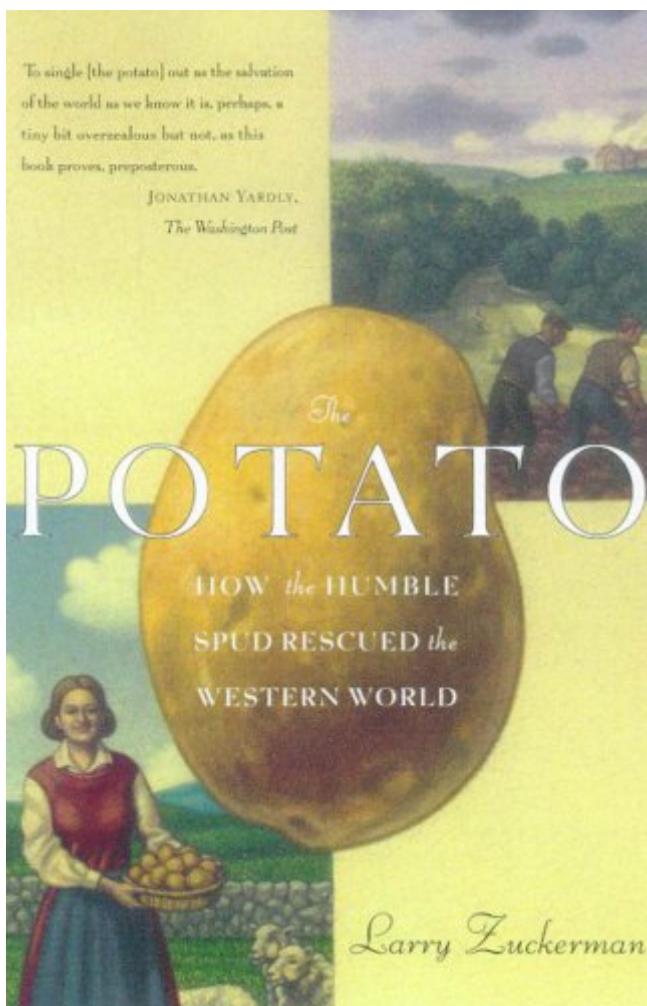


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# The Potato: How The Humble Spud Rescued The Western World



## **Synopsis**

The Potato tells the story of how a humble vegetable, once regarded as trash food, had as revolutionary an impact on Western history as the railroad or the automobile. Using Ireland, England, France, and the United States as examples, Larry Zuckerman shows how daily life from the 1770s until World War I would have been unrecognizable-perhaps impossible-without the potato, which functioned as fast food, famine insurance, fuel and labor saver, budget stretcher, and bank loan, as well as delicacy. Drawing on personal diaries, contemporaneous newspaper accounts, and other primary sources, this is popular social history at its liveliest and most illuminating.

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## **Customer Reviews**

"Potato: How the Humble Spud Rescued the Western World," by Larry Zuckerman, North Point Press, NY, 1998. This 320 p. paperback tells the story of the potato, but the focus is the Irish potato famine of the late 1840s. The potato was discovered by the Spanish in South America in 1537, but was not adopted in Europe until the late 18th Century. The book contrasts the spread of potato

cultivation in Ireland, Britain, France and the USA. The potato was especially well adapted to the Irish climate, where the poor often farmed a typical 5 acre plot. High productivity favored potato growing. Six tons of potatoes would support a family of six for a year. High rents and absentee landlords squeezed the poor. Population growth, large families, and early marriage contributed to the problem. The population was dependent on potatoes. When potato blight struck (1845-49), millions starved. A simultaneous cholera epidemic added to the disaster. The population in Ireland fell by half. In 1883, a mixture of copper sulfate and lime proved an effective fungicide that controlled potato blight. The Penalty Laws which blocked land ownership are mentioned, but the book does not mention the suspension of the laws of primogenitor, which caused farms to be divided into ever smaller plots. Zuckerman dismisses the Corn Laws, supporting high grain prices, as symbolic. These laws suggest the British intended to starve Irish Catholics. (Meanwhile, high spirited American colonists went to war over taxes on their tea.) In England, class differentials labeled root crops, including the potato, as food for animals or the poor. Along with the tomato, also of the nightshade family, both were thought to be poisonous. Meat was the traditional food, and meat sauces made with animal fats were popular. The "meat and potato" diet came about only slowly, but potatoes appear in some reports in mid-18th Century. That seemed to correlate with the construction of canals making wider distribution of bulky products practical. Potatoes were generally accepted by all classes by 1795, as an important auxiliary to bread. Baked potatoes were sold on the streets of London beginning in the 1820s. They were sometimes purchased as hand warmers in winter. In France, the potato was initially regarded with disgust. Grain was preferred. Parmentier promoted growing potatoes. He had been a prisoner of the Prussians during the Seven Years War (1756-63), and survived on a diet of potatoes. After failure of the French grain crop in 1788, Louis XIV had a pamphlet on potato cultivation distributed. After more resistance, potato cultivation finally took hold in the time of Napoleon (early 1800s). In the US, Irish potatoes were known by the 1760s, but reports easily confuse them with Spanish potatoes, i.e., sweet potatoes and yams. Although some were reported earlier, they may have been popularized by the Irish who fled the potato famine. Other immigrants such as the Scots may have contributed to their acceptance. The book includes an extensive discussion of American rural diet focusing on corn and salt pork or bacon, but with no mention of the kitchen garden. There is no mention of Burpees (from 1876) or Gurney's, traditional purveyors of garden seeds. Eventually the Burbank potato became the Russet. The potato chip was invented in Saratoga Springs, NY, in 1850. It was supplied commercially in barrels beginning in 1895, and in wax paper bags beginning in the 1930s. French fries (or pommes frites) originated in France around 1870. The story of their importation to the US is omitted. (World War I

GIs brought them back from Belgium where they were served with mayonnaise.) The story of J.R. Simplot, developer of dehydrated potatoes, instant mashed potatoes, and frozen French fries, is omitted. Fish and chips began in England in about 1900. Their popularity signified the acceptance of fresh fish in the working class diet. Zuckerman tells parts of the story of the potato quite well, but coverage is spotty. Much of the story of the discovery, transportation to Europe, and gradual acceptance is missing. The book seems to jump to the middle of the story-its acceptance in Ireland contrasted with other parts of Northern Europe. Yet, the potato first arrived in Southern Europe. The book tells a compelling story, but the depth of the research seems inconsistent. One suspects other books are more complete. Notes, bibliography, index.

