

INTERDISCIPLINARY MIDDLE GRADES (4-8) PACKAGE

AIM 7.6: Why did people view hardship during the Great Irish Famine differently?

TEACHER BACKGROUND: This lesson explores the impact of the Great Irish Famine upon the Mahon estate in Strokestown. In the early 19th century a serious economic decline affected the poorer areas of Ireland, including the Mahon estate in Co. Roscommon. When Major Mahon inherited the estate in Strokestown in 1845, approximately £13,000 rent arrears had accumulated and a large population on the estate was living in destitution. Major Mahon, under the advice of his land-agent, implemented a program of mass eviction and assisted emigration. The land clearances were intended to increase the average tenant farm size and facilitate animal rearing and the cultivation of more economically viable crops such as corn. Hundreds of tenants died on the ships chartered to take them to Canada. Major Mahon was held personally responsible for their deaths and for evicting 3,000 tenants, many of whom died as a result. There was widespread criticism including a denouncement from the local bishop. At the height of this debate Major Mahon was assassinated on his estate on November 2, 1847. He was the first landlord to be killed because of famine related grievances and for that reason the murder sparked a controversy about the rights of the land-owning class towards their tenantry. In 1848 Patrick Hasty and James Commins were publicly hanged for the murder.

In this section students assume the roles of characters on the Mahon estate. Through the eyes of their characters they must try and view the events of the 1840s and answer questions. Later, in a courtroom scene, the trial of Major Mahon's assassins is re-enacted.

ASSESSMENT:

- Students will demonstrate their understanding of multiple perspectives on historical events.
- Students will demonstrate their ability to use local events to explain broader historical developments.
- Students will demonstrate their ability to evaluate historical events based on the use of evidence.

DO NOW ACTIVITY: Examine the picture "The Ejectment" reproduced from the *Illustrated London News*.

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY: Does anyone's family rent their home? Does anyone's family rent apartments to other families? What happens if a family does not pay the rent? Is it fair to penalize someone who cannot pay their rent? Would it be fair to a landlord to make them keep a tenant who does not pay the rent? Discuss the issue of multiple perspectives.

TRANSITIONAL ACTIVITY: Explain the following: During the mid 1800s much of the land in Ireland was owned by absentee landlords. The land was rented to small farmers called cottiers. The landlords paid land agents to collect the rent from the cottiers. If rents were in arrears, they could be evicted. Is it fair to penalize a small farmer who cannot pay their rent? Would it be fair to a landlord to make them keep a tenant who does not pay the rent? Discuss the issue of multiple perspectives.

ACTIVITIES:

1- Divide the class into groups of 5 and give each group a copy of the image. Each member of the group is allocated a role, figure A, (the land agent) figure B, (the

7.6 Multiple Perspectives on the Famine

mother) etc. In their groups, Then each student describes the scene from their appointed role. As a class, students discuss differences in perspectives.

2- Divide the class into 6 separate groups. Assign each group a particular role which they maintain throughout activity two. The characters are: Sir Chris Trevelyan, Major Denis Mahon, John Ross Mahon, Patrick Brown, The Murray Family, Cottier Tenants. Write the names on the blackboard and explain who each is. One person from each group acts as the presenter. Working in teams, students read their role card and identify and underline the important information on their card. Next they discuss their character with the other members of their group. They should imagine they are the actual character. As the character, they should consider the following questions and write down their group's answers. The team's representative should prepare to present their answers in class.

- 1- What do you understand by the word "Famine"?
- 2- How did the famine affect your character?
- 3- Who do you think suffered during the famine?
- 4- How did you deal with the effects of the famine?
- 5- Could you have done anything else?

SUMMARY QUESTIONS: Did everyone suffer equally during the famine? Who would you say suffered most? Who suffered least? Why do these historical figures view the situation in Ireland during the Great Irish Famine so differently? Whose views do you agree with why? Why do you disagree with the viewpoint of the other observers?

HOMEWORK: Imagine that a reporter from an American newspaper has arrived on the scene in Ireland. The reporter is trying to find out about the Famine in Ireland. Pretend they are asking the questions from today's activity. Write your character's responses.

