

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.

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?

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."