

## THE SPUDS WERE DUDS <sup>1</sup>

Dr Martin spoke of the humble potato, reminding us that there was, 150 years ago, the most terrible event in Irish History. This was something so traumatic that we can liken it to the Holocaust in the Jewish world. Whereas the Holocaust is well remembered and spoken about, the Irish event led people, who fled it, to absolute silence. They did not speak about it with their children if they managed to emigrate. They lived in silences, and their children and their grandchildren grew up in ignorance. It is only now we are beginning to piece together what went on. He suggested if we think of Ireland in the year 1845 the majority of the Irish were tenant farmers or labourers, on land that was often owned by absentee landlords. The Estates were in the hands of Agents. So it was very profitable for them to subdivide - to put in more and more families. It became, he pointed out, the daily food of millions of Irishmen, in early 19th Century, particularly. Now, if we imagine, one acre of just ordinary arable land produced six tons of potatoes on which you could keep a whole family. This happened nowhere else in Europe.

In the autumn of 1845, in October, there came reports from some parts of Ireland that there had been a disease, it had caused widespread failure. The population was deeply affected over a million people died. A million people emigrated, so that of those eight million in 1840, by 1850 there were only six million was catastrophic. John went on to explain The British Government response was to send Government supplies to help the Irish But it was to be sold, because they unfortunately had this idea of laissez faire - don't interfere - you just let trade go on Cutback Government instrumentalities, so you have less and less officials to do more and more - and that's something we hear about today very much the idea was you did not give - they had to buy, and if they had no money with what could they buy it? So they were left to misery. ... There were individual groups helping ... but totally out of proportion to their numbers and their influence, did help to set up soup kitchens throughout Ireland to relieve things; but the effects were bad.

We find there was a decline in the Irish language Well how did our ancestors fare? The fact that they did come to Australia means they survived. they must have survived the potato famine. So you can see they were in a specially privileged position. But it happened to be the West of Ireland that was worst affected it does seem, and I say this with some pride, they were somewhat militant on the West Coast. And, so we can take pride said John. we that they did try to stand up for their rights

Now, in 1846, it was so bad that disinherited people who had been put off their land, thousands of them, were squatting along the beaches Families were broken - the fabric of society was broken ... We are now realising that children who were born of concentration camp victims, but who were born after the War, themselves are suffering. Because the experience of the parents. sadness parents, has been handed on ...then our parents were born in the 1890.s Depression and then their parents were born in the Goldrush. Then it dawned on me. This is probably an inheritance of the potato famine. They came to Australia in hard times - they were particularly careful from that hard time in Ireland, and it was handed on ...Perhaps, after a hundred and fifty years, we've broken the curse of the potato famine. But it is something important, and it is something for us to remember. So often we know little about it and are silent, as were those who had gone through it. They came to a new land, they tried to build a new world, a new society - at the other end of the earth and they then forgot the past.

We have not yet exactly established why three siblings and their mother finally decided to emigrate, but our task is to understand the life and time and explain this to each other.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr John Martin, great-grandson of Bridget Coleman [ne Carrucan], abstracted from his talk at the Croydon Carrucan Reunion, held in Victoria, Australia 1998. John explored the theme "Why they came".