APPLICATION:

- In your opinion, who was to blame for the policies on the Strokestown Estate: the landlord Major Denis Mahon, the agent John Ross Mahon, the British government, or the poor tenants?
- One million people died during the famine. In your opinion, could these people have been saved.
- Many people emigrated to Australia, Britain and America. Was emigration a successful solution to the famine in Ireland?.
- Can the eviction of in excess of 3,000 people be condoned?
- Is the murder of Dennis Mahon justified?

REFLECTION: Teachers found the initial discussion about renting a home today, the hardship of eviction and homelessness, and the problems faced by landlords who have to pay mortgages and taxes, was crucial to helping students view events in the past from multiple perspectives.

Group 1: Sir Charles Trevelyan, Assistant Secretary to the British Treasury, responsible for funding for relief during the famine.

I, and many of my colleagues in the Government, are of the opinion that famine, is the work of a fate seeking to reduce a growing population. Ireland has exceeded her ability to provide for all of her people, the majority of which are poor. Since the successful union of great Britain and Ireland in 1800, the British Government has attempted to enact social measures in our sister nation which, we feel, are appropriate to her needs. In the 1830s, the entire kingdom of Ireland was surveyed, and a Poor Law Commission was set up to investigate the levels of poverty. A Poor Law was passed in 1838 dividing the country into 130 sections called Unions. A workhouse for the relief of the poor was built in each Union. This Poor Law was funded by a local tax levied from property owners (poor rate) because it is our belief that Irish property should pay for Irish poverty.

When the potato blight struck, additional funding (by way of a loan) was made available to introduce public works schemes (road and canal building) and outdoor relief programs (soup kitchens) as a temporary measure because we did not think that the blight would recur. I personally, am of the opinion that English taxes should not be used to support the Irish crisis. The economy of any country is self supporting and the more we interfere with it, the more dependent people become on outside help. It is for this reason that I defended the export of grain from Ireland during the Famine. It is also for this reason, that I supported the new Whig Government of 1846 “laissez faire” policies, which means no interfering in the economy of Ireland.

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Group 2: Major Denis Mahon, Landlord of the Strokestown Estate

When I inherited the estate at Strokestown from my cousin in 1845, it was in a bad condition. The size of the estate was approximately 9,000 acres. The third Baron was declared insane in 1836. The management of the estate was handed over to the Court of Chancery. This body was well known for the mismanagement of landed property.

In addition to inheriting large debts of £13,000 in unpaid rents, I was also responsible for the support of many family members and was required to pay the Poor Rate. The poor rate was a tax which property owners had to pay. The tax was to be used to pay for workhouses for the poor. In 1846, a private census carried out by my agent recorded a population of 12,000 people. Many lived in absolute poverty. In a good year, the total rental off the estate was £10,000, but it was rare for the full rental to be collected. As you can see, by the time I inherited, the estate was effectively bankrupt. This meant that legally the estate could not be sold.

Being an army man, apart from the estate I have no other money and I am not in a position to borrow. When it became obvious in the winter of 1846 that a total failure of the potato crop was inevitable, I employed an agent to manage my estate and return it to profitability. As a prominent land-owner in the county of Roscommon, I chair the Relief Committee which governs the Roscommon workhouse and other relief schemes, a job which caused tension among others.

Despite my best efforts, the situation here in Roscommon is impossible. I do not have the money to deal with the present situation and it is becoming increasingly obvious to me and other landlords, that the British Government are no longer interested in helping us.

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Group 3: John Ross Mahon, Estate Agent Manager

My cousin, Major Denis Mahon, employed me as agent for his estates in County Roscommon in late 1846. Prior to my appointment, there was £13,000 of unpaid rent due to Major Mahon because of a rent strike on the estate. The estate population was immense, and many of the tenants were living in total poverty. While these destitute (poor) tenants remained, little rent could be collected and few improvements made.

With the potato gone as the staple diet of the poor, oats would have to replace it. However, the average size of farm on this estate is four acres and this is not large enough to enable the family to pay their rent and feed themselves. I estimate that an average family (5 to 6 persons) would require 12 acres to achieve this. Therefore, approximately two-thirds of the population of the estate (8,000 people) will have to be removed. Emigration and eviction was my solution.

