigrants' Letters booklet provides more information about final outcomes. These fictional accounts are all based on true facts and our aim was to encourage pupils to delve more deeply into the evidence. The ILEA pack, which was published at the same time, is unfortunately no longer available, but there is a lot of evidence now easy to reach on the net.

Webaddress: [www.collaborativelearning.org/potatobligh1845.pdf](http://www.collaborativelearning.org/potatobligh1845.pdf)

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## COLLABORATIVE LEARNING PROJECT

Project Director: Stuart Scott

We support a network of teaching professionals to develop and disseminate accessible talk-for-learning activities in all subject areas and for all ages.

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## BRIEF SUMMARY OF BASIC PRINCIPLES BEHIND OUR TEACHING ACTIVITIES:

The project is a teacher network, and a non-profit making educational trust. Our main aim is to develop and disseminate classroom tested examples of effective group strategies that promote talk across all phases and subjects. We hope they will inspire you to develop and use similar strategies in other topics and curriculum areas. We want to encourage you to change them and adapt them to your classroom and students. We run teacher workshops, swapshops and conferences throughout the European Union. The project posts online many activities in all subject areas. An online newsletter is also updated regularly.

\*These activities are influenced by current thinking about the role of language in learning. They are designed to help children learn through talk and active learning in small groups. They work best in non selective classes where children in need of language or learning support are integrated. They are well suited for the development of speaking and listening . They provide teachers opportunities for assessment of speaking and listening.

\*They support differentiation by placing a high value on what children can offer to each other on a particular topic, and also give children the chance to respect each other's views and formulate shared opinions which they can disseminate to peers. By helping them to take ideas and abstract concepts, discuss, paraphrase and move them about physically, they help to develop thinking skills.

\*They give children the opportunity to participate in their own words and language in their own time without pressure. Many activities can be tried out in pupils' first languages and afterwards in English. A growing number of activities are available in more than one language, not translated, but mixed, so that you may need more than one language to complete the activity.

\*They encourage study skills in context, and should therefore be used with a range of appropriate information books which are preferably within reach in the classroom.

\*They are generally adaptable over a wide age range because children can bring their own knowledge to an activity and refer to books at an appropriate level. The activities work like catalysts.

\*All project activities were planned and developed by teachers working together, and the main reason they are disseminated is to encourage teachers to work more effectively with each other inside and outside the classroom. They have made it possible for mainstream and language and learning support teachers to share an equal role in curriculum delivery. They should be adapted to local conditions. In order to help us keep pace with curriculum changes, please send any new or revised activities back to the project, so that we can add them to our lists of materials.

<http://www.collaborativelearning.org/potatobligh1845.pdf>

POTATO BLIGHT 1845









16/23

You pack up everything you can carry and walk to Cork - thirty miles away. There are hundreds on the road. On the way the baby dies. You eat grass and berries which make you ill but you get to Cork.



Throw the dice to discover your fate:

-  You sell everything you have to pay the passage. Read the letter on page 4 of "Emigrants' Letters" to find out what happened.
-  You cannot raise any money. You starve to death in the workhouse in Cork.
-  The landlord in the village sets up a fund to pay your fare to America. Read the letter on page 3 of "Emigrants' Letters"
-  A relative in England sends you enough to take a ship to Holyhead. The letter on page 1 of "Emigrants' Letters" tells your fate.
-  You stow away on a wheat ship to Liverpool. The letter on page 2 of "Emigrants' Letters" tells you your fate.
-  You manage to get to New York. There you join the Fenians. Later you return to Ireland to start a rebellion.

Between 1845 and 1849 nearly one million people died in Ireland of starvation. About one and a half million emigrated.



You are a member of a peasant family of six - mother, father, grandmother, son, daughter and baby boy. You live in a one roomed cabin in SW Ireland. You rent 3 acres of land for £3 an acre. You grow wheat on 2 acres to pay the rent. You work as a labourer on richer farmers' land when you can. You grow potatoes on the other acre which all the family live on.

It's 1845. Something has happened to the potato crop. The leaves have shrivelled up and the roots have gone rotten and black. Half the crop looks good to eat.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

- \* Eat some good potatoes and plant the rest to see if they do better - turn to page 3.
- \* Look for work in the local area to get money to buy food - turn to page 4.

You are given a job building walls on a big estate. The work is hard. You get only a bowl of maize a day. The government has imported the maize from America and you have to work for it. Irish food (wheat, butter, barley, bacon) is still going from Cork to England. You are getting weaker and two friends in your gang die suddenly of typhus. You are frightened of catching it, and the rest of your family, who have no work, are starving.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

- \* Travel around with your family begging and stealing - turn to page 7
- \* Slowly starve to death.



