The Highland Potato Famine

The **Highland Potato Famine** was perhaps more of a major agrarian crisis than a true famine, but *Highland Potato Famine* is now in widespread use as a name for a period of 19th century Highland and Scottish history. True famine was a real prospect throughout the period, and certainly it was one of severe malnutrition, serious disease, crippling financial hardship and traumatic disruption to essentially agrarian communities. The causes of the crisis were in many respects similar to those of the very real Great Irish Famine of about the same time.
In the mid-19th century, most crofters in the Highlands of Scotland were very dependent on potatoes as a source of food. This was because they had been deprived of access to most of the land they had worked in previous centuries and were expected to subsist on very small areas of land. The potato was perhaps the only crop that would provide enough food from such land areas. The land was generally of poor quality in exposed coastal locations. Very similar conditions had developed in Ireland.

In the Highlands, in 1846, potato crops were blighted by a fungal disease. Crops failed, and the following winter was especially cold and snowy. Similar crop failures began earlier in Ireland, but famine relief programs were perhaps better organized and more effective in the Highlands and Islands. During 1847, Sir Edward Pine Coffin (Yes, that's his real name) used naval vessels to distribute oatmeal and other supplies. Nonetheless, in Wick, Cromarty and Invergordon, there were protests about the *export* of grain from local harbors. Troops were used to quell the protests. Crop failures continued into the 1850s, and famine relief programs became semi-permanent operations.

Crofters were not simply given their oatmeal rations: they were expected to work for them, eight hours a day, six days a week. Relief programs resulted in the building of destitution roads. Also, they produced projects with very little (if any) real value, and their administration was very bureaucratic, employing legions of clerks to ensure compliance with complex sets of rules, though clerks feel hunger too and might have taken another job if one, which they thought would feed them better, had been available.

The daily ration was set at 24 ounces per man, 12 ounces per woman and 8 ounces per child.

Some landlords worked to lessen the effects of the famine on their crofting tenants. Rather than accept any real responsibility for the plight of crofting tenants, many landlords resorted to eviction. In particular, John Gordon of Cluny became the target of criticism in Scottish newspapers when many of his crofters were reduced to living on the streets of Inverness. Gordon resorted to hiring a fleet of ships and forcibly transporting his Hebridean crofters to Canada, where they were simply dumped on Canadian authorities.

To put it another way, for whatever reasons, some landlords supplied a free passage to what was hoped would be a better life, in Nova Scotia and Canada. It should be made clear that the eviction of people unable to pay their rents was not peculiar to this area. On this occasion, hard as it was, the people had somewhere better to go and the means of getting there.

During the ten years following 1847, from throughout the Highlands, over 16,000 crofters were shipped overseas to Canada and Australia. In 1857, potato crops were again growing without serious blight.