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The Character of Their Content

Tedd Levy

"The schools ain't what they used to be and never was."—Will Rogers

Educational news accounts have been filled with reports about inadequate textbooks. Much of this criticism is prompted by yet another report from the American Textbook Council on the sad quality of history textbooks.

Social studies textbooks are not alone. In a recent review of widely used science textbooks for middle school, the American Association for the Advancement of Science could not find one that was satisfactory. They found that the textbooks cover too many topics and don't develop any of them well. The ten top-selling high school biology textbooks "do little to help students understand scientific advances that are changing people's lives."

Controversy over the content of textbooks has long plagued public education in general and history and social studies in particular. As early as 1830, Samuel Read Hall, an educational innovator from New England, wrote "many of the school-books in common use in the country, have been, and still are, entirely unfit for use. Many of the books are not adapted to the capacity of children, or do not present a satisfactory view of the subjects on which they treat."

Nineteenth-century textbooks were clear on civic virtues. They promoted love of country, love of God, duty to parents, thrift, honesty, and hard work. These characteristics were designed to encourage youngsters to support the accumulation of property, the certainty of progress, and the perfection of the United States. Schoolbooks were meant to train the child's character. One suspects that many of today's critics would welcome a return of these strong narratives, simpler days, and "triumphalism" of America's story. However attractive as these days seem, we live in more sophisticated and complicated times—one only needs to visit a classroom to see the challenge. It will no longer do to have textbooks only reflect the legends of a romanticized and fantasized monocultural past.

Since 1988, the American Textbook Council has offered a consistent critique of what it views as distasteful, distorted, or harmful history textbooks. Its latest report, "History Textbooks at the New Century," again focuses on what is viewed as an overemphasis on multiculturalism. "Multiculturalism gives every indication of seeking to alter the basic way in which children see the past," the report states. "The new history textbooks are helping to erase—if not national memory—then juvenile appreciation of the nation's achievements. Many of them are assaulting Western Civilization's integrity, record, and character. They are also propagating a strange new master narrative involving feminism and civil rights."

The main casualty of multiculturalism, the report concludes is the "'triumphalism' of the old American history—establishment of responsible government, development of a national economy, extension of democracy to blacks and women, influence in world affairs, a rising standard of living for most if not all." Gilbert T. Sewall, director of ATC, complains that content is increasingly deformed by identity politics and group pieties. In the May 31 issue of *Education Week*, he wrote that "publishers should produce cheaper books that are more text-centered, simpler in design, and more honest in content" and recommends that educators consider purchasing older textbooks that have "more detailed, trustworthy narratives than new social studies offerings." A publisher's representative stated that publishers are responding to what educators say they need. Sewall, he said, is "railing against the fact that texts have more color and graphics, a lot more multiculturalism, balanced representation of racial and ethnic groups."

Controversy over content will continue. It should include the knowledgeable but often absent voice of teachers. The political use of history, however, has a long and less than honorable history. Increasingly, national politicians are joining this discussion and seeking to influence or control the content of the social studies curriculum.

The most infamous case in recent times involved one of the most thoughtfully developed social studies programs—*Mam: A Course of*

Study. Attacked by then-Congressman John Conlan (R-AZ), it marked the end of public support for the "new social studies" and has all but disappeared from nation's schools.

Conservative education officials from the Reagan era (William Bennett, Lynne Cheney, Chester Finn, and Diane Ravitch) with easy access to financial support and the national media have spoken forcefully, continually, and very critically about public education and particularly the content of U.S. history. Prompted by such criticism, the U. S. Senate condemned the original History Standards for not giving enough attention to the great figures of the past and too much to minorities. This involvement by some Congressmen continues, as demonstrated this past summer by Senator Joseph Lieberman (D-CT) who introduced a resolution decrying the sad state of knowledge of history among college students and calling for required history courses in the nation's elite universities. Interestingly, Lieberman is a board member of the organization (headed by Lynne Cheney) that sponsored the survey that led to the resolution.

