

TOPIC: Pre-Famine Ireland

SUBJECT/GRADE LEVEL: Social Studies, Grade Level 9.

TITLE: Travelers in Pre-Famine Ireland

AIM QUESTION: How did contemporary travelers view living conditions in pre-famine Ireland?

NEW YORK STATE SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS:

World History: Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in world history, and examine the broad sweep of history from a variety of perspectives.

Geography: Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of the geography of the interdependent world in which we live -- local, national and global -- including the distribution of people, places and environments over the Earth's surface.

Economics: Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of how the United States and other societies develop economic systems and associated institutions to allocate scarce resources, how major decision-making units function in the U.S. and other national economies, and how an economy solves the scarcity problem through market and non-market mechanisms.

TEACHER BACKGROUND: According to the 1841 Irish census, out of a population of over 8 million people, 5.5 million (approximately two-thirds) depended on agriculture for their livelihoods. Most people lived on very small rented plots of land and lived close to the margin for survival. Forty-five percent of the farms over an acre in size were under five acres. Only seven percent were more than thirty acres. Many areas of Ireland were densely populated. There were 217 people per square mile of arable (farmable) land in Ireland as a whole. Ulster-Armagh was the most densely populated county with 511 people per square mile. Mayo, a remote area of Ireland with much relatively infertile land had 475 people to the square mile. In comparison, England had proportionately only half as many people involved in agriculture and produced twice as much per family. Agricultural production was similar in France and Ireland, but French farms had to support 40 percent fewer people.

Activity Sheet A is designed for individual work in class or as a full class activity. Activity B has extended quotations and is designed for use by an individual student outside of class or for a group activity that has teams of students report back to class on the different documents examining conditions in pre-famine Ireland from multiple perspectives.

REFLECTION: Teachers recommended using edited, adapted or rewritten versions of documents depending on lesson goals and performance level of students. See discussion of the use of differentiated texts. High school teachers used this lesson to review concepts like poverty, prosperity, justice, injustice, and oppression.

AIM: How did contemporary travelers view living conditions in pre-famine Ireland?

ASSESSMENT:

- Students will demonstrate the importance of examining and respecting multiple perspectives when explaining historical events.
- Students will demonstrate the ability to examine and explain the significance of primary source documents.
- Students will demonstrate the ability to explain and address bias in personal accounts of the past.

DO NOW ACTIVITY: Read ACTIVITY SHEET A: Ireland before the Famine: An Economic Overview, Part A and answer questions 1-5.

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY: Did you ever visit another country? state? city? How much did you learn about the place while you were there? In your opinion, can your observations based on your visit be considered expert testimony about life there? How about your views of the city, town, or neighborhood where you live? How much do you know? Whose judgment do you trust?

TRANSITIONAL ACTIVITY: What else would you need to know about a place to supplement personal accounts before you could make judgments about the quality of life there?

ACTIVITIES:

- Examine ACTIVITY SHEET A: Ireland before the Famine: An Economic Overview, Part A. Key questions:

- 1- How many people lived in Ireland according to the 1841 census?
- 2- Approximately what percentage of the Irish people depended on agriculture for their livelihoods in 1841?
- 3- In your opinion, why was high population density a problem in pre-famine Ireland?
- 4- How were conditions different for people engaged in agriculture in Ireland, England and France?

- Examine ACTIVITY SHEET B: Multiple Perspectives on Conditions in Pre-Famine Ireland. For each passage, select between one and three key words that summarize

the description of pre-famine Ireland (eg., poverty, prosperity, justice, oppression, etc.). Discuss student choices of key words.

- Divide class into teams. Each team examines a different passage from ACTIVITY SHEET B: Multiple Perspectives on Conditions in Pre-Famine Ireland, answers the questions that accompany the passage, and reports to the class on what they learned about pre-famine Ireland from the passage.

SUMMARY QUESTION: Based on these accounts, what were living conditions like for farm families in pre-famine Ireland?

HOMEWORK: Write a description of the community where you live as if you were a visitor from another country. In your account, describe the people, their culture, physical conditions, and any potential problems.

HOMEWORK or TEST: Use ACTIVITY SHEET C to write a Scaffolded Document-based essay.