Although originally reluctant to implement my emigration scheme (I did, in fact, threaten to resign) the Major adopted my proposal when its obvious economic merit became apparent. To keep a pauper in the workhouse for one year cost in the region of £7, (and Major Mahon, through the Poor Rate - local tax levied on property owners, was responsible for the support of the workhouse) yet to send a pauper to Quebec (in Canada) cost only £4. One thousand Strokestown tenants were shipped to Quebec in early 1847. I evicted a further 3,000 people but allowed these people to remove their crops. Although evictions were carried out with the assistance of the military and police, no force was used in taking possession. During the past year, I have only been able to collect half of the years rent on the estate.

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Group 4: Patrick Browne, Middleman tenant of the Strokestown Estate

My family has lived on the town land of Cloonfad for 300 years. My brother, George, is the Roman Catholic Bishop of Elphin. In the 1760s, my father negotiated a lease for 192 acres with the Mahon family. In 1822, a new lease was drawn up and the rent increased. Myself and my son were named as partners in the lease although my father made us guarantee that we would not interfere with the land during his lifetime.

He then proceeded to issue sub-leases at random, and kept no record. By 1846, 56 families of under tenants were living on our holding. When my father died some of these tenants were sent notices to quit (eviction) but the tenants took me to court and won their case. At this point, a general rent strike commenced on our holding and consequently, I fell into arrears with the landlord, Major Mahon. He refused to assist me in the eviction of the approximately 30 families who were withholding rent, claiming that I was responsible for my own under tenants, so I evicted them. Of those who did not pay 24 are now dead and six have emigrated.

After the evictions, I attempted to plant some oats on the cleared land, but it appears to me that some of the evicted tenants squatting there have prevented people from taking it. I am liable for £150 Poor Rate (the poor rate is a tax which property owners had to pay. The tax was used to pay for workhouses for the poor) and tax each year, and given the above difficulties find it impossible to pay my full rent to Major Mahon.

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Group 5: Murray family, Gurtoose, Strokestown

In this part of the country, good quality land exists side-by-side with poorer bogland. The only way in which small tenant farmers such as my family are able to out bid richer farmers for land is to form partnerships with other families. In the late 18th century, my family, the Maguire's, the Holmes', and the Carlos' rented the town land of Gurtoose from the Mahon's. The total area of arable land in the town land was approximately 250 acres, and our family leased 65 acres of this. Our annual rent was £88.

The size of our extended family greatly increased in the decades after we moved to Gurtoose. In all, we had 10 houses, and we farmed the land together), pooling our resources and livestock. However, the increased population made it difficult to survive on this size of a holding. In 1844, we had not paid our rent. The other three families on the town land experienced similar problems, and when we did not pay the rent for several successive years, 67 households were evicted. Thirty two accepted Major Mahon's assisted emigration program to Canada. Eight of the Murray households (39 people) availed of Major Mahon's emigration scheme. Thirteen individuals who were evicted but did not emigrate were given some compensation. Many ended up in the workhouse.

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Group 6: James Killian, Northyard, Cottier Tenants

In pre-Famine Ireland, the very poor could not read or write and were native Irish speakers. They held land in one of two ways. The cottier was a farm laborer who rented a small portion of land annually from his employer. The agreement between the two was usually verbal, and the cottier paid his rent by working a fixed number of days on the employer's farm. The conacre system was more prevalent in poor areas. Under this system, a seasonal laborer made an annual verbal arrangement to occupy a portion of manured ground to grow one year's crop of potatoes. In conacre, rents were sometimes more than twice what would be paid on leased holdings.

The cottier and rural laboring classes, estimated at between two and three million, almost totally disappeared during the famine years. They would have made up a majority of the population on the Strokestown estate, although few documents describing their lives or experience exist. It was reported in the 1830s that middlemen around Strokestown were charging conacre tenants twice as much rent per acre than they were in turn paying to the landlord. The Great Irish Famine of the 1840s, like its contemporary counterparts, was very specific in terms of those who suffered and died. It is the poor and vulnerable, those at the bottom of the social scale who 'disappear' in times of social disaster. Often, these people are unable to read or write. Their experiences or lives are rarely recorded. They are the faceless victims who make up statistics.

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