2

You managed to get as far as the north of Ireland - begging and stealing. But in Enniskillen you are caught raiding one of the government corn stores. You are sent to prison and meet other people who are angry about the famine. Meanwhile, everyone else in your family starves to death. When you get out you join the Young Ireland group. You write leaflets, make speeches and prepare for armed rebellion. You want to fight to get independence for Ireland.



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You slowly dragged yourself to the workhouse. You waited three days outside with a big crowd of people, because it was full up. You were let in after some people died, and were given a watery soup. It doesn't nourish you. You feel hungry all the time. One of your family dies of dysentery. After a week your family has to move to make room for others.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

- \* Go on a public works scheme - doing work in exchange for food - turn to page 2.
- \* Decide to emigrate - turn to page 8.



6



You planted half your good potatoes, and slowly ate the rest. You only eat half your normal ration so all your family grow weak. Nobody has the strength to weed the wheatfield so it gets choked with grass and thistles. At first your new potato crop looked fine, but just before digging, the leaves turned black and the whole lot rotted and stank.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

- \* Look for work in the local area to get money to buy food - turn to page 4.
- \* Start eating the wheat - turn to page 5.

3

You trudge all over the area looking for work - any kind. In the end you get a temporary job helping with the harvest on a 100 acre farm. You collapse while carrying sheaves of wheat across the field to a cart, because you haven't eaten for three days. The farmer sacks you. There are plenty of others waiting to take your place.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

- \* Go with your family to seek help at the workhouse in the nearest town - turn to page 6
- \* Decide to emigrate even though you have no passage money - turn to page 8.



You try to live on the wheat you grow to pay the rent. You can't wait till it's ripe, and anyway you can't afford to have it ground into flour. You boil it up into a sticky green mixture. It gives you stomachache but seems to do some good. The



middleman's rent demand arrives. You can't pay it because you have eaten most of the wheat. He takes all the wheat left and turns you off the land. He tells you to leave the village and not to return.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

- \* go on a public works scheme organised by the government ten miles away - turn to page 2.
- \* Travel round the country begging and stealing. - turn to page 7

# EMIGRANTS' LETTERS





Oaklahoma  
Thursday May 10th 1847

Dear Mary, Patrick and all,

I am sorry not to have written for so long. I am afraid I cannot send any money as we spent it all on medicines for the baby - but it did.

We left New York; the factory wasn't good for my lungs. John lost his job at the docks for taking part in a strike. Now we're off in a waggon to start a homestead in Kansas - remember how I was always the best at digging! There's land going for nothing, and the Indians have been cleared out. Why don't you come over too? Better than killing yourself for the landlord and the parson.

Colin, John, Peter and Nora send their love,

Bridget

New South Wales  
Sat. October 7th 1850

Dear Colin,

I don't know if this letter will ever reach you but I wanted to return the money you sent me in Cork. I got into trouble soon after getting a job on the new railway in Newcastle. Three of us were accused of stealing a sheep by a local landowner. We were innocent, but there was a lot of bad feeling against the navvies. So we got sent to the hulks, and from there to Australia. I've finished my time, and think I'll start farming here but not potatoes! There are homesteads going very cheaply inland. I miss Ireland though. Give my love to all my friends. I hope most of them are still alive.

Your friend,  
Daniel.

Liverpool  
Dec. 12th 1849

Dear Aunt,

Here's some money to help pay the tithe and something towards next years rent. I hope you have enough to eat meat this Christmas.

They're working us very hard. I have to sew lace onto silk evening dresses, and as it's the season for parties, the work never stops. My eyes ache a lot.

I'm staying in a room rented by widow O'Connell. It's crowded as there are three other girls - one from Killarney!

There was a fight here last week between Scottish and Irish navvies. The Pealers stopped it before anyone was killed. I hope the baby is better.

I miss you

Ellen.

Montreal  
March 10th 1848

Dear Father O'Grady,

I'm lucky to be alive. Hardly anyone else from the village survived the journey. It was terrible. There were three bad storms, but that would have been alright if we had had enough to eat. The salt pork was rotten and the biscuit full of weevils and mould. We were packed in like slaves. Five or six died every day, and were tossed overboard. When the ship reached the coast of Quebec we were dumped on a bare shore. Many died on the spot. The ones who reached here are in a terrible state. I'm thankful most of my family died early on, and didn't suffer this misery.

Patrick Nolan.