Essay Question: What are conditions like for poor people in Ireland at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries?

APPLICATION: In your opinion, how reliable are personal accounts? Are you concerned about bias? Explain.

PROJECT: Use the description of the community where you live as the starting point to write a broader report about life in your community. In your report, include information from local newspapers, statistical information about the community, and information from interviews with long-time community residents.

ACTIVITY SHEET A: Ireland before the Famine: An Economic Overview

According to the 1841 Irish census:

- * Out of a population of over 8 million people, 5.5 million (approximately two-thirds) depended on agriculture for their livelihoods.
- * Most people lived on very small rented plots of land and lived close to the margin for survival.
- * Forty-five percent of the farms over an acre in size were under five acres. Only seven percent were more than thirty acres.
- * Many areas of Ireland were densely populated. There were over 200 people per square mile of arable land (land that is capable of supporting farming) in Ireland as a whole.
- * Ulster-Armagh was the most densely populated county with 511 people per square mile.
- * County Mayo, a remote area of Ireland with much relatively infertile land and little other work had 475 people to the square mile.
- * In comparison, England had proportionately only half as many people involved in agriculture and produced twice as much per family. Agricultural production was similar in France and Ireland, but French farms had to support 40 percent fewer people.

Questions

- 1- How many people lived in Ireland according to the 1841 census?
- 2- Approximately what percentage of the Irish people depended on agriculture for their livelihoods in 1841?
- 3- In your opinion, why was high population density a problem in pre-famine Ireland?
- 4- How were conditions different for people engaged in agriculture in Ireland, England and France?

(EDITED VERSION)

ACTIVITY SHEET B: Multiple Perspectives on Conditions in Pre-Famine Ireland
Examine passages A-F. For each passage, select between one and three key words that summarize the description of pre-famine Ireland. Sample key words include poverty, prosperity, justice, injustice, oppress, improve, etc.

A) Arthur Young, *A Tour in Ireland*, 1770. Source: Stephen Campbell (1994). *The Great Irish Famine*. County Roscommon Famine Museum.

"A better treatment of the poor in Ireland is a very material point to the welfare of the whole British Empire. Events may happen which may convince us fatally of this truth - if not, oppression must have broken all the spirit and resentment of men. By what policy the government of England can for so many years have permitted such an absurd system to be matured in Ireland, is beyond the power of plain sense to discover."

B) Benjamin Franklin, Letter to Joshua Babcock, January 13, 1772. Source: *The Life and Letters of Benjamin Franklin*. Eau Claire, WI: E. M. Hale and Co.

"I have lately made a tour through Ireland and Scotland. In those countries, a small part of the society are landlords, great noblemen, and gentlemen, extremely opulent, living in the highest affluence and magnificence. The bulk of the people are tenants, extremely poor, living in the most sordid wretchedness, in dirty hovels of mud and straw, and clothed only in rags."

C) Isaac Weld, *Statistical Survey of Roscommon*, 1832. Source: Stephen Campbell (1994). *The Great Irish Famine*. County Roscommon Famine Museum.

"The hovels which the poor people were building as I passed, solely by their own efforts, were of the most abject description; their walls were formed, in several instances, by the backs of fences; the floors sunk in the ditches; the height scarcely enough for a man to stand upright; poles not thicker than a broomstick for support; a few pieces of grass sods the only covering; and these extending only partially over the thing called a roof; the elderly people miserably clothed; the children all but naked."

D) First report of inquiry into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland, 1836
Source: R. Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams, eds. (1956). *The Great Famine*. Dublin: Browne and Nolan.

"Cabins of single rooms are there frequently occupied by a large family, with sometimes a widow or an old man lodging with them, or occupied altogether by several widows, or by one or more, and one or two old men, and all (pigs included) sleeping in the different corners of the room. The families are those of laborers, who generally get but very little employment; and the old men and widows subsist chiefly by begging. . . . A number of these cabins are situated in little courts at the back of the main row of cabins which form the front street or road. These courts are seldom more than six or seven feet wide, and that space, which forms the only passage or entrance to the cabins, is usually blocked up with heaps of manure made by the pigs, and with the rubbish and filth thrown out of the houses at the very doors."

