

LIVING CONDITIONS DURING THE GREAT FAMINE

**Art and the Great Hunger exhibition, Quinnipiac
University**

JUNIOR CYCLE HISTORY: LEARNING OUTCOMES

Strand one: the nature of history

L0 1.6 Debate the usefulness and limitations of different types of sources of historical evidence, such as written, visual, aural, oral and tactile evidence

Strand two: the history of Ireland

L0 2.7 Describe the impact of famine and emigration on Irish society and how the Irish Diaspora contributed to historical developments in other parts of the world

LIVING CONDITIONS DURING THE FAMINE: LEARNING INTENTIONS

1. To describe what living conditions were like for ordinary people in Ireland in the 1840s
2. To extract historical knowledge from two paintings showing living conditions in the era of the Great Famine
3. To evaluate the usefulness of visual art as a source for the historian

ACTIVITY 1: BLUE SKY THINKING



- To discover what living conditions were like during the famine in Ireland, you will start by completing a **blue sky thinking exercise**.
- You will work in pairs to answer the question that follows in the next slide
- You can be as imaginative and as creative as you like with your answer.
- Write your answer on a post it.
- When finished, stick your post it on the classroom wall.

WHAT DO YOU THINK LIVING CONDITIONS WERE LIKE FOR
ORDINARY PEOPLE IN RURAL IRELAND IN 1845?

2. TO EXTRACT HISTORICAL INFORMATION FROM A PAINTING

PAINTING 1: 'SUNSET' (OR 'ROCK OF CASHEL')
BY (HENRY) MARK ANTHONY, (1817-86)

- Anthony was a British landscape artist.
- This painting was completed c.1847, during the height of the Great Famine in Ireland.
- The Rock of Cashel - which contains Cormac's Chapel (dating from the 12th century) and a 13th century Gothic cathedral - is seen in the background of this painting.



2. TO EXTRACT HISTORICAL INFORMATION FROM A PAINTING

PAINTING 1: 'SUNSET ' (OR 'ROCK OF CASHEL) BY (HENRY) MARK ANTHONY, (1817-86)

Working in pairs, study the painting (image next slide) and answer the following questions on your worksheet:

- Describe the type of houses you can see in the town of Cashel in 1847.
- What does this painting tell us about what living conditions were like in 1847?
- Why do you think the painter chose to show both the Rock of Cashel (12th cent.) and cottages (19th cent.) in the composition?



2. TO EXTRACT HISTORICAL INFORMATION FROM A PAINTING

PAINTING 2: 'COTTAGE, ACHILL ISLAND' BY
ALEXANDER WILLIAMS (1846-1930)

- Williams was an Irish landscape artist and a well known **taxidermist**.
- In 1899, Williams rented a cottage on Achill Island off the coast of Co. Mayo.
- Although this painting dates from 1899, the cottage is typical of the type that would have existed on Achill during the Great Famine.



2. TO EXTRACT HISTORICAL INFORMATION FROM A PAINTING

PAINTING 2: 'COTTAGE, ACHILL ISLAND' BY ALEXANDER WILLIAMS (1846-1930)

Working in pairs, study the painting (image next slide) and answer the following questions on your worksheet:

- Write three sentences to describe the condition of the cottage.
- Is there any evidence to show that the cottage is not derelict (abandoned) but is in fact inhabited?
- In 1873, a visitor to the island described the condition of one of the cottages as follows: a growth of diseased vegetation covers the thatched roof [...]; a cess pool of stagnant water oozes from the dung-heap, at either side of the door; a big slab of flat stone forms a sort of bridge across it; the mud walls have given way in parts [...]; the door is hanging by broken hinges; two holes indicate windows; into one of them, if the weather be damp, the tenant's top-coat is thrust to keep out the cold. Based on this description, do you think Williams' painting is an accurate depiction of a cottage on Achill in the 1800s?



Alexander Williams R.H.S.

PLENARY: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Based on your study of these images, which piece of art do you think is the most useful for a historian studying living conditions for ordinary people in Ireland in the 1800s?
- Which piece of art is the least useful? Explain your answer.
- Do you think visual art is a useful and/or reliable source for historians?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

During the famine, many Irish people were **evicted** from the types of cottages shown in the paintings 'Sunset' and 'Cottage, Achill Island'.

Students could use the internet or local library to research the topic of **evictions during the famine** and report back to the class on their findings.