

HANDOUT: REFUGEE

Refugees stream into British cities⁶

September 20th, 1847: Besides Liverpool, they stream into Britain through Glasgow and the ports of south Wales.

A fever epidemic has broken out in Glasgow, which is swarming with Irish beggars. As in Liverpool, they crowd into such shelter as they can find; one cellar, measuring 10 feet by 10, holds eight adults and 17 children. Great numbers of Irish are landed on the Welsh coast, "bringing pestilence on their backs, famine on their stomachs".

Manchester's experience of Famine immigration is typical of industrial towns. It already has a "little Ireland" slum, the population being one-tenth Irish. The newcomers ramble about the streets "in droves" seeking shelter.

In Birmingham, the Irish influx has caused such over-crowding that 115 women are found sleeping in three rooms. The Irish are reported to be entering London at the rate of 1,000 a week, mainly by road from the west.

Not only are they detested; any hope that the misery of the destitute might evoke compassion is destroyed by the fear of fever. In York, for instance, when the Irish flock to the city, its citizens refuse to allow any building to be used as a fever hospital.

But the general British reaction is one of violent irritation, epitomised by Thomas Carlyle, who describes the Irishman as "the sorest evil this country has to strive with. In his rags and laughing savagery, he is there to undertake all work that can be done by mere strength of hand and back - for wages that will purchase him potatoes. He needs only salt for condiment, he lodges in any pig-hutch or dog-hutch, roosts in outhouses and wears a suit of tatters... There abides he, in his squalor and unreason, in his falsity and drunken violence, as the ready-made nucleus of degradation and disorder".

Fredrich Engels considers this racial imagery 'one-sided' but otherwise 'perfectly right'. What does such a race want with high wages he asks? The worst quarters of the large towns are inhabited by Irishmen. "Filth and drunkenness too, they have brought with them. The lack of cleanliness, which is not so injurious in the country... becomes terrifying and gravely dangerous through its concentration here, as in the great cities.

He deposits all garbage and filth before his house door here, as he was accustomed to do at home, and so accumulates the pools and dirt-heaps which disfigure the working people's quarters and poison the air. He builds a pigsty against the house as a wall as he did at home, and if he is prevented from doing this he lets the pig sleep in the room with himself."

⁶ Source: The Irish Times, Famine Diary, September 1997;
Taken from Human Rights and Refugees,
Trocaire and A Part of Ireland Now