Notwithstanding their five-pound and fifty-dollar characteristics, the better U.S. history textbooks are designed for learning about our country's past—the people, ideas, and events that have shaped the nation. It is crucial for citizens of a democracy to know this history—the best and the worst of it—because in a society as diverse as the United States, history provides the values that unify it. Our social cohesion is based not on a common ethnic heritage or religion, but on a vision of opportunity, freedom, equality, and justice. When Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, he dreamed of a day when his children would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. Too often, this is the content that has been missing from our textbooks. Publishers won't reduce the greatness of America's story by including the stories of more of those who made it great. Critics need less fear of the present, more hope for the future.

About the Author

Tedd Levy, a middle school teacher for many years and now an educational consultant, was president of the National Council for the Social Studies in 1998-99.

Foreword

In 1997, the people of Ireland and of Irish descent around the world observed the 150th anniversary of the worst year (1847) of the Great Irish Famine, a catastrophe precipitated by a fungus that first destroyed the potato harvest of 1845 and led to mass starvation and emigration through 1849. To commemorate that anniversary, the New York State Legislature voted that study of the famine in Ireland be included in the state's human rights curriculum along with the study of slavery in the Americas and the European Holocaust. A team of scholars centered at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York, are composing a set of interdisciplinary lessons, units of study, and projects on the Great Irish Famine for grades 4 through 12.¹ The lessons emphasize the complexity of history by presenting multiple perspectives on the causes of the famine and the many related events that followed.² *Middle Level Learning* features some of these materials (for grades 5-8) in this issue. Teachers can organize these lessons and activities to suit their needs. For example, some teachers begin with a description of notable Irish Americans,



THE GREAT IRISH FAMINE

while others start with a discussion of the Columbian exchange and the lowly potato as an agent of historic change.

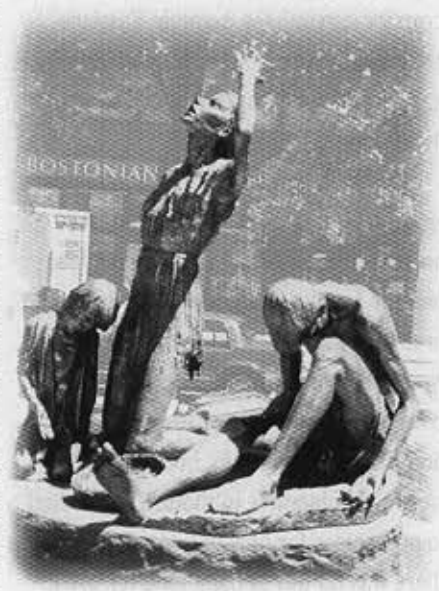
The lessons in this issue are based on material prepared for the New York State Great Irish Famine curriculum guide. The principal authors and editors are Maureen Murphy and Alan Singer of Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York. Contributing authors and editors include Maureen McCann Mileta of Hofstra University and Judith Y. Singer of Long Island University in Brooklyn, New York.

The Great Irish Famine provides teachers with a case history for exploring areas of social studies such as history, culture, economics, public policy, civics, ethics, religion, and demographics. The famine caused a peak in Irish immigration to America that changed the course of our history. Perhaps the most compelling reason to study the Great Irish Famine is that hunger and homelessness are still with us. The lessons of the Great Irish Famine have a claim on our fundamental humanity; they remind us that we have an opportunity to help our neighbors when similar disasters strike.

Notes

1. For more information about the Great Irish Famine Curriculum Project, contact Maureen Murphy by e-mail at catmnm@hofstra.edu, visit the website www.geocities.com/hsse_geo, or call (516) 463-6775.
2. Parts of these lessons were field tested in New York state by students in Cecelia Goodman's fifth grade class at PS 197 in Brooklyn; Rachel Gaglione's middle school classes at IS 119 in Queens; Jennie Chacko's, Adeola Tella's, and Michael Maiglow's middle school classes at IS 292 in Brooklyn; Cheryl Smith's middle school classes in Hicksville; and Lynda Costello's and Stephanie Hunte's middle school classes in Uniondale. In follow-up discussion sessions, students explained that they were most interested in changes in Ireland during the last 200 years, the causes of famine, whether famine is still a threat today, and how some people managed to survive under horrible circumstances. Jewella Lynch, a teacher in the Roosevelt School District; Jennifer Debler, a teacher in the Baldwin School District; and James Hughes, an assistant teacher in the Uniondale, New York, School District also reviewed the material.

