

# Review of the New York State Great Irish Famine Curriculum Guide

by Kevin Sheehan

When asked to review the (over) 1,000 page long New York State Great Irish Famine Curriculum Guide, I approached the task with some trepidation. Many of us have heard enthusiastic presentations about the guide at social studies conference during the last three years and have seen previews in national, state and local N.C.S.S. publications. Honestly, the thought, of living up to the expectations of this zealous group, somewhat frightened me.

When I received the curriculum, my fears were not assuaged. Its size and weight were too formidable for an over-scheduled administrator. Naturally, I did what we often crucify our students for, I procrastinated. When time finally left me no option, I opened the cover. What happened next was most similar to the experience that I had when I first cracked open a Harry Potter novel. I was drawn into another world.

The world I was drawn into was the world of Irish history. It was a world that was presented in a way that touched my soul, my intellect and my imagination. The large curriculum, which had once seemed so ominous, revealed Irish history through its economics, its politics, its art, its stories, its songs and most of all, *its people*. As I painlessly moved from lesson to lesson, Irish history came alive through all my senses. This was more than a story of *The Great Famine*. The curriculum was a look into the soul of the Irish people themselves.

## Addressing State Standards

We have all accepted the STANDARDS created by our state department's of education and national professional organizations. Standards are hard to be against, but equally hard to put your finger on. They are somewhat like motherhood and apple pie. This, however, is the first document that I have seen integrate the Standards in such a coherent package.

The curriculum, as does Harry Potter, draws you in. You read a lesson, make your own personal connections, and then immediately you find yourself drawn to the next lesson. As you find yourself sliding through these lessons in Irish history, you also find the Standards blending into one another. The result of all of this blending is that you gradually feel the event come to life. The history of Ireland, the Famine and the Standards finally make perfect sense.

Of course, you cannot examine a people or a historical event without looking through the lens of geography, government, economics and history. You cannot fully comprehend an event without knowing what came before and what came after. This curriculum starts with the geography and the history and of early Ireland (IRELAND BEFORE THE FAMINE). It moves into a detailed discussion of pre-famine Ireland, which must be in place if we are to understand the Great Famine. As it deals with the famine, it does so through the vehicle of an essential question (WAS THE IRISH FAMINE AN ACT OF NATURE?). It then moves to post Famine Ireland and emigration. The curriculum takes us to New York and the United States with the emigrants so that you can fully feel the impact of the Famine. (HOW DID THE IRISH FAMINE CHANGE IRELAND AND THE WORLD?) The curriculum concludes by examining the legacy of the Great Famine and famine in our world today. (WHAT IS THE LEGACY OF THE GREAT IRISH FAMINE?) It does all of this with a range of reading levels making the curriculum appropriate for any grade level. You can create your own journey through Irish history by carefully selecting appropriate lessons.

## Providing Historical Context

Each lesson is organized in a manner that would please even the most discerning supervisor. A lesson begins with a *Background* section, which sets the historical context and direction of the lesson. If you had little time and wanted to obtain a feel for the history of Ireland, you could obtain it by merely reading the *Backgrounds* for each lesson. Every lesson specifies the resources needed, often pointing the way to additional outside sources. What makes this curriculum so invaluable is that it - hands you the resources. This is nowhere more valuable than in the

elementary classroom where teachers rarely have the budget, time or access to social studies resources. The resources are all *primary* and the conclusions are to be drawn by the students themselves.

The real power of the curriculum is the fact that essential questions drive all of the lessons, rather than conclusions. The magic of this document is that these questions demand that students function as historians. As a supervisor clinging to the Grant Wiggins concept of essential questions in the face of increased state testing, I found this aspect of the curriculum one which has the power to impact not only what we teach, but how we teach.

The *Student Learning Outcomes* of each lesson plan spell out what is supposed to happen in the lesson and lead you right into a *Standards Addressed* section, which points out, in print, specific ELA and social studies standards. This section makes the connection that too many of us, in both disciplines, seem to have missed in our classrooms. In black and white, the curriculum proves that the specific Standards, from our often all too distinct disciplines, can happily co-exist in the same lesson.

The lesson plan then stretches us into greater consideration of the *Dimensions of Learning* or skills that we are addressing. After these basic components, the lesson plan moves to sections on *Assessment Options*, *Teacher Reflection*, and *Additional Learning Experiences*. These lesson plans look far more thoughtful than the ones that I once busily crafted late on Sunday nights. The beauty of this curriculum is that it puts into the hands of teachers a resource is that is not only user friendly, but one which has the power to elevate our teaching to another plane.

### **Examining Broader Questions**

The real question is how we are going to integrate this curriculum into our over-stuffed and over-scheduled day. Each of us must answer that question for ourselves in our respective educational assignments. In order to relate how I would proceed, I will share with you lessons that I loved and directions that I believe are immediately useful in my world. I loved the DBQ asking students to determine if the Great Famine was an act of genocide. (*The Great Irish Famine: An Act of Genocide?*) The documents in this DBQ begin with the definition of genocide as provided by the United Nations in 1951 and then set the stage for the question with documents on Nazi Germany, the Armenian Massacre, the slave trade, and the population decrease of the Native American people from Central Mexico after the arrival of the Europeans. The final documents are naturally centered around the Great Famine. Students must find their own answer to this question, as in history and life. The caveat, of course, is that they must provide evidence to back up their position.

All, too often, when present we present a world disaster of horrendous proportions, we tend to leave out stories of human heroism in the face of that disaster. This curriculum will introduce you to the actions of the Quakers, Choctaw Indians and countless individuals whose acts of heroism in the face of the Famine will inspire students. It is vital that we present these stories so that students do not feel a sense of powerlessness in the face of what may seem to be an unfair or unfeeling world. Just as we learned of the named and nameless heroes in the wake of the World Trade Center tragedy, we learn of Irish heroes in the face of starvation. For me, personally, this must be a part of any course on world history. We must share with students a world of hope and empowerment in the face of tragedy and crisis. We must inspire students with the belief that they can make a difference.

Others will find their own places in this curriculum. It might be in the lilt of a lesson on the music and song of the Irish, the growing of a potato, the power of mathematical analysis through statistics, geographic determinism, or the countless lessons centered on social history of the Irish people. For me, the beauty of this massive and once frightening document is that you are free to take those pieces that inspire you.

As a last thought, we often create Academic Intervention Services for our most needy students, which tend to squeeze the life out of our discipline. We give these students more of what they hate in the first place, drill and skill and large doses of memorization. What if the basis of an AIS intervention plan, was a mini-course with this curriculum taught with a skills approach. It seems to me we could do still do the drill and skill and mix in an in-depth study of a world event. What an interesting way to build mini-courses back into our over-scheduled days. This could give birth to a whole new way of thinking about support classes.

I urge you to lay your hands on this work. Once you crack the binder, you will find a new and exciting world opening up, a world that make Harry Potter's fictional universe look ordinary in comparison.

