

Irish Studies- Googling the Great Hunger

Finding Primary Material from the Famine

Google Book Search:

Locating primary sources from the 1840's is an immediate problem for the serious researcher; obviously, magazines and newspapers reported on the famine. Books were written, travelers and other observers noted what they saw, other people spread the information or commented upon it as the news spread into the world. As news, opinion, and illustrations reached the press, material proliferated...but indexing did not.

Google Book search has reached a level of development that makes it an excellent tool for looking into books and journals at a level of detail far beyond that reached by traditional indexing... we can index a vast number of books and magazines word by word. When we seek material from 150 years ago, all possible copyrights have long expired and most materials in the Google database will be full text, leaving us only the problem of slicing through the vast publishing history of the Irish Famine to locate those elusive first person accounts.

Google's indexing tools, fortunately, allow us to control our searching very precisely, and with the full text indexing we can find material now that would have been hard to locate when it was new in 1845!

To start, click on [Google Books](#) from any Google screen. Go immediately to the [Advanced](#) search screen--you will need the full array of available tools. The search lines have one window for ALL words, which is just like regular Google. The next line is for PHRASES, then there's one for AT LEAST ONE of your words. This is ideal for words that might exist in a number of forms, such as "Ireland" or "Irish". You will not only have to choose your terms carefully, you will likely have to try multiple searches with different arrays of words because you can only find words used by the writer...he might have used "famine" or "hunger" or "starvation", for instance, and the wrong choice would miss his words entirely. Be wary of phrases..."Irish Potato Famine" is now commonly used, but would certainly not have been universally chosen in 1847. Even if you found excellent sources on the first try, try again with alternate terms...there is probably more material out there. But don't search just yet...there are more necessary tools.

Look over the entire search page thoroughly. There are many tools for you to control your findings. For the Famine, the most important may be the Publication Date line. Modern materials are well cataloged and easy to find...we are trying to look back to 1845. Set your dates slightly broad to allow for slow writing, publishing, and transmission of material, perhaps to something like January 1844 to January 1855 for early reporting. Study other tools available, but do not use any not directly useful to your search. For early material, the subject line might well be counter productive. You can limit to books or magazines if you wish to. The "Full View" and "Public Domain" checks are irrelevant for 150 year old material, but might be useful when hunting 20th century material. Modern items still protected by copyright might not open except for minor excerpts, but if you need the book or journal, the library can take the citation you have identified and help you obtain a full copy.

A sample search that produced excellent results: "Ireland" and "famine" on the "All Words" line; "burials", "funerals", or "internments" on the "At Least One Word" line; dates set to 1845 through 1850 to seek out the earliest material noting the social collapse under the stress of mass death and debilitation.

Search, change vocabulary, experiment, and search again. This is an extraordinarily rich database and persistence will be richly rewarded. You will be reading material that would have been nearly impossible to locate only a few years ago!

WorldCat:

Go to [WorldCat](#) from the [Drew Library Research Resources](#) page. Go immediately to [Advanced](#) searching...you need more tools! Look over the dropdown menus next to the search boxes, the line for date limits, the possibility of restricting results (this is not a good database for searching periodical articles), and the other available tools. The dropdowns, for instance, can be set to Place of Publication or Author, among other choices. Choose words and phrases as above...phrases need to be bracketed by quotation marks, as "potato famine". OR terms can be put within a search box, as "famine or hunger or starvation." Again, the year brackets can be added to locate early books or left out to trace the recent. When you locate a good book, open the citations and look at the subject terms to improve your search. Here, you are searching the holdings of thousands of libraries worldwide with modern cataloging. Books owned by Drew will be noted, books only available from other libraries may be ordered from Interlibrary Loan.

Other Googles:

Try [Google Advanced](#) or [Google Advanced Image Search](#).

The obvious features include a PHRASE line ("Potato crop"), an ALL WORDS line ("Ireland") and an ANY WORDS line ("famine, hunger, starvation"). These features allow you to build a tight and efficient search easily. Next, note the DOMAIN line. This can be your most powerful single tool! Try ".org" to find American organizations focused on your issues and interests. ".edu" will get you academic sources. Perhaps best of all, ".ie" will get you sites from the Republic of Ireland, and sites from the North will be found within the ".uk" domain. Within the .uk domain, you can only specify Northern Ireland by your choice of search words. This quickly nets you news, political sites, historical groups, and more FROM Ireland. Using these tools for images can get you political party posters, pictures of historical sites and markers, very local museums of events of the past. You can approach history on a much more intimate level by searching the place where the events took place and meeting people who live there.

For more on searching Ireland and Irish America, have a look at our other Research Guides:

- [Ireland and Northern Ireland](#)

[and Irish and](#) Irish American Research.

Irish literature, dance, theatre, politics, sociology, current newspapers? Here and in Ireland?? Yes...we have databases for that. We have almost 200 databases. Come see us and we'll get you started!

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