Top photo: Alan Singer. Bottom: Boston Irish Famine Memorial Project. Photo Illustration: A. Ladson



Top: Irish Famine Memorial on Dublin's dock
Above: Boston Irish Famine Memorial Project



On the Cover:

Irish Famine immigrants arrive in Boston.
Boston Irish Famine Memorial Project

A Brief History of the Potato in Ireland

A New Food

The potato probably arrived in Ireland by accident.¹ In 1588, a great fleet of ships, sent out by Spain to conquer England, was defeated by the British navy. Some of the retreating Spanish Armada tried to get home by sailing around the northern tip of Scotland, but were damaged by storms. Some of these ships were wrecked along the Irish coast. The crews were killed or captured by the Irish, who took what they found on board. This booty probably included potatoes, which Spanish explorers had brought back from the New World. Once their initial suspicions (such as "Is this plant poisonous?") were overcome, Irish farmers planted this new crop along the Irish coast, where it grew very well. Soon the Irish of all ranks were eating potatoes, and it became the preferred food of the common man.

The potato arrived in an hour of need in Irish history. In the twelfth century, Pope Adrian IV, the only English pope, gave control of Ireland to King Henry II of England. In the sixteenth century Irish revolts against English rule were brutally crushed by the armies of Queen Elizabeth I. In this long

war, casualties were high and the homes of wealthy and poor alike were destroyed. The countryside, with its grain crops and cattle, was ruined. Just as that terrible war ended, the potato reached the hands of hungry Irish peasants.

The potato has many advantages as a food crop. First, it is a high-yield crop: potatoes produce more pounds of food per acre than any other crop. A single acre of land produced enough potatoes to supply an Irish family with ten pounds of potatoes a day for a whole year (enough to keep six people pretty well fed).

Second, potatoes are easy to plant and easier to harvest than a grain crop. To plant a yard with potatoes, all a poor farmer needs are a spade and a few potatoes from last year's crop: he cuts the potatoes into chunks, with a bud (or "eye") on each chunk, and places them in the soil. In about four months, if the weather is moderate, each eye will grow into a potato plant, with a big cluster of potatoes hanging on the roots. Grains have to be cut and threshed. Potato trenches can be dug on a hillside, where no plow could go. Drain some land at the edge of a bog, or clear some rocky soil, and potatoes can even be planted there.

Third, potatoes are easy to prepare for eating. Grains, like wheat or corn, usually have to be hulled and milled before they can be digested by humans. One can simply boil potatoes in an iron pot over an open fireplace. Potatoes can be used as animal feed: cows, pigs, and cattle can eat small or damaged produce. Also, the potato happens

to be a very nutritious food. It is mostly water and carbohydrates (children need carbohydrates like starch and sugar for energy and for their growing bodies), but it also provides important vitamins and minerals. For example, one potato contains 50% of the U.S. recommended daily allowance of vitamin C.

On the other hand, the potato as a crop has a few disadvantages. First, the advantages themselves created a problem, because peasants came to rely on the potato exclusively. If there was a failure of the potato crop, there was no other food to fall back on. For example, flood or late frost had destroyed potato crops, leading to smaller famines in Ireland before 1846. To be fair, it should be said that reliance on a single crop for survival was not unique to the Irish. In other cultures and climates, people have grown and depended on one crop for survival; for example Russians grew mostly wheat, Asian peoples grew rice, and several South American cultures depended on maize.

Second, before the invention of refrigerators, there was no good way to store potatoes for periods of more than a few months (unlike grain, which can be stored in dry rooms or silos for years). Peasants would dig a pit, fill it with potatoes, and cover them with moss or leaves as protection from frost and rain, but the potatoes were still vulnerable to mold. This method kept potatoes for only one season, and thus there was no way to bank food for use in hard times.

Finally, the fact that potatoes gave such



"Here and There; or Emigration a Remedy," 1848

a high yield tempted landlords to subdivide plots again and again to bring in more rent. As a result, Irish families were forced to survive on less and less land. Economically, it was a formula that could only bring disaster in the long run.

