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# Three Famines: Starvation And Politics



## THREE FAMINES

STARVATION AND POLITICS

THOMAS  
KENEALLY



## **Synopsis**

Through the lens of three of the most devastating food crises in modern history—“the Great Famine of British-ruled Ireland, the great famine of British-ruled Bengal in 1943, and the string of famines that plagued Ethiopia during the 1970s and 1980s, Booker Prize-winning author Thomas Keneally vividly evokes the terrible cost of mass starvation at the level of the individual who starves and the nation that watches. Famine is widely misunderstood as a completely natural catastrophe. Keneally recounts that while the triggers—“crop, pestilence, and drought”—are natural, the political and ideological choices that prolong famine are man-made. Government neglect and individual venality, not food shortages, are historically the causes of sustained, widespread hunger. In Ireland, British authorities ignored the existence of a food crisis while the famished fed on diseased cattle and human remains. In Bengal, where over four million starved to death, Field Marshal Archibald Wavell’s reports of people dying in Calcutta’s streets and demands for relief resulted in little more than a mocking cable from Winston Churchill asking, why, if food was so scarce, hadn’t Gandhi died yet? In Ethiopia, Mengistu Haile Mariam arranged for 400,000 bottles of whisky to ship to Addis Ababa from Britain to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the revolution that put him in power, while one person died every twenty minutes in Korem. These three famines are stark examples of how throughout history, racial preconceptions, administrative neglect, and incompetence have been more lethal than the initiating blights or crop failures. Keneally’s startling narrative history is a sobering warning to the authorities in charge of mercy in our time to stop making choices that feed famine instead of the starving.

## **Book Information**

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## Customer Reviews

For those interested in the related issues of hunger, starvation, and the human consequences of venal politics, *Three Famines* is a book worth reading. Keneally discusses three Famines (the Irish potato blight, the Bengal famine of 1943-4 and the recurring Ethiopian famines) in the context of ideology, policy, and the amazing lack of empathy decision-makers have for the poor. He finds a common thread in these crises, including the physical and psychological effects on the people who suffer but also in the ways in which famine is responded to by governments and aid organizations. While Keneally does not go as in depth on the Bengal famine as Madhusree Mukerjee (in her book *Churchill's Secret War*) or on the Irish famine as in many other works, his knowledge of and description of the Ethiopian famines is top-notch. The book is a very easy read (though the content is hard to get through for the empathetic). I would have liked to divine more "outrage" but very likely Keneally feels it but wants the reader to find it her/himself. I recommend this book without hesitation.

I found this work to be both scholarly and readable. It lays blame for famines directly where it needs to be, centralized governments. It also shows the physical, cultural, and personal effects of starvation on different groups. Very informative and fascinating book.

Thomas Keneally, in his recent book *Three Famines*, takes a rather clinical approach to mass starvation. The reader expecting any sentimentality toward the victims of such eras will not find it here. Readers will, however, come away with a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to famines. Keneally makes his points through revisiting the potato famine in Ireland, the Bengal starvation in 1942, and the Ethiopian experience with intermittent famines later in the century. He makes the case that each of the three resulted from the ideology and mindsets of governmental leaders, racial perception, and administrative bungling or malfeasance. Segments of the book are not for the faint of heart, but a reading of this volume will open and inform the minds of all who take the time for it.

I thought this book was a bit chaotic and tried to make analogies that were broad enough to be more than obvious. By using famine's that were all over the place historically it was hard to analyze what extraneous pressures came to bear on the institutions and people responsible for the catastrophes. The initial descriptions of the effects of hunger were extremely enlightening but the rest of the book was a jumble of ideas and histories and did not form any cohesive argument.

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