

TOPIC: Impact of the Great Irish Famine

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

TITLE: Documentary History of the Great Irish Famine

AIM QUESTION: How do we measure the impact of an event like the Great Irish Famine?

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: This lesson provides poetic, artistic and documentary descriptions of the impact of the potato blight and the famine on the people of Ireland. It is designed so that student teams examine different sections of the document package and report on their findings to the full class. The goal is to help students create their own metaphors for understanding events of this magnitude.

AIM: How do we measure the impact of an event like the Great Irish Famine?

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 paintings in the creation of metaphors for understanding historical events and the use of historical events as symbolizes in an examination of the human condition.

DO NOW ACTIVITY: Read the excerpt from the poem, The Famine Year (The Stricken Land) by Lady Wilde. What images or metaphors are used in this poem to describe the Great Irish Famine?

'Weary men, what reap ye? Golden corn for the stranger.

What soy ye? Human corpses that wait for the avenger.

Fainting forms, hunger-stricken, what see you in the offing?

Stately ships to bear our food away, amid the stranger's scoffing.

There's a proud array of soldiers -- what do they round your door?

They guard our master's granaries from the thin hands of the poor.

Pale mothers, wherefore weeping?

Would to God that we were dead,

Our children swoon before us, and we cannot give them bread.'

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY: Historical events are evaluated in many different ways.

Historians explore their short term and long term impacts. They look at large scale numbers that give a sense of the magnitude of an event. They also look at personal accounts to understand an event in human terms on ordinary people. A good example of this is The Diary of a Young Girl. It is the story of a Jewish girl, Anne Frank, who is killed during World War II. In your opinion, can historians rely on the accuracy of personal accounts? Is it valid to generalize from one persons description of events or from one persons life experience? Explain.

TRANSITIONAL ACTIVITY: Sometimes art and poetry are useful in explaining an event because they provide us with powerful metaphors that help transform an event of great magnitude into a more human scale. Examine the painting "The Eviction" by Erskine Nicol (1853). Describe the painting. Why is this painting considered a

### 3.5 Great Hunger

powerful metaphor or image of the Great Irish Famine. Examine the poem, The Famine Year (The Stricken Land) by Lady Wilde. What images or metaphors are used in this poem to describe the Great Irish Famine?

ACTIVITY: Student teams will examine either ACTIVITY SHEET A- HUNGER, B- HOMELESSNESS, C- ILLNESS, or D- RESISTANCE AND SURVIVAL. Each group will describe for the class images in these personal accounts that paint pictures that help us measure the impact the Great Irish Famine.

SUMMARY QUESTION: How do we measure the impact of an event like the Great Irish Famine?

HOMEWORK: Use the material from the ACTIVITY SHEETS to write a poem that presents an image of the Great Irish Famine.

APPLICATION: How has photography provided a new medium for creating historical metaphors? Discuss examples of famous historical photographs.

- Use the documents in this package to answer the following essay question:  
What was the impact of the potato blight and famine on the people of Ireland?

PROJECT: Select 20 historical photos that you believe provide metaphors for understanding major historical events. Create an annotated photoalbum.

### **ACTIVITY SHEET A- Hunger**

Source: Helen Litton. *The Irish Famine, An Illustrated History* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1994).

A) Captain A.E. Kennedy, County Clare, Report to the Poor Law Commissioners:

“A man had died from hunger, and his widow had gone into the ploughed field of her landlord to try to pick a few potatoes in the ridges which might be remaining since the harvest; she found a few -- the landlord saw her -- sent a magistrate to the cabin who found three children in a state of starvation and nothing in the cabin but the pot, which was over the fire. He demanded of her to show him the potatoes -- she hesitated; he inquired what she had in the pot -- she was silent; he looked in, and saw a dog, with the handful of potatoes she had gathered from the field. The sight of the wretched cabin, and still more, the despairing looks of the poor silent mother and the famished children, crouched in fear in a dark corner, so touched the heart of the magistrate, that he took the pot from the fire, bade the woman to follow him, and they went to the court-room together. He presented the pot, containing the dog and the handful of potatoes, to the astonished judge. He called the woman -- interrogated her kindly. She told him they sat in their desolate cabin two entire days, without eating, before she killed the half-famished dog; that she did not think she was stealing, to glean after the harvest was gathered. The judge gave her three pounds from his own purse; told her when she had used that to come again to him.”

B) John Norris, Constable, County Wicklow, June 16, 1847.

“A travelling pauper named Honor Kerwin and her child dropped on the highway near Aughrim, both being ill with fever and lay on the side of the road till the following day when I reported the case to Jeremiah Tool the warden, who had them conveyed to Rathdrum Fever Hospital immediately. But being refused admittance there they were sent back to this place and left on the cross roads at Aughrim the most part of the night and then put in to a shed.

It is a very hard case that there is no place to remove poor persons of this description when they fall on the public roads and although I am well aware it is no part of my duty to interfere in such cases. Still every person calls on me to keep the public passways clear of such nuisances. There is 8 or 9 families at present ill with fever in this neighbourhood, some of them in sheds and no place to receive them.”

C) Sligo Union, February 19, 1848.

“A boy of 14, named James Foley ... left the Killanummery hospital on 22nd January, being a week convalescent after fever; he received from the doctor who had been in

charge of the hospital, which was at that time ordered to be closed, a ticket of admission to the hospital at Manorhamilton; the boy, instead of going there, returned to his father, who, fearing contagion, would not admit him among his other children, and probably from want of shelter, in addition to his weak state of health, the poor boy perished in the inclement weather, or it might have been from a relapse. The father was in the receipt of out-door relief for himself and his children, including the boy James, and he did not report either his being in hospital, or his subsequent condition to the relieving officer.”

