

Visiting Ireland Today

by Judith Y. Singer and Alan Singer

Great Irish Famine curriculum writers and reviewers were concerned that students, particularly elementary school students, would confuse past and present and conclude that the Great Irish Famine is a contemporary event. To address this concern and to help teachers introduce elementary school students to Ireland today, they included this report on a 1999 trip to Ireland. It is geared to the reading level of Cobblestone magazine, grades 4-8.

Instructions: Read the story "Our Trip to Ireland" and answer questions 1-7.

- 1- Where is Ireland located?
- 2- How has Ireland changed in recent years?
- 3- What evidence is there that Irish civilization is very old?
- 4- What evidence is there of Ireland's religious traditions?
- 5- Why was the potato famine a major event in Irish history?
- 6- How is life in Ireland similar to life in the United States?
- 7- How is life in Ireland different from life in the United States?

Activities: Draw a picture of Ireland today. Write a story about a trip taken by your family.

Word Bank: Irish vocabulary words - dhia dhuit - hello; seoinini - off-islanders; seach- a lone tree, a mythical symbol; slan - good-bye

Our Trip to Ireland

"*Dhia dhuit* (hello)."

My name is Judi Singer and my name is Alan Singer. In June, 1999, we spent two weeks traveling in Ireland. This is the story of our trip.

We met our friend Professor Maureen Murphy at Kennedy Airport in New York City. Maureen is an expert on Irish history and literature. She has lived and studied in Ireland and speaks the Irish language. She joined us for our first week in Ireland.

The flight from New York to Ireland takes over six hours. We flew east toward the sunrise, so the time in Ireland was five hours ahead of the time in New York.

We left New York about midnight, but six hours later when we arrived in Ireland it was already afternoon.

The Republic of Ireland is located on an island in the Atlantic Ocean, off of the western coast of the continent of Europe. Most of the island is part of the Republic, but a small section in the north is part of another country, the United Kingdom (also called Great Britain). The entire island is two-thirds the size of New York State and the population of the Republic (3.6 million people) is about half the population of New York City. The people there speak both Irish and English. Most are Roman Catholic and nearly everyone is literate.

At one time Ireland was among the most densely populated places in the world, but currently it is one of the least densely populated countries of Europe. In the past it was considered a poor country, but today Ireland is part of the European Economic Community and the country is prosperous. Its money is called the punt or Irish pound. One punt is worth about \$1.35 in United States money.

If you look at a map of the North Atlantic, you will see that Ireland is located considerably north of New York State. It is approximately 2,000 miles due east of Newfoundland, Canada. However, the climate in Ireland is warmer than expected because Gulf Stream ocean currents from the Caribbean Sea moderate the temperature. It rarely gets either as warm or as cold as in New York and palm trees can grow on city streets. While we were in Ireland, the temperature was about ten degrees cooler than in New York City, and it rained part of the time nearly every day. Because of its high level of rainfall, Ireland is very green, and its nickname is the "Emerald Isle."

The island of Ireland is nearly 300 miles from north to south and 170 miles from east to west. It has a 2,000 mile long coastline and no place on the island is more than seventy miles from the sea. Its coastal areas tend to be hilly while its central regions are flat. Its highest mountains are about the same height as the Catskill Mountains in southern New York State.

The three of us arrived in Dublin, the capital of Ireland, where we were met by our friend, Sister Margaret MacCurtain. Margaret is an historian, a teacher and a Dominican nun. For the first few days, Margaret and Maureen acted as our guide.

We spent the first two days of our trip in Dublin. Dublin is both an old and a new city. It is located on the east coast of Ireland where the Liffey River enters the Irish Sea.

The recorded history of Ireland goes back much further than the written history of the United States. An early settlement on the site of Dublin appears on an ancient Roman map. Later, Viking sailors built a small trading post on the river. In the 1100s, invaders from England made Dublin their stronghold.

As you walk through the streets of Dublin or along the Liffey River today, you see buildings that date from the late 1700s and early 1800s. Dublin is famous for its brightly painted doors. There are also many new buildings and a railway system called the DART. There was a lot of construction going on in the city during our visit.

