

Rethinking Schools *Online*

Famine Trial Indictments

British Landlords

INDICTMENT: You are charged with the murder of over a million Irish peasants who died in the famine years of 1846 and 1847. These were needless deaths. Even without the potato, there was more than enough food produced in Ireland during those years to feed everyone in the country, and still have plenty left over. The action — or lack of action — taken by your group led to untold misery. You are to blame.

— You are directly responsible for the terrible famine resulting from the potato blight. You owned the land that the Irish peasants worked. When the potato crop failed, you had a choice: You could either allow your tenants to stop paying rent temporarily, and allow them to eat the crops grown on other parts of your land, or you could force them to pay rent even if they would starve as a result. You chose this latter course, which resulted in so much starvation, disease, and death.

— You forced the Irish tenant farmers to live on the worst parts of your land with the rockiest soil, where only potatoes could be grown. Including their families, this totaled six million Irish out of a country of eight million. You planted three quarters of the land — the best land — with wheat, oats, and barley, where you also grazed cattle and sheep. But did you let the Irish share in any of this? No. Even during the worst of the famine, you continued to export all this food from Ireland to England. The oat crop alone would have been enough to feed all six million Irish who lived on tenant farms.

— Even as people starved, you had perfectly good land that went unplanted. You didn't want to plant any more crops for fear that this might bring down the prices for your other crops. People starved, and you worried about profits.

— To make matters worse, during the height of the famine, Irish tenant farmers couldn't pay their rents. So you had them evicted from their homes, and had their homes destroyed. You decided that it would be more profitable if the land were used for cattle and sheep, rather than to allow the Irish to live there and grow food. Keep in mind that these tenant farmers and their families had lived on that land for generations.

— You made sure that you were off in London or Paris so you didn't have to personally witness any of the suffering in Ireland.

— It was really a kind of genocide you were committing against the Irish. When the potato famine hit you didn't try to help, instead you saw it as an opportunity to make even more money from the land. You compared the removal of Irish in Ireland to the whites' removal of Indians in America. As the Irish died or left the country, your newspaper, the London *Times*, wrote, "Soon a Celt [an Irishman] will be as rare on the banks of the Liffey as a red man on the banks of the Manhattan [Hudson]." To you, this was good news.

Possible Defense:

- The government is responsible for social welfare, not landlords. You're just a businessman.
- You didn't mean to hurt anyone, but you had to make a living. And in a capitalist system, products (food included) are sold to the highest bidder.
- Nothing you did was illegal; you broke no laws.

- In fact, the Anglican Church (God's representative on earth) never said that what you did was wrong or immoral.
- Perhaps it was all for the best. Many Irish got to go to America.

Irish Tenant Farmers

INDICTMENT: You are charged with the murder of over a million Irish peasants who died in the famine years of 1846 and 1847. These were needless deaths. Even without the potato, there was more than enough food produced in Ireland during those years to feed everyone in the country, and still have plenty left over. The action — or lack of action — taken by your group led to untold misery. You are to blame.

— It's true that the British landlords, backed up by the British government, turned the potato blight into a famine that killed over a million Irish. However, what did you do to stop the crimes committed by the British? By not organizing massive resistance to the British, you are also to blame. And you knew that the solution was simple. There was a saying in Ireland at the time: "Sure, this land is full of barley, wheat and oats. The English have only to distribute it." What a foolish hope. You had to *take* it from them. You must have known that they wouldn't just give it to you. The most that the Irish did in the way of "redistributing the wealth" was to steal a few sheep.

— There were six million Irish who the English forced to subsist on potatoes — three quarters of the entire country of Ireland. Why did you put up with it? You allowed the English landlords to export incredible amounts of food while the poor Irish starved. Not only was there barley, wheat and oats, there were also plenty of cattle, sheep and pigs that were sent from Ireland to England everyday.

— It's true that the Irish helped one another by sharing generously. If they hadn't, surely even more people would have died in the potato famine. But the sharing was not enough to make a big difference. You had to do something more, but you didn't.

— Some poor Irish who had lost their land even allowed themselves to be hired as housewreckers, who would destroy homes after tenant farmers were evicted by British landlords. Poor Irish were pitted against other poor Irish for the crumbs provided by the British.