#### **ACTIVITY SHEET B- Homelessness**

Source: Helen Litton. *The Irish Famine, An Illustrated History* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1994).

A) Captain A.E. Kennedy, County Clare, Report to the Poor Law Commissioners.

“These helpless creatures are not only unhoused, but often driven off the land, no one remaining on the lands being allowed to lodge or harbour them. Or they, perhaps, linger about the spot, and frame some temporary shelter out of the materials of their old homes against a broken wall, or behind a ditch or fence, or in a bog-hole (scalps as they are called), places totally unfit for human habitations; or they crowd into some of the few neighbouring cabins still left standing, when allowed to do so, as lodgers, where such numbers usually congregate that disease, together with the privations of other kinds which they endure, before long carry them off. As soon as one horde of houseless and all but naked paupers are dead, or provided for in the workhouse, another wholesale eviction doubles the number, who in their turn pass through the same ordeal of wandering from house to house, or burrowing in bogs or behind ditches, till broken down by privation and exposure to the elements, they seek the workhouse, or die by the roadside.”

B) Report of Vice-Guardian to the Commissioners, County Galway, February 20, 1848

“Our first duty on arriving here was to visit the workhouse; and we can scarcely convey an idea of the total absence of any thing at all approaching to order or decency in which we found almost every department. . . The probation wards. . . were in a very disreputable state, wet and filthy in the extreme; a heap of dirty straw piled up in one corner; several panes of glass broken in the windows, and their places supplied by pledgets of straw. . . We found the adult paupers at breakfast. The Indian meal stirabout with which they were supplied was thin, much burned and otherwise infamously cooked. Many of the paupers were served with sour porter or beer (in lieu of milk) to take with their porridge; and on our inquiring the cause, were

informed, that it had been sent by the milk contractor as his supply of milk was short. . . the portion of liquid (called milk) which he did supply, was in our opinion more than half water. We found the kitchen department in a most unsatisfactory state; the boilers were in a disgraceful state of rust, totally unfit for culinary purposes. . . Crowds of women in the day-rooms crouched in masses together round the walls, endeavouring to obtain warmth from the close contact with each other. . . The dormitories were in a most irregular condition; the floors disgracefully disfigured, and in many places we fear approaching to decay, from the effects of urinal and other discharges continually taking place. .. The pumps of the house are altogether out of order, and the pipes broken or otherwise destroyed; and the water required for the purposes of the house is carried in buckets from the lake by some of the female paupers, who were, when we first saw them, almost in a state of nudity.”

#### **ACTIVITY SHEET C - ILLNESS**

Source: Helen Litton. *The Irish Famine, An Illustrated History* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1994)

A) Mohill Union, Report to the Poor Law Commissioners, December 1847.

“The building we found most dilapidated, and fast advancing to ruin, everything out of repair, the yards undrained and filled, in common with the cesspools, by accumulations of filth -- a violation of all sanitary requirements; fever and dysentery prevailing throughout the house, every ward filthy to a most noisome degree, evolving offensive effluvia; the paupers defectively clothed, and many of those recently admitted continuing in their own rags and impurity; classification and separation set at nought; a general absence of utensils and implements; the dietary not adhered to, and the food given in half-cooked state -- most inadequate, particularly for the sick; the meals distributed through the medium of one-sixth the number of vessels required, and uproar and confusion, the stronger securing an over quantity to the privation of the weaker, and the breakfast not completely dispensed until late in the evening; no contracts existing, no stores of provisions to meet even the wants of a day; the able-bodied not employed, and without restraint or discipline; the destruction of all description of Union property proceeding rapidly, many hundreds' pounds worth appearing to be missing; the children in the schools receiving no education or industrial training, in other respects their neglected state painfully exhibited by their diseased and emaciated aspect; no means for the proper treatment of the sick, the officers ignorant of their duties; coffins unused in the interment of the dead.”

B) Reverend Meehan to the Poor Law Inquiry, 1849.

“The most fatal effects of starvation in the appearance of the poor people was a swelling about the face and a peculiar turn of the eye; the eye was made sharp and closed, and made long; the extremities of the feet became swollen, and the upper part of the feet less swollen; they were deformed; they were not well able to walk, and they became languid and careless about what became of them.”

#### **ACTIVITY SHEET D - Resistance and Survival**

Source: Helen Litton. The Irish Famine, An Illustrated History (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1994)

A) Threatening notices sent to landowners in County Tipperary, July 1846.

“I do hereby require of you to set on work in your neighbourhood or if you will not you will feel the displeasure of me and me brethren. - Captain Starlight”

“I do hereby require of you to set on work in your neighbourhood or if you will not I will not bear hunger no longer while there is beast in the field and I do Blame you for the whole of it that you would not exert your self alike all the gentlemen in the Country I give you Three Days Notice When you are not a penny out of pocket it appears to me that you are Betraying the Neighbours I am as well Die by the rope as Die by the hunger”

B) Note sent to James Flanagan, Kilcock, County Kildare, January 6, 1848

“Sir -- We the people of the district that you collected the Poor Rates in, in either Boush or Innismachthesant, or any other part that you collect the Poor Rate in, or take up any distress, or drives any person's cattle for the Rates, we will be under the necessity of shooting you in the open daylight, for we may as well lose our lives as to lose our support; so if you don't like this warning we give you, take your own advice, for we are determined to stop you or any other person that will come to collect them till the times mend.”

C) Captain A.E. Kennedy, County Claire, report to the Poor Law Commissioners

“Eight sheep, the property of the parish priest at Carrigaholt, were lately killed and consumed in the neighbourhood of Tullig, where a number of evicted poor still linger. The owner refused to take any step towards prosecuting the offenders, as he informed me that he believed them to be in a state of starvation, and only hoped God would forgive them as freely as he did.”