In Dublin, we visited Trinity College, the National Library, the National Art Gallery, and the National Museum. We especially liked walking through St. Stephen's Green, a park in the center of the city. Dublin's parks and public places have a number of statues. In St. Stephen's Green there was a monument to people who died during the Great Irish Famine over one hundred and fifty years ago. There was also a famine memorial along the river. Other statues celebrated national leaders, writers, and fictional characters like the fabled seafood vendor Molly Malone.

At Trinity College we saw an exhibit of old Bibles that date from the 7th century. They were hand lettered and illustrated by Irish monks. The most famous ones are known as the Book of Kells and the Book of Durrow. The National Museum has major exhibits on the ancient history of Ireland and the 1916 uprising that led to Irish independence from the United Kingdom (Great Britain). It even has a full size model of a Viking boat that was built using traditional tools.

The Famine Memorial in Dublin

While staying in Dublin, we visited a former Roman Catholic monastery in Glendalough, a small village south of the city. The site has buildings that date from the tenth century. The solid stone walls of the building are still standing as reminders of the distant past.

For us, the best part of Dublin and Ireland was the people we met. The National Library's Educational Officer, Noel Kissane, gave us a tour of the building. Maureen's friends, Andre and Dunlah, welcomed us to their home for dinner. While they normally speak Irish at home with their family, they spoke English during our visit so we would feel included.

After Dublin, Margaret drove the four of us across the width of Ireland to the Atlantic coast. It was a trip of about 120 miles or the length of Long Island. We were both a little nervous about driving in Ireland because the cars are riding on the opposite side of the road from the direction they travel in the United States. We know that in Great Britain and in parts of the Caribbean traffic also flows this way.

Travel in Ireland is slower than in New York because there are few highways. Trucks, cars, buses and farm vehicles share two lane roads and some of the roads were very narrow. At one point, we took a ferry across the Shannon River to get to the town of Kilrush in Co. Clare.

In Kilrush, we visited a local history museum that had an exhibit on battles between tenant farmers and landlords over control of the farmland of Ireland. We also spoke with a local baker who gave us a tour of his shop. The Considine Bakery was started by his family in 1847 to help supply bread to people whose potato crop had

failed during the Great Irish Famine. He showed us bars on windows that were put there because bakers feared that hungry people would break into the bakery to steal loaves of bread.

The next day we visited the Burren and the Cliffs of Moher. The Burren is a plateau overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. The land is so rocky that it is difficult to grow crops here, though tiny, brightly colored flowers make their way through cracks in the rocks.

Farmers tried to clear the land of rocks by building long, low, stone walls. They planted potatoes in mounds of soil laid out in rows and fertilized with kelp from the sea. Life in the Burren is so harsh that a surveyor once described it as “savage land, yielding neither water enough to drown a man, nor a tree to hang him, nor soil to bury.” The most strikingly beautiful part of the Burren are the Cliffs of Moher. At their highest, they tower over 600 feet above the Atlantic Ocean. Below, waves pound on the rocky shore.

While we traveled around Ireland it seemed that Maureen and Margaret knew people everywhere. After touring the Burren, we visited Maureen’s old friends, the Mac Namara family, on their farm, and we were invited to a traditional Irish dinner of roasted lamb and potatoes.

After County Clare, Maureen and Margaret returned to Dublin and we continued to travel on our own. We took a small eight seat airplane to the island of Inishmaan in the Aran Islands, a chain of small islands in the Atlantic Ocean near the city of Galway. The entire population of Inishmaan is less than 150 people. Its two-classroom elementary school has only sixteen students between the ages of four and fifteen.

Inishmaan was a place of incredible beauty and we went for many long, quiet walks. Because we were so far north and it was the middle of June, it did not get dark until almost eleven o'clock at night. At times the sky was very bright and it seemed as if we could see forever. However, when heavy clouds and fog rolled in off the sea, it was so overcast that we could not even see to the next island.

The entire island is criss-crossed by low stone walls that divide the land into small plots that are used for grazing cows. Some of the plots were covered by a lush coating of green grass dotted with tiny flowers and some seemed to be entirely a sheet of rock. The island still has many old stone buildings and impressive stone forts that were first built over one thousand years ago. On Inishmaan we saw our first potato fields.

