

Many teachers make use of photographs when teaching History. Most classrooms are now equipped with internet access and data projectors. Rather than telling students what a fulacht fiadh or a bawn is we can now show them photographs of such items. When we deal with political figures we can show them photographs of Parnell or Pearse or Carson, etc.

A picture is worth a thousand words, as the cliché says. However, it becomes more complicated when we show students photographs of events; can we flash a photograph up onto the whiteboard and say, —This is the battle of the Bogside, and leave it at that? The more discerning student will realise that such photographs raise issues such as selectivity, representation, contextualisation and interpretation.

The great thing about Transition Year History is that it affords us time to explore and analyse the use of photographs as historical sources. Students can develop a range of skills in relation to photographs and engage in activities outside the classroom. There is scope to combine the study of photographs used for historical purposes with a study of contemporary media issues if links are desired with other subject areas such as Media Studies, English/Irish or Art. A number of approaches can be taken, ranging from the relatively simple to the more reflective.

1. Teach students where to locate photographs of historical interest.

Students should search for photographs of local interest. The following sites are recommended as starting points:

<http://www.nli.ie/digital-photographs.aspx>

This is the online digital photograph collection of the National Library of Ireland. Get students to search for their home town or specific events. For example —Dublin bombing|| throws up twelve results including events related to the Civil War, the Emergency, Nelson’s Pillar and the 1973 bombs.

Students need to match dates with photographs and learn to place them in their appropriate historical context. Students should also learn that some results from a particular search may be of no relevance at all.

<http://foto.clarelibrary.ie/fotoweb/>

The Clare County Library has an extensive collection of Clare-related photographs which can be browsed or searched.

<http://dublincitypubliclibraries.com/image-galleries>

Dublin City Library has various collections of photographs available online.

<http://www.corkpastandpresent.ie/mapsimages/corkphotographs/>

The Cork City Library site provides access to many photographs of Cork.

<http://life.time.com/history/>

Photographs from the Life magazine archive cover many notable historic events.

Photographers and collections worth investigating:

Margaret Bourke-White – photographed the liberation of Buchenwald, India and Pakistan in 1947 and many other significant occasions.

Dorothea Lange – photographed the Dust Bowl, Japanese-American internment during WWII, Ireland (particularly Co. Clare) in the mid 1950s. She created the famous —Migrant Mother|| image.

The Lawrence Collection – Ireland, 1870-1914. Images can be seen at the NLI website.

Fr. Francis Browne – of Titanic fame, but many other subjects are covered, both in Ireland and in other countries, during the first half of the 20th century.

2. Most students have access to digital cameras.

Get students to research images of their local area (e.g. from the NLI website, or through old postcards or even family photographs). Send them out to create, as closely as is safely possible, a matching modern version of the older photograph. This is a pleasant and easy task for the beginning of the year. It teaches them skills of visual literacy and close observation as they need to match up windows, chimneys, perspectives, etc.

(See <http://www.photography.paul-walsh.net/landscape/Cushman/> for exactly matched Dublin city centre scenes in 1961 and 2011.)

O'Connell Street, Ennis – around 1900 and 2009:



Using Photographs in the study of Transition Year History



A display of such photographs could be created. Students could be asked to make notes on:

- What is the same?
- What is different?
- What could students of the future learn from the photograph they have taken?
- If suitable books or records are available, the students could research how/when/why the main changes took place in their local area.

3. True or False worksheet on photographs as historical evidence.

- Students should be encouraged to **reflect** on and **discuss** the use of photographs as sources of **historical evidence**.
- This exercise could be completed in pairs or small groups using statements such as some of the propositions given here.
- Alternatively, each group could be asked to prepare points for and against one statement and to give their opinion as oral feedback to the class.
- Students could be asked to find photographs to illustrate their points-of-view and share them with the class as part of their feedback.