E) Testimony of Widow Kilboy to the commissioners of the Poor Inquiry, 1836 Source: Stephen Campbell (1994). *The Great Irish Famine*. County Roscommon Famine Museum.

"When earning nothing, persons who are in the habit of employing me have lent me money to be repaid in work when they would have employment for me. At such times we have lived on one meal of dry potatoes in the day. I and my for children have often lived on eight stone of potatoes for the whole week; about sixteen stone would be sufficient for us. . . I am not able to clothe my children; the wages I can earn are too little even to buy potatoes for them; but the people that employ me. . . are kind enough to help me now and then with a little food or seeds beyond my wages."

F) Gustave de Beaumont, *Ireland: Social, Political and Religious*, 1839
Source: Peter Gray (1995). *The Irish Famine*. New York: Abrams.

"Misery, naked, and famishing, that misery which is vagrant, idle, and mendicant, covers the entire country . . . it follows you everywhere, and besieges you incessantly . . . and if the voice does not excite profound pity, it importunes and terrifies you."

(ADAPTED VERSION)

ACTIVITY SHEET B: Multiple Perspectives on Conditions in Pre-Famine Ireland
Examine passages A-F. For each passage, select between one and three key words that summarize the description of pre-famine Ireland. Sample key words include poverty, prosperity, justice, injustice, oppress, improve, etc.

A) Arthur Young, *A Tour in Ireland*, 1770. Source: Stephen Campbell (1994). *The Great Irish Famine*. County Roscommon Famine Museum.

Better treatment of the poor in Ireland is important to the welfare of the whole British Empire. Events may happen which may convince us fatally of this truth. Oppression breaks the spirit and causes resentment. By what policy the government of England can for so many years have permitted such an absurd system to exist in Ireland, is beyond the power of plain sense to discover.

B) Benjamin Franklin, Letter to Joshua Babcock, January 13, 1772. Source: *The Life and Letters of Benjamin Franklin*. Eau Claire, WI: E. M. Hale and Co.

I have lately made a tour through Ireland and Scotland. In those countries, a small part of the society are landlords, great noblemen, and gentlemen, extremely wealthy, living in the highest affluence and magnificence. The bulk of the people are tenants, extremely poor, living in the most slum-like conditions, in dirty shacks of mud and straw, and clothed only in rags.

C) Isaac Weld, *Statistical Survey of Roscommon*, 1832. Source: Stephen Campbell (1994). *The Great Irish Famine*. County Roscommon Famine Museum.

The shacks which the poor people were building as I passed were in horrible condition; their walls were formed by the backs of fences; the floors sunk in the ditches; the height scarcely enough for a man to stand upright; poles not thicker than a broomstick for couples; a few pieces of grass sods the only covering; and these extending only partially over the thing called a roof; the elderly people miserably clothed; the children all but naked.

D) First report of inquiry into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland, 1836
Source: R. Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams, eds. (1956). *The Great Famine*. Dublin: Browne and Nolan.

Single rooms are frequently occupied by a large family. Sometimes a widow or an old man lives with them. All (pigs included) sleeping in the different corners of the

room. The families are those of laborers, who get very little employment; the old men and widows survive by begging. . . . A number of these cabins are situated in little courts at the back of the main row of cabins. These courts are seldom more than six or seven feet wide, and that space, which forms the only passage or entrance to the cabins, is usually blocked up with heaps of manure made by the pigs, and with the rubbish and filth thrown out of the houses at the very doors.

E) Testimony of Widow Kilboy to the commissioners of the Poor Inquiry, 1836 Source: Stephen Campbell (1994). *The Great Irish Famine*. County Roscommon Famine Museum.

Persons who are in the habit of employing me have lent me money to be repaid in work when they have employment. We live on one meal of dry potatoes in the day. I and my for children have often lived on eight stone of potatoes for the whole week; about sixteen stone would be sufficient for us. . . I am not able to clothe my children; the wages I can earn are too little even to buy potatoes for them; but the people that employ me. . . are kind enough to help me now and then with a little food or seeds beyond my wages.

F) Gustave de Beaumont, *Ireland: Social, Political and Religious*, 1839 Source: Peter Gray (1995). *The Irish Famine*. New York: Abrams.

