

# Teaching About the Great Irish Famine: A Response

by Maureen Murphy

David Cowell's essay "Demythologizing Subject Matter: Teaching Ireland In The Curriculum" discusses the difference between the methods of the historian and the maker of myth. The historian pieces together the facts of an event to create the relationship between cause and effect, an understanding of the perceptions that surround the event and an appreciation of the results of that event. The historian provides the primary sources that inform the interpretation; readers of history are able to trace the historian's argument. The myth maker is content with making statements about the meaning of an historical event. They are less concerned with analysis than with conveying their received truth. The difference between the methods of the historian and the myth maker affects the teaching of history. Cowell argues that students should be taught to think like historians rather than to be receivers of historical myths. He offers the example of the Great Irish Famine to demonstrate how to teach students about the complexity of an historical event by interrogating the sources.

The New York Great Irish Famine Curriculum (2001) embraces a pedagogy that is consistent with Cowell's model. The 150-lesson curriculum is organized around four basic questions: How did the Columbian Exchange and British Colonialism contribute to the conditions that resulted in the Great Irish Famine? Was the Great Irish Famine an Act of Nature? How did the Great Irish Famine change Ireland and the World? What is the Legacy of the Great Irish Famine? The lessons are interdisciplinary, interactive and project-based with opportunities for students to write in a variety of literary forms about the Great Irish Famine.

Our lessons are designed to engage students in reading and evaluating primary source materials: texts, newspaper accounts, maps, charts, statistics, speeches, songs, poems, film and videotapes. Students are encouraged to form their own judgments and to cite their sources for those judgments. The curriculum provides a wide variety ways for students to share their judgments: speaking, listening, reading and writing. For example, students debate their conclusions in democratic dialogues; they respond to texts written about historical events; they write their own texts in response to their readings; they create dramatic monologues and plays; they answer document-based questions.

Teachers and students respond enthusiastically to the Great Irish Famine Curriculum's learning experiences; however, the famine myth makers have criticized it for not delivering an indictment of the British government. They would have preferred and accusatory narrative charging that government with genocide. Instead of students mastering myth maker's scripts, they are expected to demonstrate that they understand that the Great Irish Famine is not a seamless story, that it is complex and that it requires thoughtful analysis. Our hope is that students not only learn about the Great Irish Famine but that they appreciate the way it enlarges their understanding of the issues of hunger and homelessness.

Kevin Sheehan's review likened the curriculum guide to opening a Harry Potter novel. We are delighted with the metaphor because it suggests that both texts engage young people and their teachers. We are also gratified with his assessment that the guide demonstrates how teachers can use content-rich material to teach to the New York State Learning standards. Like Sheehan, we think the curriculum and the standards complement one another.

Sheehan explores ways that teachers can fit the Great Irish Famine curriculum into an already jam-packed schedule. He suggests finding lessons that speak to student and teacher interests. That is a good idea. The curriculum is not meant to be prescriptive; it offers 150 lessons as platforms for teachers to use to develop appropriate learning experiences for their students. Lessons on human tragedy, debates on official responses, and an examination of the role of rescuers can provide teachers with material to help their students understand other crises in the past and present.

**Copies of the New York State Great Irish Famine Curriculum Guide are available from the New York State Education Department, Publications Sales Desk, 3rd Floor, Education Building, Albany, NY 12234. \$15.00 per copy includes shipping and handling costs. Checks and purchase orders payable to the State Education Department. For further information, contact Mary Daley, (518) 474-8773; or [mdaley@mail.nysed.gov](mailto:mdaley@mail.nysed.gov).**