Most of the people of Inishmaan are native-speakers of Irish, though they were always willing to speak English with *seoinini* (off-islanders). Ireland requires that all public school teachers speak both Irish and English. While we were on the island a group of about eighty college students studying to become teachers were attending an institute to improve their ability to speak Irish. They were very friendly and glad to discuss schools in the United States and Ireland. They also invited us to join them in a game of basketball and at a pub to listen to Irish music and singing.

When we were ready to leave Inishmaan the entire island was blanketed by a heavy fog. We decided to take a ferry boat, and that was another adventure. We gritted our teeth and closed our eyes as waves and a storm tossed the small boat around. We were glad when we finally docked on the mainland after a half hour trip that seemed much longer.

During the next week we traveled by car and bicycle around the Irish countryside. We saw cows, goats, and sheep everywhere. We visited a modern mushroom farm where the mushrooms were growing inside giant humidified plastic tents. We also saw people using traditional tools to cut peat in the bog. A bog is the remains of a shallow lake filled in with partly decomposed vegetation. A foot or two under the top soil, the compressed plant matter has been laying for thousands of years, since the last ice age. For centuries it has been cut into rectangular blocks, laid out to dry in the sun, stored, and used instead of wood or coal as a fuel in a fireplace or stove.

Highpoints of our trip included the town of Strokestown where we visited a museum that teaches about the Great Irish Famine. At Sligo we visited a long abandoned famine graveyard. A bronze statue of a *Faoin Sceach* from the graveyard became the symbol for this Great Irish Famine project. In Ireland, the lone tree or *sceach* is a symbol from early Celtic mythology. The boulder stones surrounding its base represent ancient burial customs. The *sceach* is also a famine symbol because trees like these often took root in stone houses that were abandoned when people died or emigrated.

In Athlone, we saw the remains of a workhouse from the era of the famine and we biked along the banks of the Shannon River. In Tullamore, we biked on the towpath of the Grand Canal that connects the Shannon River and the west coast with Dublin and the east coast. The canal was first opened in the 1790s.

One of the most beautiful parts of Ireland, and perhaps the entire world, is the Ring of Kerry. It is a hundred mile long loop on the Iveragh Peninsula in southwestern Ireland. We started in Killarney at a national park with

sparkling lakes, bicycle and hiking paths, mountains with peaks lost in the clouds, a working farm with buildings and tools from the early 1900s, and a fancy country estate that was built in the early 1800s. After Killarney we drove through mountain passes and along cliffs overlooking the ocean. We stopped at a museum that honors Daniel O'Connell, who is considered by many Irish to be the "father of their country."

We finished our tour of the Ring of Kerry at Tralee, where we attended a performance of Siasmsa tíre, the National Folk Theatre of Ireland. Performers used traditional songs and dances to show life and work in a farming village during the summer, fall, winter, and spring seasons. In the first and last song and dance of the show, the performers pantomimed cutting peat in a bog.

After Tralee it was time to drive back to Dublin and to head home to New York. On the way we stopped for souvenirs of our trip. We bought a lot of books and posters about the history of Ireland and its people. We also purchased woolen scarves and tweed hats that will continue to remind us of the people we met and the places we visited. In Dublin, Margaret met us for one last Irish dinner. We were sorry to be leaving. The next morning, we hurried to the airport and caught our plane home.

"Slan (good-bye)".

Lesson Ideas and Activities

- Draw political, physical and resource maps of Ireland.
- Create photomontages and travel brochures for modern Ireland.
- Learn and perform an Irish stepdance.
- Find recipes and cook a traditional Irish meal.

Check out these websites:

The Irish Times (www.Ireland.com), the Irish government (www.irlgov.ie), the millennium in Ireland (www.2000.Ireland.ie) and the Irish Tourist Bureau (www.ireland.trevel.ie).

