
Book Reviews

For real economics, read about the potato

by Marcia Merry

The History and Social Influence of the Potato

by Radcliffe Salaman, edited by J.G. Hawkes
Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, U.K., 1989
685 pages, paperbound, \$24.95

The Amazing Potato

by Milton Meltzer
HarperCollins, New York, 1992
117 pages, hardbound, \$14.89

Dr. Radcliffe N. Salaman's book, *The History and Social Influence of the Potato*, is one which everyone, not just food, agriculture, or history buffs, should read. If you missed it the first time (it was released in 1949), or the second time (it was reprinted in 1970), don't miss it now. A new edition was printed with a new introduction in 1985, and subsequently reprinted in 1986, 1987, and 1989, and is still in print.

In 24 chapters, the book tells the story of the potato, with appendices of statistics, an index, and bibliography. An obvious reason to read the book is the current threat of a repeat today, in eastern Europe, of a potato-blight famine similar to that of the famous Irish potato famine in the 1840s.

But reason enough to read the book, is that the author gives you plenty of real economics and truthful history when he tells the potato story. This is all too rare. I recall that Lyndon LaRouche, in his lecture series on economics in New York City in the early 1970s, recommended Salaman's book for presenting the facts of a case study of failed economic policy—the tragedy of the potato famine in Ireland; and for its other informative sections.

Salaman is an English national trained at the turn of the century for a career as a medic and pathologist. When these pursuits were cut off to him for health reasons, he began collaboration with friends then active in building up an English school of Mendelian research. After a few misadventures, Salaman

specialized in the inheritance of characters of the potato, and pursued this for the rest of his life. For example, he was the director of the Potato Virus Research Station in Cambridge, England for the first 14 years after its founding.

Salaman's account begins in the Andes of Peru, the home of the potato (*Solanum tuberosum*)—which in English today is called the "white" or "Irish" potato. He covers the archeological record of pre-written history cultivation, the Inca period, the subsequent transit of the potato to Europe, and the development of various varieties. In many early European locations, the potato was a delicacy, grown in test gardens for amusement, and for imputed medical or aphrodisiac qualities.

The book covers legends of the potato from the time of Sir Walter Raleigh, and has a chapter on "The Potato of Shakespeare and the Jacobeans." However, in preface to this chapter, Salaman explains that the vegetable called a potato at that time was not the *Solanum tuberosum*, but the sweet potato, a different one altogether.

Among the other chapters of the book are studies of the history and variety of potato in selected locations, including St. Helena, Tristan da Cunha, and, in detail, the British Isles—Wales, Scotland, England, and Jersey.

However, the meat of the book is the extensive, well-documented economic history of Ireland from the 16th century through the 19th century, told in eight chapters, along with a table listing features of the "Failures of the Potato Crop in Ireland" from 1724 to 1894.

Salaman documents how, under domination by London, the Irish people suffered such low wage levels, seizure of family farms for estates owned by British subjects, and general impoverishment, that, as of the mid-1800s, households had come to subsist on a diet based almost wholly on the potato as the staple article, produced in home plots, and harvested and stored by the household. When under these circumstances, the fungus *Phytophthora infestans* arrived in Europe from Mexico, probably via the United States (the dates of arrival are 1843 Philadelphia, 1844 Belgium, 1845 Ireland), the results were devastating. The pest causes a blight to the plant, which results in the tubers putrefying.

In the late 1840s in continental Europe, where potatoes, except in certain locations, were not the staple diet, people compensated for the blighted potato crops by eating more of other foods until the blight was beaten back. But in Ireland, the blight resulted in famine because there were relatively no alternative crops, nor means to produce them. Ireland lost 2 million people because of the potato famine—one-fourth of the population. One million fled their homeland, and another million died of starvation or from hunger-induced disease.

Salaman gives the quotations and citations of British officials who said that this depopulation from "natural causes" was too bad, because it was "not enough."

A version of this story of the potato has been produced for children by Mr. Meltzer, who attributes the inspiration for his little book to the reading of Salaman's history.