

TOPIC: Impact of the Great Irish Famine

SUBJECT/GRADE LEVEL: Social Studies, Grade Level 10.

TITLE: Impact on Ireland

AIM QUESTION: How did famine change life in 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: The Great Irish Famine had a wide ranging impact on life in Ireland. In this lesson, students examine changes in customs in response to the famine. Death was a central ritual in Irish community life where the community mourned following a ritual pattern of gathering, speaking about the dead, comforting the family and burying the dead within the rites of the Catholic Church. One special feature of Irish death customs was the caoine (pronounced "keen"), a spontaneous song with traditional elements sung by women.

REFLECTION: The use of pictures as historical documents make this a very powerful lesson. 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.

AIM: How did famine change life in Ireland?

ASSESSMENT:

- Students will demonstrate an understanding of cause and effect in history and the ability to support conclusions based on an evaluation of evidence through individual and group writing assignments and during group and class discussions.
- 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 explore the use of poetry and songs in the creation of metaphors for understanding historical events and the use of historical events as symbolizes in an examination of the human condition.
- Students will demonstrate the ability to apply an understanding of historical events to explain contemporary problems.

DO NOW ACTIVITY: Examine Frederick Burton's painting "Death of an Aran Child."

Write a paragraph describing what you see in the picture.

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY: Discuss the painting by Frederick Burton. What do you notice about the picture? What is the response of each of the parents? What about the rest of the figures? It is clear that the child's death has brought people together for some sort of ritual? What do we learn about the impact of the Great Irish Famine on life in Ireland?

TRANSITIONAL ACTIVITY: Every family and every people have special rituals that they observe. What special rituals does your family have? What does your family , church or community do when someone dies? What customs and rituals have you experienced or do you know about? Why are such customs important to surviving families and friends? Why are ritual and culture important in people's lives?

ACTIVITY:

- Death was a central ritual in Irish community life where the community mourned following a ritual pattern of gathering, speaking about the dead, comforting the family and burying the dead within the rites of the Catholic Church. One special feature of Irish death customs was the caoine (pronounced "keen"), a spontaneous song with traditional elements sung by women. Having observed the highly ritualized treatment of death in the Burton painting, look at the engraving of the famine dead being removed for hasty burial sometimes into mass graves. Contrast the two treatments of death. Famines have not only individual and family casualties; whole communities are spiritually as well as physically destroyed

- Read ACTIVITY SHEET: Hospitality Rewarded. Key questions: In your opinion, why does the woman offer food to the stranger? What is the main idea of this story? What do we learn about the values of famine-era Ireland from this story?

- ACTIVITY SHEET: Skibbereen. Who is Mr. Nicolas Cummins? Why is he upset by what he discovers in Skibbereen? How has famine overwhelmed the ability of the Irish people to respond?

SUMMARY QUESTION: How did the Great Irish Famine change people's attitudes toward life and death?

HOMEWORK: 1) Make a list of your family's rituals. 2) Write a paragraph describing each ritual. 3) Write a paragraph explaining why rituals are important in your family.

APPLICATION: Examine pictures of starvation in other parts of the world in other eras. How does famine disrupt people's lives and cultures?

ACTIVITY SHEET: Hospitality Rewarded

Source: Cathal Póirtéir, Famine Echoes. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1995. Collected from Mrs. Hartigan who was born in 1878 in Co. Cork.

There is an incident still related about the famine years. In this district there lived a woman and her husband. They were small farmers. One day the husband and his workman were working not far from the house. Coming on to dinner time the wife got a meal of porridge ready for the three and put the plates on the table.

She then went out to call the men and when she returned, she found a stranger in the kitchen. He was redheaded and of wild hungry appearance. He asked the woman for something to eat as he was starving. She hadn't much in the house besides what was cooked on the plates and she thought of the two men who would be in any moment. She told him he could have a meal.

He cleaned one plate and the greater portion of the second. Then he thanked the woman and left. The husband and the workman came in almost immediately and were asked if they saw a stranger passing. They said they had not. The wife told what had happened, and the husband said it was all right as the one plate of porridge would do for the two of them, and they could make up for it at supper. It was said that from that day on everything prospered with that family - stock, crops, milk, undertakings.

Questions:

- 1- In your opinion, why does the woman offer food to the stranger?
- 2- What is the main idea of this story?
- 3- What do we learn about the values of famine-era Ireland from this story?

(Edited Version)

Skibbereen

This account is from a letter written by Mr. Nicholas Cummins, a government official in County Cork, Ireland. He sent the letter to the Duke of Wellington and it was published in *The London Times*, December 24, 1846. A workhouse opened in Skibbereen in 1842 before the Great Irish Famine. In December, 1848 there were more than one thousand able-bodied men, seven hundred able-bodied women, 1,641 children and 880 aged and infirm people living in the workhouse. The workhouse was so overcrowded that many families simply remained in their homes and waited to die of hunger or disease.

Source: Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger, Ireland 1845-1849* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1962), p. 161-162.

Word Bank: lamentable- heartbreaking; appalling- awful; hamlet- small village; hovels- huts; famished- starving; ghastly- horrible; phantoms- unreal; spectres - ghosts.

