

under Sir Robert Peel the Prime Minister, and distributed. Peel also attempted to repeal the Corn Laws which would allow the direct importation of corn from the U.S.A. to Ireland. His attempt failed in Parliament and he resigned on December 5th. His successor was Lord John Russell who failed to form a government. Peel returned to power until June 1846 and managed eventually to repeal the Corn Laws. Russell formed a government on June 29th but was unaware of the scale of the disaster in Ireland. Starvation had set in the previous March. From the outbreak of blight to the summer of 1846 over a million pounds worth of corn had been exported from Ireland. Tenants were forced to sell their corn to avoid eviction as Charles Gavan Duffy, the Fenian leader wrote indignantly "More than a third of the potato crop throughout the island was gone; in some districts more than half; and at the same time the bulk of the remaining supplies, cattle, and corn, butter, beef and pork, which would have fed all the inhabitants, continued to be exported to England, to pay the rent of farms which no longer yielded the cultivators their ordinary food".

Famine relief measures were introduced in March giving employment on road making, bridge construction and pier building to about 140,000 persons nationally but did little for the overall problem. Russell's administration was unsympathetic to Irish suffering. His Chancellor of the Exchequer Sir Charles Wood and the Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Charles Edward Trevelyan were both firm believers in 'laissez faire' economic and wanted Ireland to pay for its own famine relief. By December of 1846 there were 500,000 people on relief schemes. The figure rose to 734,000 by the following March. During 1846 private relief organisations were established. The Society of Friends being the best established relief agency in Mayo. Trevelyan's Labour Rate Act sought to force landlords to pay for the work schemes and set August 15th, 1847 as the date for the ending of government sponsored projects. The Poor Law had established workhouses in the years prior to the Famine in the towns of Westport, Castlebar, Ballina, Belmullet, Swinford and Ballinrobe. These workhouses could not cater with the numbers who gathered daily outside their doors for admittance. As early as December 1846 the Board of Works, which operated the famine relief projects, could no longer administer the schemes. Government grain depots in Mayo commenced selling grain at the market price plus five per cent at the end of 1846. But those who needed it most had little money with which to purchase it.

Blight again destroyed the 1846 potato crop. The scale of the disaster is best given in the words of one traveller who in July 1846 wrote: "I ranged all the West and I can assure you I was in utter astonishment and consternation too. The picture is a truly melancholy one - for since last Wednesday this green country has become black. I did not see one green field of potatoes in the West. I scarcely could believe four or five days would have made such a change. Every field is gone."

The tenant population were reduced to a diet of 'nettles and asses flesh' according to Balla native Patrick .W. Nally, (later Fenian organiser for Connaught). The majority of the population were exhausted and starving. Snow began to fall in November. Most people were ill clothed. People ate everything they could lay their hands on including rats, rabbits, snails, dandelion roots and grass. But what was available from nature was very limited. An Englishman, William Bennett travelled much of Ireland in 1847 helping where he could. This is what he found in Belmullet in North Mayo: