

Saint Patrick Goes to Haiti

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Saint Patrick is celebrated in Haiti, although not with the green beer and clothes he inspires in the United States. There he is better known as *Dambala*, a *loa* or spirit who often appears in the form of the snake in Haiti's Vodou religion. *Dambala* and the other spirits were brought from West Africa to Haiti in slave ships that brought the ancestors of today's Haitians across the Atlantic. Vodou was brutally suppressed, so the Haitians disguised their worship by representing their spirits with Christian symbols and icons. St. Patrick, often painted with snakes at his feet, and himself an escaped slave, must have seemed a good match. So centuries later, prints of St. Patrick with his staff and his bishop's mitre still preside over the drumming and chanting of vodou ceremonies in Haiti.

In the United States, St. Patrick is celebrated with sad songs that recognize the starvation and injustice that drove the ancestors of today's revelers across the Atlantic. One of the saddest and most popular of these songs, *The Fields of Athenry*, can bring tears to your eyes, whether it is sung softly in the original folk version or shouted in the punk rock remake by the Dropkick Murphys. The song begins:

By a lonely prison wall

I heard a young girl calling
Michael, they have taken you away
For you stole Trevelyn's corn
So the young might see the morn
Now a prison ship lies waiting in the bay.

At first blush this is personal tragedy- a young man deported from Ireland (to Australia), leaving his wife and young children behind, perhaps forever. All because he stole food to keep his kids alive. But with more context, the personal tragedy evolves into a natural and economic disaster, and eventually into an outrageous international injustice.

The song's Trevelyn is Sir Charles Edward Trevelyn, a British bureaucrat during the Great Irish Famine of 1845-1849. By 1845 Britain had controlled Ireland for centuries, during which the large British landowners (and a few wealthy Irish ones) had, with government help, pushed Irish peasants into smaller and smaller parcels. Although the Emerald Isle was a fertile country that grew more beef, grain and other food than it needed, most of that food was grown on large estates and exported to Britain. Irish peasants — the majority of the population — ate mostly potatoes because that was the only crop they could grow enough of to feed their families on their small plots. So when a fungus killed almost the entire potato crop in 1845 (and again for the next four years), the peasants had nothing to eat.

Sir Charles Trevelyn was responsible for managing the British government's relief efforts

during the Famine. These efforts were the outrageous international injustice. British relief programs did save lives, but they did not come close to matching the need, because the government refused to take life-saving measures if they conflicted with its free-market economic theories. Trevelyn himself welcomed the famine as a “mechanism for reducing surplus population.”

“Trevelyn’s corn” was dried corn that the British government bought from the U.S. to distribute cheaply to the hungry. The government feared interfering with the free market more than it feared people starving to death, so it refused corn rations to anyone who could theoretically buy food on the market. This included people physically able to work but unable to find jobs in a collapsed economy, and families with any land- even a quarter acre. The economic theories did not fill empty stomachs, so people not theoretically poor enough for help starved to death while food sat undistributed in the warehouses.

Meanwhile, the potato blight did not affect other crops, including beef and grain. Ireland continued to be a net exporter of food throughout the famine. Keeping the food in Ireland would have saved lives, but it might have interfered with the free market. So the British kept eating beef and grain imported from a starving Ireland. Some Irish desperately ate their island’s famously green grass: they were found dead, with green stains around their mouths.

Trevelyn’s “mechanism” for reducing Ireland’s population worked. Over one million people- by conservative estimates- were reduced to their graves, starved to death or killed by the diseases of hunger. More than 2 million were forced to flee the island- to America, England, Australia and many other places where St. Patrick is honored. All told, Ireland lost a quarter of its population.

Today, the Great Famine is as much a distant memory in Ireland as it is in Boston, New York or San Francisco. After centuries of being one of the poorest nations in Western Europe, Ireland is now one of the wealthiest and peaceful countries in the world, the product of an economic boom fueled by strong government investment, especially in education and infrastructure.

But a century and a half after the Great Famine, people in Haiti are still being killed by the same economic theories. Haiti has made headlines recently, for people eating cookies made of salt, butter and brown dirt to hold off starvation. The stories were, at first blush, a personal tragedy (a mother unable to feed her infant son) and a natural and economic disaster (hurricanes, high fuel prices). But with more context, the personal tragedy evolves into an outrageous international injustice.

For decades, the World Bank and the Inter-America Development Bank (IDB) propped up Haitian dictators with generous loans. The notorious “Papa Doc” and “Baby Doc” — Francois and Jean-Claude Duvalier- received almost half of Haiti’s current outstanding loans. The Duvaliers used the money to buy warm fur coats and fast cars, and to fund the brutal *Tonton Macoute* death squads. In return, the international community, especially the United States, received a reliable vote against Fidel Castro in the United Nations and the Organization of American States.

The Haitian people received very little from these loans. Since 1980, when Haiti started receiving the Banks’ help in earnest, its per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has *shrunk*

by 38.3%. Along the way, Haiti became the poorest country in the Americas, and one of the hungriest countries in the world. Today, about half of school-age kids in Haiti are not in school. Over half of all Haitians struggle to survive on \$1 a day or less, and life expectancy is in the mid-50's. Many of those who can flee do so, including cities like Boston and New York, that sheltered the refugees from Ireland's famine.

The loans lavished on the Duvaliers and other dictators are now due, so Haiti's elected government is sending almost a million dollars every week to the well-appointed offices of the World Bank and the IDB in Washington. Like Ireland exporting beef while people starved, Haiti is exporting money while people die of poverty.

The World Bank and the IDB are not commercial banks. They are funded by our tax dollars, and were not established to make a profit. They are supposed to be, in the World Bank's words, "working for a world free of poverty." Like the British in Ireland, the Banks have their "relief programs" for Haiti, including programs that will eventually forgive a portion of Haiti's debt. But like the British response to Ireland's famine, the Bank programs do not rise to the seriousness of the situation.

The Banks' programs are too late — they will not provide full relief for months, perhaps years. The Banks started their programs in 1996, but would not admit Haiti until 2007. Like the British declaring the starving Irish theoretically able to work, in 2000 the World Bank declared Haiti theoretically able to pay its debts, and therefore ineligible for the Bank's help: "[d]espite being very poor and having a relatively significant external debt level, after taking advantage of other sources of debt relief, Haiti's debt will be reduced to a sustainable level." So Haiti has just started jumping through the many hoops required to receive relief.

The Banks' programs are also too little - they stop where the requirements of helping poor people conflict with the requirements of the Banks' economic theories. The Banks could simply cancel Haiti's debts, especially those from loans given to dictators, which would immediately make a million dollars a week available for life-saving government programs. But the very institutions that gave generously to the Duvaliers- knowing full well how the money was being spent- now demand "accountability" from Haiti's democratic government before cancelling the dictators' debts. Accountability means, in part, that the government has an economic plan that satisfies the Banks' free market theories. Haiti's plan is not yet available, but the Banks have required other poor countries to demonstrate accountability by slashing public health and education spending. For now, accountability means keeping the \$1 million coming every week, while the citizens of Haiti eat dirt.

The citizens of the United States could put a stop to this injustice immediately. We pay the largest share of the Banks' costs, and have the largest say in the Banks' governance. If our leaders made cancellation of Haiti's debt a priority, the debts would be cancelled.

Some members of the U.S. House of Representatives have taken the first step towards ending this injustice. In mid-February, Rep. Maxine Waters circulated a letter that 53 of her colleagues signed, urging the U.S. Treasury Department to arrange the immediate suspension of all debt payments from Haiti. The Haiti Debt Cancellation resolution in the House, House Resolution 241, seeks to permanently cancel Haiti's IDB and World Bank debts, and has 66 co-sponsors.

In *The Fields of Athenry*, Michael calls out his final words to his wife Mary:

Against the famine and the Crown
I rebelled, they cut me down
Now you must raise our child with dignity.

If his children survived, Michael's wish would have eventually come true. Athenry, Ireland, is now a dignified tourist destination and commuter town, known for its quaint medieval buildings and ruins. People do not flee Athenry anymore, or steal corn to feed their children. Instead, people move there for jobs and opportunity – the latest census classifies one in five Athenry residents as “not Irish.”

The children of “Michel” and “Marie” in Haiti deserve the same chance at dignity and prosperity that the children of Michael and Mary received. They can take a big step in the right direction if the international community lets Haiti's government invest in its people, their education and the infrastructure, rather than in payments to wealthy banks. So this St. Patrick's Day, as we sing about long-ago starvation and injustice in what is now a wealthy island, we should also think about the misery and injustice under St. Patrick's eyes in Haiti, an outrage we can still do something about.

Human rights lawyer Brian Concannon Jr., brian@ijdh.org, directs the Institute for Justice & Democracy in Haiti (IJDH). More information on the fight to relieve Haiti's burden of debt can be found on IJDH's website, www.HaitiJustice.org.

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