- Megan Hamm and Stacey Saltzer

Great Irish Famine Museum

by Rachel Gaglione and Lynda Costello

Students from three middle-level social studies classes in the New York City metropolitan area (PS 197K, Brooklyn, NY, IS 119Q, Queens, NY, and Lawrence Road JHS, Uniondale, NY) created exhibits for a "Great Irish Famine Museum." Their exhibits were displayed in their schools and for middle school students, teacher education students and social studies and English teachers at a conference at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York. Over 200 people attended the two day conference.

The three classes used newspaper drawings from the famine era down-loaded from the world wide web and stories and primary source documents as a starting point. The drawings are available on the world wide web at a site called "Views of the Famine" at (vassun.vassar.edu/~sttaylor/Famine).

One class wrote a Great Irish Famine "big book" that they read to younger children in other classes. They created giant famine posters on oak tag to go along with a story of the famine. A second class used large cardboard cartoons (at least 2 feet by 3 feet) to make dioramas of scenes from the *Illustrated London News* and of poverty in New York City today. In addition, students in this class designed 3 x 5 inch trading cards on the history of the Great Irish Famine.

The third class was studying the "push" and pull" of immigration. Students used five tri-fold bulletin boards (approximately four feet high) to tell the history of the Great Irish Famine and the Irish Diaspora. Each bulletin board had a special focus. What was the Great Irish Famine? How did the Irish travel to North America? What happened when the Irish arrived? How did Irish immigrants survive in the United States? How were Irish immigrants treated? In addition, students made paper maché "artifacts" for display in front of each panel.

Teachers used the following rubric to evaluate student work.

Great Irish Famine Project Grading Rubric

Student Name _____

	Needs Improvement	Satisfactory	Excellent
1. The overall project shows evidence of understanding human rights and the problems faced during the famine which led to immigration.			
2. All work is written to standard which includes engaging the reader, an organizing structure, appropriate facts, voice, a conclusion, as well as excluding extraneous information and proper use of conventions.			
3. Presentation of the project shows care,			

3. Presentation of the project shows care, effort and evidence of revision and/or thoughtfulness.			
4. Project shows ability to communicate effectively through the form chosen by the			

Overall Grade and Comments:

Traditional Irish Crafts

Bodhrán (Middle Level)

Irish musicians play a wood and skin frame drum called the Bodhrán that originated in ancient times. The frame is usually made from beechwood and the skins are either goat or deer. The skins are attached to the frame using glue and brass upholstery nails. Wooden cross pieces are attached to the inside of the frame to keep it from losing its shape. Musicians hold one hand between the cross pieces and the skin and beat the other side of the skin and the wooden frame with a wooden beater. This is a modified version of the Bodhrán that substitutes balsa for harder wood and wax paper for animal skins.

Materials

1 36" x 2" x 1/16" strip of balsa wood

1 36" X 2" x 1/4" strip of balsa wood

wax paper, staples, thumb tacks, scissors, serrated knife or craft saw, unsharpened pencil.

1- Soak the 1/16" piece of balsa wood in hot water until it bends easily (between two and three hours). Gradually bend the balsa wood until it forms a circle. Overlap the ends by about 4 inches. Staple the ends together. This will make a circle with a diameter of approximately 10 inches.

2- Measure in place a piece of the 1/4" balsa wood equal to the diameter of the circle (approximately 10"). Cut with the serrated knife or hobby saw. From the center of the wood, use the serrated knife or hobby saw to remove a 1/4" wide, 1 inch deep piece of wood. Use thumb tacks to anchor the support piece to the frame.

3- Measure in place a 2nd piece of the 1/4" balsa wood equal to the diameter of the circle (approximately 10"). Cut with the serrated knife or hobby saw. Line it up so it crosses the other support piece at right angles. Mark off where crosses the other support. Use the serrated knife or hobby saw to remove a 1/4" wide, 1 inch deep piece from the wood. Slide it over the other support and use thumb tacks to anchor the cross piece to the frame.

4- Role out a sheet of wax paper four inches longer than the diameter of the circle. Center the circular frame on the wax paper. Pull tight and staple the wax paper to the circular frame. Staple around the entire circular frame.

5- Use the eraser end of unsharpened pencil as the beater.

