

## Compassionate Stranger: Asenath Nicholson and the Great Irish Famine

**Maureen O'Rourke Murphy**

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After decades of misrule, mass unemployment and widespread poverty, Ireland was brought to her knees in 1845 by an invisible assailant: *Phytophthora infestans*, potato blight. At the time, potatoes fed two-thirds of Ireland's 8.1 million people. Potatoes were the one crop most capable of supporting extended families on small plots of land, and by 1852, one million people had starved and another million fled the island.

In *Compassionate Stranger*, we meet Vermont-born Asenath Nicholson, a battle-tested crusader against slavery, alcohol, meat eating, and other social ills of the early to mid-1800s in New York City, who boarded a three-masted schooner and sailed to Ireland as a woman in her fifties to help the poor. Arriving in the summer of 1844, she spent much of the next five years walking the Irish countryside alone. The devastating famine compelled her to write *Ireland's Welcome to the Stranger* (1847), with hopes that it would bring much-needed help to the Irish poor. Her book further served as an indictment against reprehensible official policies related to land, employment, and famine relief.

*Compassionate Stranger* is authored by Maureen O'Rourke Murphy, the director of New York State's Great Irish Famine Curriculum.

MATT SUTHERLAND (Winter 2015)

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