— And in the end, what did you do? You ran away to the United States. In 1847 alone, about a quarter of a million Irish left the island to travel to the United States for a better life. Although we can sympathize, this did nothing to end the injustice in Ireland.

Possible Defense:

- Everyone — landlords, British government, Anglican Church — exploited *you*. It wasn't the other way around. And it was the system of colonial capitalism that gave all these people the power to exploit you in the first place.
- You were weakened by disease and poverty. How could you be expected to fight back? Sick Irish peasants could be no match for the British army.
- You are the victim, not the murderer. Get real. It's absurd to blame you for your own deaths.

Anglican Church

INDICTMENT: You are charged with the murder of over a million Irish peasants who died in the famine years of 1846 and 1847. These were needless deaths. Even without the potato, there was more than enough food produced in Ireland during those years to feed everyone in the country, and still have plenty left over. The action — or lack of action — taken by your group led to untold misery. You are to blame.

— In some ways it could be said that the Anglican Church is the *most* to blame for the starvation of

the Irish. Supposedly, you are God's representative on earth. The Bible says to love your brother as yourself. Yet how did you respond in those two fateful years, 1846 and 1847? You knew that the English landlords forced the Irish to live on the worst land — land that was good only for growing potatoes. The landlords used the best Irish land to get rich, by growing wheat, barley and oats, by raising pigs, and by grazing cattle and sheep. Did the landlords keep any of this food in Ireland, even when people began to starve? No. They exported it to England. The government enforced the will of the landlords with military might. And how did the Anglican Church respond? Did you protest? Did you tell the landlords that they were too greedy, that they were not doing their Christian duty? No. You did nothing.

— And to make matters worse, you demanded that the Irish continue to tithe 10 percent of all their crops to the church — a church that the Irish didn't even belong to, because the vast majority of them were Catholic. This was outrageous. How could you possibly justify these actions? It was the Irish who paid the salaries of your ministers, even though the ministers served the more wealthy Protestant minority. The tithe of the Irish was worth about one hundred and twenty five million dollars in today's money.

— Worse than this, you gave the landlords a way to feel OK, even good, about what was happening: God must be punishing the Irish, you told them. One landlord's daughter remembers her mother telling her that "it was the hand of Providence destroyed the potato crop, for all the other crops prospered, and the very weeds in the stricken fields grew strong and green." Providence? God's will? It was the Anglican Church that taught the British landlords this nonsense. You preached that the potato famine was God's punishment. You taught the English that the Irish were "savages," misled by their priests. As one French traveler in Ireland commented, all the Protestants "speak of the Catholics with extraordinary hatred and scorn." Thanks to you.

— When typhoid fever began striking the poor Irish, but rarely the wealthy landlords, many British Anglicans used this as proof that God was punishing the Catholics. The church did nothing to protest against this ridiculous notion.

— The Anglican Church was more than just a spectator to these events. By the early 1830s, the Church owned five million acres of Irish land.

Possible Defense:

- If the Irish Catholics had converted to the correct religion, and not have been so stubborn, perhaps you would have been able to help them more.
- You broke no laws.
- It would have been wrong to help people who could not help themselves.
- God works in mysterious ways. The potato blight was created by God, not by man.

British Government

INDICTMENT: You are charged with the murder of over a million Irish peasants who died in the famine years of 1846 and 1847. These were needless deaths. Even without the potato, there was more than enough food produced in Ireland during those years to feed everyone in the country, and still have plenty left over. The action — or lack of action — taken by your group led to untold misery. You are to blame.

— In the first winter of the famine, while 400,000 Irish starved to death, English landlords continued to export food from Ireland to England. The British government could have outlawed the export of food while people starved. However, the government allowed the landlords to export 17 million pounds sterling worth of grain, cattle, pigs, flour, eggs, and poultry — food that could have fed twelve million people, twice the number of Irish tenant farmers dependent on potatoes.

— Unbelievably, the British government would not allow charity shipments of food from other

countries to be sent directly to Ireland, unless it was on English ships. Otherwise they first had to be sent to England, to be re-shipped on English ships. You made sure that England profited from Irish suffering.

— One law that you enforced said that only the landlord and his guests could shoot game or could fish on the landlord's estate — land where the Irish had lived for generations. So as the landlord and his buddies went on hunting expeditions for sport, starving Irish peasants could only watch.