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Statement	True / False	Reason Why?
Photographs are very useful historical documents		
Photographs are a true representation of a particular time in history		
A photograph can represent information dishonestly		
Photographs are more useful than textual information		
Photographs capture unique moments in time and place		
A photographer can accidentally or deliberately create a biased image		
All photographs are biased in some way		
We need to know who took the photograph and why s/he took it		
An unlabelled photograph is useless as a historical source		
Contemporary photos of family and friends are of little historical value		
Modern photos are more likely to have been interfered with than older ones		

4. One way to encourage students to get the most out of photographic sources is to use an observe-analyse-interpret approach.

Observe	Analyse	Interpret
Describe exactly what you see,	What is happening in it?	What impact would this photograph have had on viewers at the time?
What people/objects are shown?	Is it a staged / unstaged shot?	Has its impact changed over time?
What is the setting	What does the photographer want us to see?	What can we learn from it?
What else can you see?	Was it intended as a public or private record?	What can we not learn from it?
Is there other relevant information available such as labels/captions?	Is it simply presenting facts, and/or is it a 'message' shot?	What can we infer from it?



Eviction scene, Moyasta, Co. Clare, 1888 (Lawrence Collection, NLI)

Using Photographs in the study of Transition Year History

Observe	Analyse	Interpret
<p>10 people (males) 3 policemen, man in bowler hat (partly obscured), 2 boys (barefoot). Stone cottage, thatched roof (weeds on it and tied down with rope). Doors off hinges, 2 tables and 4 súgán chairs thrown outside. Bushes, unpaved ground. Eviction scene, Clare, 1888.</p>	<p>Policemen and man in bowler hat sent to enforce eviction. Other men and boys are the evicted tenants/neighbours (?) Unstaged "stand-off" shot, but subjects must have been aware of the photographer's presence (?) Photo records the facts of an eviction, how it was carried out. Photographer deliberately creating an historic record (?)</p>	<p>1888 – Eviction part of Plan of Campaign, rent not paid (?) Resistance to eviction - bushes probably stuffed into doorway, now pulled away. Sullen attitude/body language of local men but no evidence of violence in this photograph. Poverty – walls and roof of cottage in poor repair, boys are barefoot, not much furniture. Don't know: did the tenants remain evicted? Where did they go? Where were the women/girls?</p>

What else could students add? Find other photographs to analyse/place in context.

5. Examining photographs for historical evidence.

The following questions taken from <http://www.edutopia.org/life-magazine-online-photography-analysis> are useful when examining a photograph as a possible source of historical evidence:

- **Subject matter:** What is the main subject of this photograph?
- **Time:** What might have happened just after or before the photo was taken?
- **Framing:** What would be visible if you could move the camera left or right, up or down?
- **Vantage point:** How far was the photographer from the images seen in the picture?
- **Dominance:** What is the first thing you notice in the picture?
- **Original purpose:** How was the photograph first seen or used? How is the photograph regarded today?
- **Intention:** What do you think the photographer was trying to express through the image?

Consider these questions in relation to the well-known Eddie Adams image from the Vietnam War which shows General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a Viet Cong suspect on 1st February 1968:



There is an interesting article at <http://www.thephoblographer.com/2013/02/01/this-week-in-photography-history-eddie-adams-pulitzer-winning-image-was-captured/> which places this photograph in a sequence of rarely seen before-and-after shots, and which also explains Eddie Adams 'attitude to his own Pulitzer Prize-winning shot:

The general killed the Viet Cong; I killed the general with my camera. Still photographs are the most powerful weapon in the world. People believe them; but photographs do lie, even without manipulation. They are only half-truths. ... What the photograph didn't say was, "What would you do if you were the general at that time and place on that hot day, and you caught the so-called bad guy after he blew away one, two or three American people?"

Students could be asked to find out:

- What was the context within which this photograph was taken?
- What is the story of (a) General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, (b) the Vietcong prisoner Nguyen Van Lem, and (c) the photographer Eddie Adams?
- What was the impact of this photograph on US public opinion in 1968?
- What were/are the conflicting attitudes to this photograph and the people in it?