Dip Candles (Elementary Level)

Candlemaking is a craft that dates back to ancient times. Before electricity, people depended on candles to light their homes. In Europe, candlemaking was perfected during the Middle Ages. Candles were generally made from tallow (animal fat) or beeswax. Beeswax candles were more expensive to make and were generally reserved for religious use.

Materials: Electric hot plate, two-quart pan, 2 coffee cans, pencils, wick, paraffin.

1- Put a quart of water in two-quart pan and heat the water to a soft boil. Put a chunk of paraffin in the coffee can and place the can in the pan of water. Lower the heat and wait until the paraffin melts.

2- Fill the second coffee can three-quarters of the way full with cold water.

3- Tie an eight to ten inch length of wick around a pencil. Tie a knot in the other end of the wick.

- 3- Quickly dip the wick in and out of the melted paraffin. Dip into the cold water. Repeat the process over and over again so that the wax builds up on the wick. Occasionally, shape the wax by rolling it between your hands.
- 4- When the candle is a satisfactory size, cut it off the pencil leaving about 1/4 inch of wick exposed.

Straw Crafts (Elementary Level)

Traditionally, the most common type of roof on an Irish farm house was a thatched roof made of straw. Because of the damp climate, the roofs must be regularly maintained. The most popular types of straw to use for thatching comes from wheat, rye, flax, or oat plants. Ideally, it should be gathered from fields after the plants are fully ripened but before they are cut down, or they should be taken from a field of grain that has been cut but not threshed by a combine. It is important not to break the straw. Sometimes rushes, reeds and tough grasses are substituted for straw, depending on local conditions. Straw is also used to make baskets, brooms, chair seats, braided belts, religious ornaments, and children's toys called Corn Dollies. In the British Isles "corn" refers to all grains, not maize or Indian corn.

In Ireland, corn dollies and ornaments are associated with the celebration of St. Brigid's Day (a patron Saint of Ireland) in February and harvest festivals. Children make St. Brigid's Crosses (Cros Bride) to hang for good luck, St. Brigid dolls, and braided straw belts (Crios Bride). Sometimes boys gave corn dollies to girls that they had a crush on.

If straw has been harvested from a field, remove grain heads from the straw. Cut off pieces between the joints. Slip the husk off and trim pieces to uniform lengths. Straw is also available at craft shops. Soak the straw in warm water overnight to make it softer and flexible.

Materials:

Straw or reeds, sharp scissors, needles, thread, lightweight craftwire, garbage bag ties, or jute twine, pieces of yarn for trim, wire cutter, long-nosed pliers (Thisle - twine made of paper - can be substituted for the straw or reeds. It is easier to work with for younger children and does not have to be soaked.)

Cros Bride (St. Brigid's Cross)

- 1- Cut twelve 12" long pieces of straw or reed. Soak overnight to soften.
- 2- Make bunches of 3 pieces. Bend the first bunch around a pencil and hold the ends with a rubber band. Bend the next bunch around a pencil. Weave the three straws through the first bunch at a right angle. Attach the ends with a rubber band. Bend the next bunch around a pencil. Weave the three straws through the second bunch at a right angle. Attach the ends with a rubber band. Bend the final bunch around a pencil. Weave the three straws through the bunch at a right angle. Attach the ends with a rubber band.
- 3- Pull on each bunch to tighten the weave. Use jute string to tie the end of each bunch and cut away the rubber bands. Loop a piece of string through one of the bunches to make a hanger.

Corn Dollies

- 1- For the body, cut 5 straws that are at least 12 inches long. Soak overnight to soften.
- 2- Bend the softened straws around your finger and bind both "legs" with wire or jute twine leaving a gap of about 1/4". The loop forms the head of the doll.
- 3- Arms are made by binding two 8 inch pieces of straw at the ends with wire or string. Insert the arms through the body below the head and attach with wire or string.
- 4- To make the skirt, fan out the straw that forms the "legs". Loop wire or a 6 inch piece of straw around and between the strands so they remain in a fanned out position.

Sources: David Shaw-Smith, ed. (1984). <i>Ireland's Traditional Crafts</i> . London: Thames and Hudson; Lowell Thompson and Norman Machart (1982). <i>Authentic Craft Activities to Enrich the Social Studies</i> . Lanham, NY: University Press of America.
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