Having for many years been intimately connected with the western portion of the County of Cork, and possessing some small property there, I thought it right personally to investigate the truth of several lamentable accounts which had reached me, of the appalling state of misery to which that part of the county was reduced. I accordingly went of the 15th instant to Skibbereen, and to give the instance of one town land which I visited, as an example of the state of the entire coast district, I shall state simply what I there saw. . . . Being aware that I should have to witness scenes of frightful hunger, I provided myself with as much bread as five men could carry, and on reaching the spot I was surprised to find the wretched hamlet apparently deserted. I entered some of the hovels to ascertain the cause, and the scenes which presented themselves were such as no tongue or pen can convey the slightest idea of. In the first, six famished and ghastly skeletons, to all appearances dead, were huddled in a corner on some filthy straw, their sole covering what seemed a ragged horse cloth, their wretched legs hanging about, naked above the knees, I approached with horror, and found by a low moaning that they were alive and were in fever, four children, a woman and what had been a man. It is impossible to go through the detail. Suffice to say, that in a few minutes I was surrounded by at least 200 such phantoms, such frightful spectres as no words can describe, either from famine or from fever. Their demonic yells are still ringing in my ears, and their horrible images are fixed upon my brain.

Questions

- 1- Who is Mr. Nicolas Cummins?
- 2- Why is he upset by what he discovers in Skibbereen?
- 3- How has famine overwhelmed the ability of the Irish people to respond?

(Adapted Version)

Skibbereen

This account is from a letter written by Mr. Nicholas Cummins, a government official in County Cork, Ireland. He sent the letter to the Duke of Wellington and it was published in *The London Times*, December 24, 1846. A workhouse opened in Skibbereen in 1842 before the Great Irish Famine. In December, 1848 there were more than one thousand able-bodied men, seven hundred able-bodied women, 1,641 children and 880 aged and infirm people living in the workhouse. The workhouse was so overcrowded that many families simply remained in their homes and waited to die of hunger or disease.

Source: Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger, Ireland 1845-1849* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1962), p. 161-162.

Having for many years been intimately connected with the western portion of the County of Cork, and possessing some small property there, I thought it right personally to investigate the truth of several heart-breaking accounts which had reached me, of the awful state of misery to which that part of the county was reduced. I accordingly went of the 15th instant to Skibbereen, and to give the instance of one town land which I visited, as an example of the state of the entire coast district, I shall state simply what I there saw. . . . Being aware that I should have to witness scenes of frightful hunger, I provided myself with as much bread as five men could carry, and on reaching the spot I was surprised to find the wretched small village apparently deserted. I entered some of the huts to learn the cause, and the scenes which presented themselves were such as no tongue or pen can convey the slightest idea of. In the first, six starving and horrible skeletons, to all appearances dead, were huddled in a corner on some filthy straw, their sole covering what seemed a ragged horse cloth, their wretched legs hanging about, naked above the knees, I approached with horror, and found by a low moaning that they were alive and were in fever, four children, a woman and what had been a man. It is impossible to go through the detail. In a few minutes I was surrounded by at least 200 such frightful ghosts as no words can describe, either from famine or from fever. Their yells are still ringing in my ears, and their horrible images are fixed upon my brain.

Questions

- 1- Who is Mr. Nicolas Cummins?
- 2- Why is he upset by what he discovers in Skibbereen?
- 3- How has famine overwhelmed the ability of the Irish people to respond?

(Rewritten Version)

Skibbereen

This story is from a letter written by Mr. Nicholas Cummins, a government official in County Cork, Ireland. He sent the letter to the Duke of Wellington and it was published in *The London Times*, December 24, 1846. A workhouse opened in Skibbereen in 1842 before the Great Irish Famine. In December, 1848 there were more than 1,700 healthymen and women, 1,641 children and 880 aged and infirm people living in the workhouse. The workhouse was so overcrowded that many families simply remained in their homes and waited to die of hunger or disease.

Source: Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger, Ireland 1845-1849* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1962), p. 161-162.

Because I own property in the western portion of County Cork, I decided to personally investigate the truth of the heart-breaking stories about the awful state of misery there. Aware of the frightful hunger there, I brought as much bread as five men could carry. I will write you about what I witnessed in the town of Skibbereen.

On reaching the village, I was surprised to find that it seemed to be deserted. I entered some of the huts to learn why. What I saw was more horrible than I can describe using my tongue or pen. In the first hut, I found six starving and horrible skeletons. They were huddled in a corner on some filthy straw covered by an old cloth. I approached them with horror and found by a low moaning that they were alive. There were four children, a woman and a man. They were all sick with fever.

It is impossible to go through all the details of my trip. In a few minutes I was surrounded by at least 200 such frightful ghosts. They were all suffering from famine or from fever. Their yells are still ringing in my ears. Their horrible images are fixed upon my brain.

Questions

- 1- Who is Mr. Nicholas Cummins?
- 2- Why is he upset by what he discovers in Skibbereen?
- 3- How has famine overwhelmed the ability of the Irish people to respond?

