

Grade: 7-9

Famine Curriculum

Aim: To provide students with background information for the story "The House Guest."

New York Standards: 1 Language for Information and Understanding. Students will listen to a passage describing sectarian neighborhoods in Belfast, will trace the boundaries of the nationalist and unionist districts on a map and will study the iconography of the wall murals that separate urban neighborhoods.

Students will create a timeline of Belfast community unrest between 1968 and 1975, the year "The House Guest" was published.

Historical background: The Troubles in Northern Ireland began in 1969 as a series of nationalist civil rights protests to the Northern Ireland government over issues of housing and employment. Militant unionists attacked a peaceful march between the cities of Belfast and Derry (January 1-4, 1969). Later in the spring the marchers request permission to finish their walk and are denied; marchers demonstrate and are attacked by militants. The Royal Ulster Constabulary enters the Bogside, the Derry nationalist section, and are charged with brutality. Later in the summer the Bogside is under siege by unionists, and the British Army is called in to restore order. The same month there are disturbances in Belfast. Many Catholic nationalists are burned out of their homes, particularly those who live in mixed areas of the city.

While the Troubles started over civil rights matters, in 1970, the unrest became politicized when the Provisional wing of the Irish Republican Army (Provos). In 1971, the first British soldier was killed in Northern Ireland during riots in the Catholic nationalist section of Belfast. More than 150 houses are burned during summer riots protesting internment without trial of suspected terrorists.

On January 30, 1972, "Bloody Sunday," thirteen unarmed civilians were shot by British paratroopers in Derry after a banned civil rights demonstration. In March, the British government suspended the Northern Ireland parliament and the province was ruled directly from Westminster. While 1972 was the high-point of sectarian violence, the decade was marked by violence: car bombs, letter bombs, fire bombs in Northern Ireland as well as in London and in the Irish Republic. Neighborhoods become more segregated except for a middle-class residential area around Queen's University; particularly vulnerable are the small enclaves located within larger "other" districts. Residents enter "other" neighborhoods at their own risk.

In 1975, Denis Mulcahy, a Cork-born, bomb expert with the New York City Police Department, founded Project Children, a program designed to bring Catholic and Protestant children from Northern Ireland to American families for a respite from the unrest. Between 1975 and 1990, more than 5,000 children like Bridgie participated.