

Chapter Three

Have we not seen, at pleasure's lordly call,
The smiling long frequented village fall?
While, scourg'd by famine from the smiling land
The mournful peasant leads his humble band;
And while he sinks, without one arm to save,
The country blooms—a garden and a grave . . .

Ill fares the land, to hast'ning ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay . . .

—Oliver Goldsmith,
The Deserted Village

THE almost immediate starvation and distress that followed the failure of the potato crop in 1846 could have happened only in Ireland, a country forced by its union with Britain to depend for its subsistence on this single crop. For although three-quarters of Ireland's cultivable land was in "corn"—a general term that included such grains as wheat, oats, and barley—almost all of it was shipped to England. The cattle and sheep grazed in Ireland, and the pigs fed, were likewise not eaten in Ireland but sent to Britain for consumption by either the British people or those maintaining her colonies.

The Irish farmers, cottiers, and farm laborers, roughly six million of the country's population of eight million, were forced to subsist on produce grown on the remaining quarter of the land, and no crop other than the potato could have borne this burden of feeding so many people at the expense of so little arable land. The Irishman's greedy consumption of it was therefore no mere accident, for it was the only food allowed him by the gentry, who maintained the status quo by perpetuating his hopeless degradation. Wheat would have

taken three times the acreage to feed the same number of people, but since the potato plant's waste also fed the pigs and chickens of Ireland, it would be more accurate to say that for every person who might have been maintained on wheat, three persons, a pig, and some chickens were maintained on the potato. Even the kind of potato grown had to be considered, for some multiply faster than others. The Irish, with the limited amount of land left over for their potato crop, were forced to choose the worst kind of potato—the lumper—the least agreeable to the taste but by far the most fertile.

Unfortunately, the cottiers' situation in the landowners' scheme of things also fostered those habits that led to the filth, stench, and degradation of an Irish hovel. The dunghill beside the entrance to the cottage fertilized the potato garden in the rear. The pig was not to be consumed by the family but to be fattened and eventually sold in anticipation of "gale day," which came in May and November, when half the year's rent was due. This friendly but most untidy animal must have sensed its own importance in the family's scheme of things. Passing in and out of the cottage as freely as the children did, it nosed their legs out of the way in order to gobble up some potato leavings from the floor, dropped excrement when and where it pleased, grunted as if in conversation, and even slept on the straw between parents and children. The cabin was where it had the best right to be, to Paddy's way of thinking, since it paid the rent. Smelly, dirty, and unlovely, it was a necessary guest, one of the first living things the infant saw on opening its eyes on the squalid world of Ireland in the middle of the last century.

With England's help, the potato and the pig created and sustained the squalor, for when the latter was sold and the rent paid, anything left over was needed for the tithe (one-tenth the value of his produce) to the Anglican Church, to which he did not belong. As Lord Macaulay put it, "Between the poorest English peasant and the Irish peasant there is ample room for ten or twelve well-marked degrees of poverty."¹

As a vegetable the potato is a potent source of calories—

those heat-producing units so needed in the 1800s by the poorly clothed and sheltered Irish peasantry. It is also, if eaten in sufficient quantity, a remarkable source of protein, amino acids, and all the important mineral elements, such as nitrogen, iron, calcium, magnesium, sulphur, chlorine, and potassium. Even quantities of such elements as copper, boron, silicon, manganese, fluorine, and iodine, all of them necessary in small quantities for health, are present in the potato. Moreover, capable as it is of supplying all these necessities, it requires little culinary preparation, either to heighten its flavor or to extract its nutrients. A peck of unpeeled potatoes in a cauldron of boiling water, and in half an hour the family had a meal. Since no time was wasted between the cooking and the eating of them, skin and all, little was lost of the food's essential values. With a little salt, some crushed mustard seed, and possibly some buttermilk to add to its nutritional qualities, it was capable of preventing scurvy, building and protecting sound teeth, and supplying all the energy needed for a good day's work.²

Sometimes on larger farms where there was a greater variety and abundance of food, the potatoes would be served in what was then a novel way. An immense pot of boiled potatoes was emptied into a large wooden bowl, and after their skins had been slipped off and put aside for the pigs and fowl, the hot potatoes were salted and crushed with slotted wooden spoons. As the crushing continued, about a pint of diced, well-boiled onions was poured in, together with their boiled-down liquid. Finally, a quart or so of fresh milk and close to a pound of butter were added, and all the ingredients were thoroughly mixed, mashed, and stirred until the whole took on the appearance of a huge mound of thick cream—soft, lumpless, delectable. Thus was born the now commonplace dish called "mashed potatoes."

Arthur Young, an acutely observant early traveler in Ireland, described the partaking of an Irish meal this way: "Mark the Irishman's potato bowl placed on the floor, the whole family upon their hams around it, devouring a quantity almost

incredible, the beggar seating himself to it with a hearty welcome, the pig taking his share as easily as the wife, the cocks, hens, turkies, geese, the cur, the cat, and perhaps the cow—and all partaking of the same dish. No man can often have been a witness of it without being convinced of the plenty, and I will add the cheerfulness, that attends it.”

Young estimated that a barrel of potatoes containing 280 pounds would last a family of five persons, exclusive of its beggar and animal guests, a week, or eight pounds a person a day. Since three in the family would have been children, the father must have eaten twelve to fourteen pounds a day—more than enough, if shortly after they were cooked he ate them, skin and all, with some milk and an egg or two a day, to supply him with the necessary nutrients to be energetic, active, and healthy.

Though not a nutritionist, Young correctly disagreed with those who called the Irish potato, milk, and egg diet unhealthy. During his tour of Ireland he saw too many poor people “as athletic in their form, as robust, and as capable of enduring labour as any upon earth. The idleness seen among many, when working for those who oppress them, is a very contrast to the vigour and activity with which the same people work when themselves alone reap the benefit of their labour. To what country must we have recourse for a stronger instance than lime carried by little miserable mountaineers thirty miles on horse’s back to the foot of the hills, and up the steeps on their own? When I see the people of a country, in spite of political oppression, with well-formed vigorous bodies, and their cottages swarming with children; when I see their men athletic, and their women beautiful, I know not how to believe them subsisting on an unwholesome food.”³

In England, where the poor used their earned money to buy food—bread, cheese, and meat rather than potatoes and milk—and where they kept it under lock and key and consumed it with great economy, the English child had access to it only at mealtime, during which the parents were watchfully present. Under such conditions, everyone, including the chil-

dren, soon learned the value of husbanding a penny out of every shilling; there was contact with tradesmen, a modest knowledge of the mercantile and social world.

In Ireland, on the other hand, the work done by the cottier or farm laborer was paid for not in wages but in the potatoes he was either given or allowed to grow in his own garden. Cash was so rare and so little understood that when a cottier, for some reason, was paid for his labor in money, he often pawned a pound note for a few shillings. It would scarcely have occurred to such a man to save one potato out of every twelve, as the English wage earner learned to save a penny out of every shilling.

The plentiful supply of potatoes during normal years and the willingness of the poor to live almost exclusively on them and a little milk led to a different kind of family life. The children helped themselves as hunger dictated; there were always a few extra potatoes being kept warm by the fire. They were neither counted nor put under lock and key nor missed when eaten. With always more about ready to be cooked, the family atmosphere was relaxed, hearty, and cheerful. Children going to school filled their pockets with cold lunch potatoes, the largest of which they often gave to their teacher. Laborers employed in digging potatoes were at noon allowed a "cast" of potatoes—as many large potatoes as they could roast on an open fire and eat at one sitting. Some Donegal fishermen had their wives weave special woolen stocking bags in which they carried mashed potatoes to be eaten at sea. Or they would take "live" turf into their boats with them on calm days and roast potatoes with fish at sea.

But the potato blight changed all that almost overnight. In and around every hovel and cabin, the stench alone of the rotting potatoes was enough to convince parents and children alike that they were caught up in an awful catastrophe. Many believed that God was punishing them for their gluttonous consumption of the potato during carefree years when it was plentiful enough to be used to manure the land. As the Irish