Misery covers the entire country . . . it follows you everywhere, and besieges you constantly. . . and if the voice does not cause pity, it terrifies you.

(REWRITTEN VERSION)

ACTIVITY SHEET B: Multiple Perspectives on Conditions in Pre-Famine Ireland
Examine passages A-F. For each passage, select between one and three key words that summarize the description of pre-famine Ireland. Sample key words include poverty, prosperity, justice, injustice, oppress, improve, etc.

A) Arthur Young, *A Tour in Ireland*, 1770. Source: Stephen Campbell (1994). *The Great Irish Famine*. County Roscommon Famine Museum.

Better treatment of poor people in Ireland is important to entire British Empire. If things do not get better in Ireland, there will be serious trouble. Oppression breaks people's spirit and causes resentment. I do not understand why the government of England has allowed these problems to continue for so many years.

B) Benjamin Franklin, Letter to Joshua Babcock, January 13, 1772. Source: *The Life and Letters of Benjamin Franklin*. Eau Claire, WI: E. M. Hale and Co.

I have lately made a tour through Ireland. A small part of the society are landlords, great noblemen, and gentlemen. They are extremely wealthy and live in the highest affluence. Most of the people are tenants. They are extremely poor. They living in the most slum-like conditions, in dirty shacks of mud and straw, and clothed in rags.

C) Isaac Weld, *Statistical Survey of Roscommon*, 1832. Source: Stephen Campbell (1994). *The Great Irish Famine*. County Roscommon Famine Museum.

I walked passed people who were building shacks to live in. They live in horrible conditions. Walls were made from the back of fences. Floors sunk into ditches. The ceilings were so low that a man could not stand up straight. The poles holding up the roof were as thin as broomstick. There was only dirt and grass to cover the walls. Inside the shacks, elderly people wore old clothing and children were almost naked.

D) First report of inquiry into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland, 1836 Source: R. Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams, eds. (1956). *The Great Famine*. Dublin: Browne and Nolan.

Single rooms are occupied by a large family. Sometimes a widow or an old man lives with them. All (pigs included) sleep in different corners of the room. Irish workers cannot find jobs. The old men and widows survive by begging. Rows of cabins are crowded together. The space between the rows is six feet wide. It is usually

blocked by heaps of manure made by the pigs and by garbage thrown out of the houses.

E) Testimony of Widow Kilboy to the commissioners of the Poor Inquiry, 1836 Source: Stephen Campbell (1994). The Great Irish Famine. County Roscommon Famine Museum.

When I cannot find work I have to borrow so my family can live. We have one meal of dry potatoes a day. I and my for children often live on eight stone of potatoes for the whole week, even though we really need sixteen stone. I am not able to clothe my children. My wages are too little even to buy potatoes for them. The people who employ me are kind enough to help me now and then with a little food or seeds beyond my wages.

F) Gustave de Beaumont, Ireland: Social, Political and Religious, 1839 Source: Peter Gray (1995). The Irish Famine. New York: Abrams.

The country of Ireland is covered by misery. Poverty follows you everywhere. You can never escape from it. Sometimes you pity the poor people. Sometimes you are terrified by what you see in Ireland.

ACTIVITY SHEET C - Scaffolded Document-based Essay Question

Essay Question: What are conditions like for poor people in Ireland at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries?

Procedure:

1. Read the passages describing pre-famine Ireland and answer the questions that follow each passage.
2. Use your answers to the questions to write an essay. In your essay, be sure to refer to each of the four documents.

A) Arthur Young, an English agriculturist and writer, toured Ireland from 1776-1780 (adapted from Peter Gray, *The Irish Famine*, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995).

I made many enquiries concerning the state of the lower classes (poor), and found that in some respects they were in good circumstances, in others indifferent; they have, generally speaking, such plenty of potatoes, as always to command a bellyful; they have flax, enough for all their linen, most of them have a cow and some two, and spin wool enough for their clothes; all a pig, and numbers of poultry, and in general the complete family of cows, calves, hogs, poultry, and children; fuel they have the utmost plenty; great numbers of families are also supported by the neighbouring lakes; which abound prodigiously with fish.

