

# THE QUEEN'S VISIT

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By the mid 1800s, Ireland was in the hands of landlords who took more and more of the fertile land, forcing the Irish to survive on smaller and smaller plots, until they became totally dependent on the crop that could produce the most yield per acre – the potato. It was a difficult life, but at least they weren't starving, for potatoes are a remarkable source of vitamins and minerals. Then late on August 20, 1845, a potato fungus was discovered at the Dublin Botanical Gardens. The following day, August 21, is a date remembered in Irish history as the first day of An Gorta Mor - the Great Hunger - a tragedy that saw millions lost to emigration, disease, and starvation. Within the week, reports came in from all over Ireland that the potato crop had turned black in the ground. It was the only crop affected, since everything else grew in abundance, but the other crops belonged to the landlord.

The landlords protected those crops from the hungry Irish until they were harvested, and exported to England for profit. Parliament did little to help, quoting the economic doctrine of *Laissez Faire* saying that the country was to be left to the effect of natural forces. Many died in '45 awaiting a better harvest in '46, but it didn't come. The potato crop in '46 was almost totally destroyed. People were forced to eat what little seed potato they had to survive, many fell victim to the diseases which attend starvation and when the sick and starving Irish couldn't pay their rent, they were evicted. The blight did not return in 1847, but that year saw the largest death toll in the 5-year period since those who had eaten their seed potatoes had nothing to plant, those who had been evicted had nowhere to plant, and those who had fallen victim to disease were unable to plant. To make matters worse, the blight returned in 1848 and 1849 and neither landlord nor Parliament provided adequate assistance. Millions died of starvation and hunger-related disease on the roads, alongside prosperous farms. A limited amount of aid was provided but it was too little and there were some soup kitchens, but in some, the cost of receiving food, was the surrender of their faith and conversion to the Church of England. It was a price too high for many, and they turned their backs on the food, rather than turn their backs on God.

Parliament was denounced for not intervening in the Irish tragedy, and they reacted by declaring the crisis officially over in 1847. Their evidence was the few acres of potatoes had been produced that year with no sign of the blight. But they made no mention of the fact that it returned in 1849 and 49. After 1849, the potato blight slowly abated, but the blight on the Irish continued. Most historians estimate that the effects of the great hunger were not over for another 30 years as the lack of land or living wage, food shortage, and disease continued. Emigrants sent money back to loved ones they were forced to leave behind and it helped them climb back to a stable life, but it would be a generation before many of the emigrants could establish themselves in the lands to which they fled. In the end, most of those who suffered the Great Hunger, were gone before its effects were. The benchmark event that marked that turn in history was the formation of the Land League in 1879.

A meeting convened in Daly's Hotel, Castlebar on August 16<sup>th</sup> 1879 inaugurated a body called the Mayo Land League. Founder Michael Davitt convinced MP Charles Stewart Parnell to join the land agitation and the Mayo Land League became the National Land League with Parnell as President and Davitt, as Secretary. Branches were formed in almost every parish in the country and by the end of 1879 there was a formidable organization in place to plan what became known as the Land War. It was only then that it could be truly said that the Great Hunger was over and the Irish began to take back their land.

One of the most insensitive incidents to come out of the Great Hunger was the British government's premature declaration of the end of the blight and in order to show that all was well, a massive publicity campaign was mounted, the highlight of which was a visit by Queen Victoria at harvest time in 1849. As the Irish starved and died in the workhouses and on the roads, hundreds of thousands of Pounds were spent to beautify the roads on which she would travel. Crowds of curious and angry onlookers were kept in check by British soldiers as reports were sent to the world that wherever she went, the Queen was cheered by her adoring subjects, and headlines proclaimed that "THE FAMINE IS OVER AS THE QUEEN VISITS IRELAND." Ironically, that report - although propaganda in its time - would eventually come true.

The truth of that statement lies in a most remarkable incident that occurred on the exact anniversary of the first day of the hunger, exactly 30 years after the blight had begun to fade! The date was August 21, 1879, and the place was the Church of St. John the Baptist in the Irish village of Knock in Co. Mayo. On that evening, a small group witnessed an astonishing vision as three figures, surrounded by a mysterious glowing light, suddenly appeared, beside an altar on which rested a cross and a lamb surrounded by adoring angels. The

witnesses knew that they were in the presence of St. Joseph, St. John and Mary, the mother of God. They couldn't believe what they were seeing. Word spread, and shortly, others from the area arrived and saw it too. No such heavenly visitation had ever before been reported in Ireland, and the people fell to their knees and prayed, oblivious of a soaking rain. The figures remained, silent for nearly two hours, and then vanished as suddenly as they had appeared. In 1939, after many years of intense investigation, the apparition at Knock was granted canonical sanction by the Church. Of the hundreds of visions reported, it is one of only ten to have received such recognition, and it ranks with Lourdes and Fatima as a holy site of pilgrimage, yet it is the only appearance of the Virgin during which She remained silent.

Many have questioned why Mary said nothing, and only stood praying. Praying for what, for whom? Any student of Irish history should know the answer for there are clues in the date of the apparition. Consider that the Great Hunger wasn't really over for 30 years after 1849; Mary appeared in 1879 – exactly 30 years later! And She appeared on August 21, the exact anniversary of the first day of the Great Hunger! Is it possible that, since the Irish had suffered so much for their faith, that the Lord, in appreciation, sent His beloved mother; and that She, as any mourner would, stood in silent prayer for the generation which had just passed away. Think of it, the timing is incredible. Not only is August 21 significant, but the year 1879 was truly the end of the great hunger, for the Irish began taking their land back from the landlords. While the dates have an uncanny significance, there is yet another irony. Since August 1879 marked both the historic end of the Great Hunger and the year in which Our Lady visited Knock, a 30-year old headline had at finally come true: **THE FAMINE WAS OVER AND THE QUEEN HAD VISITED IRELAND** – but it wasn't Victoria; it was the only Queen that the Irish ever recognized !

Millions have visited Knock since 1879 and numerous miracles have been reported at the shrine. The Catholic people of Ireland, who struggled so hard to keep their faith alive had received a visit from heaven, and the Virgin had received a new title - Our Lady of Knock.