

## *Black Potatoes* by Susan Campbell Bartoletti

**Subjects:** Ireland—History—Famine, 1845–1852—Juvenile literature

**Awards:** Sibert Informational Book Medal Winner, Best Books for Young Adults, Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People

**Book Lists:** Middle School, Reluctant Readers

**Props:** Potato

JNF

Have you ever thought of the power of the potato? (*Show potato*) It doesn't look like much, but back in the early 1800s Ireland learned the hard way the power of the potato—the difference between life and death. (*Put potato down*) In 1845, the population of Ireland numbered over eight million, making the small island the most densely populated country in Europe. However, in that same year, a disaster struck Ireland. A mysterious blight attacked the potato crops, destroying the only real food of Ireland's rural population. Over the next five years, the blight attacked again and again. These years are known today as the Great Irish Famine, a time when one million people died from starvation and disease and two million more fled Ireland and emigrated to various countries. This book tells the story of the Great Irish Famine through the eyes and memories of the Irish people.

In these pages you will read about how they lived, why their lives depended on the potato, how they dreaded the workhouse, and how they feared and defied the landlord and his agent who collected the rent and evicted them from their homes. You will read the stories of children and adults who suffered from starvation and disease, and who died. You will read about people who held onto hope, who committed heroic acts of self-sacrifice, and who fought to survive and preserve their dignity.

These laborers lived in great poverty. Most only spoke Irish. Most could not read and write. Work was scarce in Ireland, so they had no money to buy food and as their potato crop failed, they had no food. People became desperately hungry. One woman from County Westmeath recalls how, (*Read on page 33*) "The men used to steal the tails of the bullocks (the young bulls). They would wait until the landlord was gone to bed, then steal out and cut off the tails. They would skin them and roast them."

The British government created workhouses where the Irish could go to work and receive food and shelter. Although these were created to help the Irish, in many instances they failed miserably. Johnny Callaghan recalls that, (*Read on page 102*)

"When a person was near death, he or she was removed from other parts of the workhouse to a large room at the gable-end . . . From the window, there were a few boards slanting down to the earth and beneath was a huge grave or pit. The corpse was slid down the boards into the pit and lime was put over the corpse." Some burial pits held as many as nine hundred bodies.

Another story circulated about a Carlow undertaker who earned an unsavory reputation. James Doyle recalls that the man, (*Read on page 158*) "collected people before they were quite dead. One man woke up as he was being carried in a coffin for burial. He shouted to know where he was, and the undertaker replied, 'We are going to bury you.' 'How'll you bury me when I'm not dead,' said the man. The undertaker calmly replied, 'Oh, the drop will kill you anyhow.'" Kathleen Hurley said, "People were worn out with untold hardship. My father said he saw people dead on the roadside, such sights, their bodies all skin and bones, with bunches of green grass in their mouths, the green juice of grass trickling down their chins and necks."

In 1850 the Famine years ended. The potato crops recovered and began to grow in plenty. However, by 1910, the devastation and poverty had caused five million people to leave Ireland. And actually, my great, great grandparents were some of those immigrants. At 15 years of age, Sarah Jane Creighton—followed by her 17-year-old boyfriend, Samuel MacFarland—left Ireland for the United States in 1880. Sarah and Samuel sailed for America in hopes of a better life. I have been told that they were sick of eating potatoes.

It has been over 150 years since the Famine and today Ireland's population numbers about four million. That's less than half the amount of people who lived in Ireland in 1845. Read this book to learn of the pain and suffering of an entire country. Let it open your eyes and hearts to their strength and courage and their survival with dignity. (*Hold up book*) *Black Potatoes* by Susan Campbell Bartoletti.