Reverse the medal: they are ill clothed, and make a wretched appearance, and what is worse, are much oppressed by many who make them pay too dear for keeping a cow or horse. They have a practice also of keeping accounts with the labourers, contriving by that means, to let the poor wretches have very little cash for their year's work. This is a great oppression.

Questions

- 1- How does Arthur Young describe the condition of peasants in pre-famine Ireland?
- 2- In your opinion, are conditions described by Young more positive or negative? Explain your answer.
- 3- In your opinion, what is Mr. Young's purpose in writing this book about his tour of Ireland? Explain your answer.

B) Benjamin Franklin, a leader of the American Revolution, visited Ireland while he was representing the colonies in London. This is from a letter to Joshua Babcock, January 13, 1772. Source: *The Life and Letters of Benjamin Franklin*. Eau Claire, WI: E. M. Hale and Co.

“I have lately made a tour through Ireland and Scotland. In those countries, a small part of the society are landlords, great noblemen, and gentlemen, extremely opulent, living in the highest affluence and magnificence. The bulk of the people are tenants, extremely poor, living in the most sordid wretchedness, in dirty hovels of mud and straw, and clothed only in rags.

I thought often of the happiness of New England, where every man is a freeholder, has a vote in public affairs, lives in a tidy, warm house, has plenty of good food and fuel, with whole clothes from head to foot, the manufacture, perhaps, of his own family. Long may they continue in their situation! But, if they should ever envy the trade of these countries, I can put them in a way to share of it. Let them, with three fourths of the people of Ireland, live the year round on potatoes and buttermilk, without shirts, then may their merchants export beef, butter, and linen.

Farther, if my countrymen should ever wish for the honor of having among them a gentry enormously wealthy, let them sell their farms and pay racked rent; the scale of landlords will rise, as that of the tenant is depressed, who will soon become poor, tattered, dirty, and abject in spirit. Had I never been in the American colonies, but were to form my judgment of civil society by what I have lately seen, I should never advise a nation of savages to admit of civilization; for I assure you, that, in the possession and enjoyment of the various comforts of life, compared to these people, every Indian is a gentleman, and the effect of this kind of civil society seems to be, the depressing multitudes below the savage state, that a few may be raised above it.”

Questions

- 1- How does Benjamin Franklin describe the condition of peasants in pre-famine Ireland?
- 2- In your opinion, why does Mr. Franklin suggest that his fellow countrymen need to experience the conditions in Ireland?
- 3- In your opinion, what is Mr. Franklin’s purpose in writing this letter about his tour of Ireland? Explain your answer.

C) Chevalier de La Tocnaye, a French nobleman, wrote about social unrest in Ireland by the "White Boys" in the 1790s (adapted from Peter Gray, *The Irish Famine*, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995).

In every country of the world the peasant pays tithe (church tax) with reluctance. In Ireland it seems to me a more vexatious (worse) tax than elsewhere, for the great mass of the people being Catholic, it seems to them hard that they should be obliged to maintain a minister who is often the only Protestant in the parish. Beyond the ordinary tithe he has a right, over nearly the whole of Ireland, to one-tenth of the milk of a cow, one-tenth of the eggs, and one-tenth of the vegetables of the gardens. One can easily understand that these conditions may be very severe when the minister exacts his dues in kind, and especially when these poor miserable folk have, as well, to supply a subsistence for their own priests.

They have often made complaints and claims in connection with this subject. From complaints and claims the peasants come to threats, and from threats to the execution of the things threatened. They assembled at night in great numbers in certain parts of Ireland, and in order that they might recognize each other safely, they wore their shirts outside their clothes. From this came the name White Boys. In this garb they overran the country, breaking the doors and gates of ministers' houses, and if they could catch the cattle they mutilated them by cutting off their tails and ears. All the time they did no other violent act, and a traveler might have gone through the country with perfect security. For different offenses of the kind indicated the magistrates of Wexford arrested a score or so of the culprits, and immured them in the town prison. Their comrades demanded their liberation, and were not able to obtain it. They threatened then to come and free them by force, and advanced on the town to the number of two or three thousand.