Easy read, good book.

Cool book on history of the potato-a different way to look at history worth a read. Relaxing and full of keen info.

This was pretty good. The author ended up saying the same thing over and over again as it appeared to me he was cobbling a bunch of independent writings together into a book. It was very interesting though.

I got interested in potatoes during a visit to their homeland in Peru. This book gives a great account of how they moved from the Andean highlands to our dinner table.

The book spent too much time on the social effects and implications of the potato and the Irish Potato Famine, What about Poland, Germany and Russia? Multiple "cultivars" were mentioned but not explained, etc.

While i really liked this book and found it full of useful information and insightful analysis, i also found the book very disappointing. I was disappointed by his treatment of the pre-Colombian aspects of the potato's history. We find out little about the origins of the potato, its importance and uses in pre-Colombian South America, etc. (They are part of the Western World) We also find little about the potato itself. The book is Eurocentric and just a social history. These are both shortcomings of the book and strengths. Zuckerman, who writes quite well, provides us with a tremendous social history of the potato in a few countries: France, England, Ireland and the US. The book ranges far

and weaves a complex historical story with great explanations. Just the discussion on how social attitudes towards the potato is worth the cost of the book. I would recommend this book, but be forewarned that it is a limited social history.

The print is very small in this factual book, which covers the daily diets of the majority of people in Europe for a few centuries. We can be glad all over again that we did not live in the old days. Importing the potato from the Andes took some time to catch on, and only the fact of it thriving in Europe's conditions made it popular. Europe ate grain, meaning wheat bread if people could get it. When they couldn't, because of price or growing conditions, they ate rye bread or oats. The bread couldn't be baked every day in a cottage, because they hadn't ovens, and they hadn't fuel. Baking was done once every two or three weeks, often communally, and the bread was always eaten with a soup or something in which to sop it as it would have gone rock hard. There's no mention of the medieval trencher, a half-loaf placed on the table in front of a diner and onto which a stew was ladled. When potatoes came along, and emerged from gardens, they were shunned by the wealthy because wealthy people ate meats and fruits, not muddy roots. But the good crop, ease of growing and harvesting and the ease of baking or boiling made potatoes popular with cottage dwellers. Potatoes could also be fed to pigs, as could the peels. We get good contrasts between Irish and English circumstances, including factory workers' conditions, followed by an enlightening look at the French. I can only really comment on the Irish and would add a few points - the author probably had to discard much salient information to keep the book at a reasonable length. We're told that the Irish landscape had been denuded of trees for cask making. Actually, Cromwell ordered all the native forests felled so that rebellious Irish could not gain shelter and supplies from them. The oak was used to make Elizabeth's navy. Casks would have been made too, in order to ship the immense amount of foodstuffs out of Ireland annually. Oats are mentioned as being grown but not eaten so often as in Scotland. The Irish farmers had their horses requisitioned during the Napoleonic wars and were given donkeys instead, imported from Spain. Hence the oats were shipped out of Ireland for feeding horses in England while donkeys ate rough grazing. In Scotland the latitude is too high for wheat so oats had to support the people. Potatoes introduced a new factor to the demographics as we are shown; a larger family size could be supported on increasingly smaller plots of land. During the awful famine times after the fungal blight hit the potato, I felt the author should have provided bills of lading, or an annual tally, of the immense amount of beef, grain, dairy and other foods being shipped out of Ireland by English landlords while her people starved. He does note that the famine did not strike equally, but in some areas where the ground was good, nobody was

dependent on the potato, and it would be fair to say that there was no famine there. Some landlords made work, like building roads or barns, so the people could earn. But the author fails to show the turning point at which evictions were commonplace - barricaded doors being broken, families removed and roofs burnt - because the landlords felt there would be more profit and less work in sheep rather than late rents. Wool made clothes, particularly uniforms, which England always needed. By contrast Americans seem to have never gone hungry, but embraced the potato as one more addition to the table. I would have added a reference from Dana's account *Two Years Before The Mast*, in which a ship that has been weeks at sea meets another and trades for sacks of potatoes and onions; these restore men struck with scurvy and every man enjoys them raw or cooked. We see how potatoes made it to the standard table in a household looking for convenience, and how the chip as we call it - French fry to the American author - and the crisp - chip to the author - came into popularity. Both depended on enough oil, heat and deep pans for frying. I'd have liked a photo of the forty kinds of potatoes of all colours, shapes and sizes grown in the Andes today, some of which may be better adapted to climate change. I would have thought a way to conclude would be with the development of the modern supermarket potato, which needs no peeling because it doesn't have a tough leathery dirty-looking skin, which comes cleaned, graded, bagged and mercifully free of the muck and stones that used to plague my mother when she bought from the supermarket up the road. Thanks very much to Larry Zuckerman for wading through all the research so we don't have to, and putting together a fine comparative study of how our ancestors lived, died, and ate potatoes.

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