— One British policy said that the starving Irish might be put to work on public works (welfare) projects, so long as it was not work to grow more food. There was land that was not even planted with crops. However, you worried that if this land was planted with food crops, it would lower the prices that the landlords would receive for their crops. Wouldn't want to hurt the English landlords, now would we? Irish were only granted "welfare" work if they first sold any land they owned that was more than one quarter acre. And who bought this land? That's right: wealthy English landlords. The Irish had a saying: "Beware of the horns of a bull, of the heels of a horse, of the smile of an Englishman."

— During the worst of the famine, Irish tenant farmers were unable to pay their rents to the landlords. So the landlords began evicting them. Not only did the British parliament pass no laws forbidding these cruel evictions, the British government provided constabulary (police) to make sure that no one would stop the landlords from exercising their property rights. How could you allow — and even promote — such cruelty?! On one estate, in Templemore, tenants complained to the government bailiff that they had only a few black potatoes, and that they needed more time to pay the English landlord his rent. Your bailiff replied, "What the devil do we care about you or your black potatoes? It is not us that made them black. You will get two days to pay the rent, and if you don't, you know the consequence."

Possible Defense:

- You are responsible for the welfare of the entire British empire, not just one part of it. You did what was best for Britain. In the long run, it's best for everyone.
- The landlords owned the land. They were allowed by law to do whatever they wanted to do with it. They could have fed peasants if they'd chosen to. You didn't stop any charity.
- In the capitalist system, food goes to those who have money to pay for it. That's just how things work. No money, no eat.
- There were simply too many Irish. It may sound cold, but perhaps this was for the best.
- Everything you did was legal.

"Political Economy" — The System of Colonial Capitalism

INDICTMENT: You are charged with the murder of over a million Irish peasants who died in the famine years of 1846 and 1847. These were needless deaths. Even without the potato, there was more than enough food produced in Ireland during those years to feed everyone in the country, and still have plenty left over. The action — or lack of action — taken by your group led to untold misery. You are to blame.

— There really are no evil people here. Sure, people did evil things, but it was the capitalist market that was mostly to blame. Yes, the British landlords exported lots and lots of food while the Irish starved. But why? Because they were devils? No. They did it because that's what people do in a capitalist economy: They sell their produce where they can get the best price. Hardly anyone in Ireland had any money. So the landlords sent their wheat, barley, oats, cattle, sheep and pigs to England. Not bad people, a bad *system*: you, capitalism.

— Blame individuals for the famine, blame the British government, the landlords — but when you come right down to it, the real culprit is capitalism and the whole system of British colonialism. If

Britain mistreated *only* Ireland, then perhaps it could be said that particular groups were to blame. But the British destroyed lives wherever they went: India, Kenya, South Africa, Barbados, Jamaica, and so many more. Ireland was but one of many colonies harmed by the *system of colonial capitalism*. The logic of the system said that the colonies would benefit when the whole empire benefited. So the duty of every colony was to benefit the empire. Therefore, even as the Irish starved, the logic of colonial capitalism — what the English called "political economy" — said that food must be exported from Ireland to feed people in England. Supposedly this way the whole empire would benefit. What stupidity. It was this system that allowed human beings to stand back and do nothing — or even make matters worse — as over a million Irish starved to death. This was just the operation of the "political economy."

— In a capitalist economy, goods go to those who can afford them. If Irish had had the money, the food crops would have stayed in Ireland and have been purchased by the Irish. But because the money was in England, that's where the food went. It wasn't a conspiracy, it was just the normal working of the capitalist system. Yes, there were people who made bad decisions, but the real culprit is colonial capitalism.

— To summarize: no particular individual or group of individuals is responsible for the mass starvation in Ireland. It was the system. The system that said: profits before people, England before the colonies.

Possible Defense:

- Systems are not real. People are real. If people do bad things, blame them — blame the landlords, the government or the Church. Saying, "It's the system," is a cop-out.
- Focus on the good that capitalism does: It gets a large amount of goods produced and distributed efficiently.
- Just like in any natural or social system, sometimes the weak don't survive. It happens, and ironically, short term pain can make the system stronger and produce long term gain.
- Call it the system, but people will sell their produce only to the people who have the money to buy it. It's unrealistic to think that a system could work differently. Poor and starving people don't have the resources to compete in the marketplace. What's the alternative?