

AIM QUESTION: Why study about the Great Irish Famine, 1845-1852?

**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:**

Study of the Great Irish Famine allows students to explore a number of essential social studies questions related to the causes of events and the responsibility of government to respond to them. No one knows exactly how many people died in Ireland's great Famine of 1845-52, but in a population of more than eight million people, the death count reached at least one million. Another million and a half people emigrated. This human disaster occurred within the jurisdiction of Great Britain, the richest and most industrially advanced empire in the world at that time. According to historian Christine Kineally in an article in *Natural History* magazine (January 1998), "the potato blight was an ecological disaster that struck Ireland when it was particularly vulnerable. But what transformed the blight into a famine was the failure of the British government, along with landlords and merchants, to meet the challenge and implement effective action." Conditions in Ireland became so bad during the potato famine that according to one report: "Most of the dead were buried in fields or along the roads. The corpse was frequently wrapped with straw ropes and buried in this way without a coffin. . . . Tombstones were not erected as it was difficult to find men with the strength to make the graves. . . . Bodies actually lay unburied by hedges for rats soon devoured the flesh and only the skeleton remained. During the famine people died from a variety of causes, though relatively few from actual starvation. Most were felled by relapsing fever, typhus, dysentery, and cholera. Their vulnerability to these diseases made worse by hunger, inadequate shelter, overcrowding in workhouses, and hard labor on work relief projects.

**ASSESSMENT:** Student will be able to 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.
- the importance of examining and respecting multiple perspectives when explaining historical events.
- the ability to examine and explain the significance of primary source documents.
- the ability to apply an understanding of explain contemporary problems to explain historical events.

**MATERIAL:** Activity sheets are prepared for students on different reading levels. Edited documents are primary sources shortened to highlight key points with some definitions included. Adapted documents translate text into language more accessible to students while retaining main ideas, information and at least some sense of the original language. Rewritten documents are completely rewritten, sacrificing language to make meaning accessible to students. Teachers have the option of using differentiated edited, adapted and rewritten text, either with an entire class on any grade level or with selected students.

**DO NOW ACTIVITY:** Read ACTIVITY A: Excerpts from an editorial in *The London Times*, September 22, 1846, section A, and answer questions 1 and 2.

**MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:** What contemporary natural disasters do you remember? Hurricanes. Droughts. Storms? Floods? Explain. These kinds of events have been called acts of nature. But the impact of acts of nature are often influenced by the actions of people and governments. For example, a heat wave leads to expanded use of

electricity, but failure to plan leads to a blackout. In your opinion, are companies and governments responsible for “acts of nature”? Do they have a responsibility to plan to prevent widespread disruption, damage, and death? Do they have a responsibility to assist victims and help them survive and rebuild? Explain.

**TRANSITIONAL ACTIVITY:** Read ACTIVITY A and answer key questions: What caused the destruction of the Irish potato crop? Who does the editorial blame for the Great Irish Famine? What is the editorials view of the Irish response to action taken by the British government? Who else could be considered responsible? How do we decide who is responsible for the Great Irish Famine? What kind of information would you want to examine to help you decide?

**ACTIVITY:** Student teams read and discuss ACTIVITY B and answer questions 3, 4, 5. Teams report on their views to the class and the full class discusses key questions: Who does the editorial blame for the hardships in Ireland during the Famine? Why does the editorial blame them? In your opinion, how are these arguments similar to or different from statements made about welfare recipients in our country today? Explain the reason for your answer.

**SUMMARY QUESTION:** In your opinion, why is it important to study the causes and the impact of the Great Irish Famine?

**APPLICATION QUESTIONS:** In your opinion, do you think there was anything the Irish could have done to become accepted as equal citizens in Great Britain? Explain. In your opinion, what groups in United States history had similar experiences? Explain.

Discuss the contemporary debate over public assistance programs in the United States. What similarities and differences exist with the opinions expressed in this editorial?

**HOMEWORK:** Act of Nature/Act of Man: Find a Current Events article on a natural disaster in the contemporary world. Summarize the story of the disaster. Explain your opinion on why it can be considered an act of nature, an act of man, or both?

AN EDITORIAL ON PUBLIC RESPONSE TO THE GREAT IRISH FAMINE. Excerpts from an editorial in *The London Times*, September 22, 1846.

Do Now: Read and answer questions 1 and 2.

**Word Bank:** calamity - disaster; murmur - whisper; palliate -relieve; afflictions - illnesses.

“The people have made up their minds to report the worst and believe the worst.

Human agency is now denounced as instrumental in adding to the calamity inflicted by Heaven. It is no longer submission to Providence, but a murmur against the Government. The potatoes were blighted by a decree from on high. Such are the thanks that a Government gets for attempting to palliate great afflictions.”

Questions

1- Who does the editorial blame for the Great Irish Famine?

2- What is the editorials view of the Irish response to action taken by the English government?

B: Read section B, C and D and answer questions 3, 4 and 5.

**Word Bank:** indolence - laziness; suffrage - voting; doles - welfare benefits; bonbons- chocolate candy; Celts - Irish; potatophagi - potato lovers; dun - bill.

B) The Government provided work for a people who love it not. It made this the absolute condition of relief. The Government was required to ward off starvation, not to pamper indolence; its duty was to encourage industry, not to stifle it; to stimulate others to give employment, not to outbid them, or drive them from the labor markets. Alas! the Irish peasant had tasted of famine and found that it was good.

C) There are ingredients in the Irish character which must be modified and corrected before either individuals or Government can hope to raise the general condition of the people. It is absurd to prescribe political innovations for the remedy of their sufferings or the alleviations of their wants. Extended suffrage and municipal reform for a peasantry who have for six centuries consented to alternate between starvation on a potato and the doles of national charity! You might as well give them bonbons.

D) For our own parts, we regard the potato blight as a blessing. When the Celts once cease to be potatophagi, they must become carnivorous. With the taste of meats will grow the appetite for them. With this will come steadiness, regularity, and perseverance. Nothing will strike so deadly a blow, not only at the dignity of Irish character, but also the elements of Irish prosperity, as a confederacy of rich proprietors to dun the national Treasury.

**Questions**

3- Who does the editorial blame for the hardships in Ireland during the Famine?

4- Why does the editorial blame them?

5- In your opinion, how are these arguments similar to or different from statements made about welfare recipients in our country today? Explain the reason for your answer.

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