The Major in charge imprudently advanced before his soldiers in order to speak with the White Boys, and after some lively discussions, he received a blow from a scythe (sharp farm tool) which laid him dead. Immediately on seeing this the soldiers fired, and in two or three minutes the whole force of the White Boys was broken up and put to flight, leaving behind them several hundreds dead. A few of the unfortunates who were wounded, fearing the punishment which would follow if they should be taken dragged themselves as well as they could into the corn-fields and hedges, and there perished miserably.

After this battle nothing has been heard of the rebellious peasants, and the country has been quiet. This revolt seems to me to be in little, a perfect parallel to the Revolution in France in its beginnings.

Questions

- 1- Why do Irish Catholic farmers object to the church tax?
- 2- Why were the protesters called the "White Boys"?
- 3- How did the "White Boys" protest against the church tax?
- 4- Why did the demonstration turn violent?
- 5- Why does Chevalier de La Tocnaye compare these protests to the beginning of the French Revolution? Do you agree or disagree? Explain your answers.

C) John Carr was an English travel writer. He published this account of Irish dependence on the potato in 1806 (adapted from Peter Gray, *The Irish Famine*, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995). A "guinea" was an English coin.

An Irish cabin, in general, is like a little antediluvian (ancient) ark; for husband, wife and children, cow and calf, pigs, poultry, dog, and frequently cat, repose (sleep) under the same roof in perfect amity. In eighty-seven cabins there were one hundred and twenty full grown pigs, and forty-seven dogs. The rent of cabin and potato plot in the county of Wicklow and neighbourhood, is from one to two guineas; the family live upon potatoes and butter-milk six days in the week. The Sabbath is generally celebrated by bacon and greens.

Insufficiency of provision, which operates so powerfully against marriage in England, is not known or cared about in Ireland. Want of an establishment (lack of a home) never affects the brain of the enamoured rustic (farmer). Love lingers only until he can find a dry bank, pick a few sticks, knead a little mud with straw, and raise a hut about six feet high, with a door to let in the light and let out the smoke; these accomplished, the happy pair, united by their priest, enter their dwelling, and a rapid race of chubby boys and girls soon proves by what scanty means life can be sustained. Upon an average, a man, his wife, and four children, will eat thirty-seven pounds of potatoes a day.

Questions

- 1- Why does John Carr compare an Irish cabin to a "little antediluvian ark"?
- 2- How does Mr. Carr compare marriage in England and Ireland?
- 3- In your opinion, what is Mr. Carr's purpose in writing this article? Explain your answer.

D) Gustave de Beaumont was a French sociologist who traveled in Ireland and wrote about the state of the Irish poor (adapted from Peter Gray, *The Irish Famine*, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995).

I have seen the Indian in his forests, and the negro (*sic*) in his chains, and thought, as I contemplated their pitiable condition, that I saw the very extreme of human wretchedness; but I did not then know the condition of unfortunate Ireland. Like the Indian, the Irishman is poor and naked; but he lives in the midst of a society where luxury is eagerly sought, and where wealth is honored. Like the Indian, he is destitute of the physical comforts which human industry and the commerce of nations procure, but he sees a part of his fellows enjoying the comforts to which he cannot aspire. In the midst of his greatest distress, the Indian preserves a certain independence, which has its dignity and its charms. Though indigent and famished, he is still free, and the sense of this liberty alleviates many of his sufferings: the Irishman undergoes the same destitution without possessing the same liberty; he is subject to rules and restrictions of every sort: he is dying of hunger, and restrained by law. The Irishman is not quite so much to be bewailed (pitied) as the Indian or the slave. Still, at the present day, he has neither the liberty of the savage, nor the bread of servitude.

In all countries, more or less, paupers may be discovered; but an entire nation of paupers is what was never seen until it was shown in Ireland. To explain the social condition of such a country, it would be only necessary to recount its miseries and its sufferings; the history of the poor is the history of Ireland.

Questions

- 1- Why does Gustave de Beaumont compare Irishmen with Native Americans and enslaved Africans?
- 2- Why does Beaumont argue that in some ways, no people in the world are as badly off as the Irish?
- 3- Do you agree or disagree with Beaumont? Explain your answer.