During the 1700s the population of Ireland grew rapidly, largely as a result of more food being available thanks to the potato, which replaced oats as the main subsistence crop. From 1701 to 1801 (at which point England forced a union of Ireland with Great Britain), the population of Ireland doubled, reaching nearly 5,000,000.

Poverty Still

Although the potato diet allowed population growth, the vast majority of people remained very poor. After being defeated by the British, the Irish became a nation of tenants on their own lands. The rent for a small plot of land for a potato patch, even a small patch on swampy bog, was very high. Most people had no money, so part of their harvest always went to the landlord. People also had to give a share of their potatoes to the Anglican (Protestant) Church of England, a tithe (tax) they bitterly resented because most of the Irish were Roman Catholics.

The potato needs little in the way of cultivation, so preparing the ground, sowing, and harvesting the crop takes only three months. Thus, for much of the year, peasants had little to do, no way to earn money, and no food reserve if stored potatoes ran out before the next harvest. With no public education available, often kicked off the land for inability to pay rent, hanging on the edge of starvation, many of the Irish sank into apathy. Squatters built shacks alongside roads and grew potatoes on scraps of land. Many people were driven to commit small crimes so they would go to prison, where at least they would be fed. Alcoholism and drunkenness became a

major problem. Workhouses in the cities provided labor and food, but these were usually overcrowded and unsanitary, and they were overwhelmed in famine years. Several British commissions studied the "situation of the Irish" and made recommendations to the government for reform, but enormous changes in agriculture and economic policy would have been needed to lift the Irish out of poverty, and this did not happen. In 1845, the Devon Commission concluded that the Irish people's "sufferings were greater than [that which] the people of any other country in Europe had to sustain" and recommended moderate reforms. But such reforms were not implemented by the British.

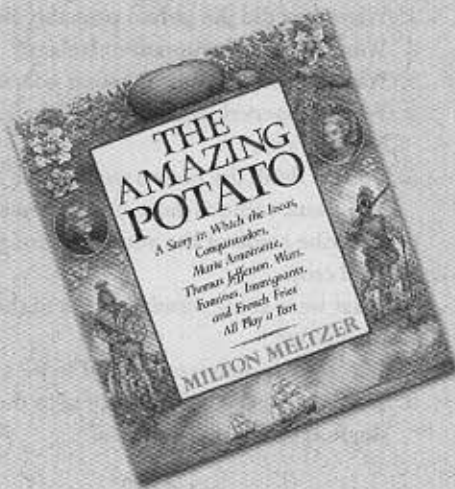
Blight and Famine

Problems with the Irish potato crop were first reported in the *Dublin Evening Post* on September 9, 1845. Overnight, healthy green fields of potato plants turned black and there was an overpowering, sickening sweet smell. Potatoes were rotting underground. At first, the cause of the crop failure was unknown. Some people believed it was punishment from God or was caused by excess dampness. The blight, however, was the result of a fungus known as *Phytophthora infestans*, which probably arrived in Europe from North America. There had been similar potato crop failures on the east coast of the United States in 1842 and 1843. The blight spread quickly through Holland and Belgium, arriving in Ireland in 1845, when it destroyed 30% of the potato crop. In 1846, 1848, and 1849, nearly the entire potato crop failed.² Although the blight did not strike in 1847 (possibly due to weather conditions), people starved because they had eaten any unspoiled "seed potatoes" during the terrible winter of 1846-47. The British government decided not to provide replacement

seed potatoes in 1847.³

The first official government response to the potato blight was to estimate damage to the crop. Police reported crop losses weekly. Experts also investigated the situation and suggested possible "remedies," which were wishful thinking. At first, British Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel purchased American Indian corn to help feed the hungry, and he set up small-scale public work relief projects. Later, the government and private charities set up food kitchens where they distributed soup, but such efforts were quickly overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem.

The situation for the Irish worsened when Peel and his supporters were replaced by a new government headed by Lord John Russell. Like most leading British thinkers and government officials at that time, he believed in *laissez-faire* economics. This theory held that government involvement in the economy (like aid to the hungry) would only increase problems like scarcity in the long run. *Laissez-faire* (lay-say fair) is a French phrase that means "leave it alone"; in other words, let market forces determine supply and price, with no government help or intervention. Thus, the British exported grain and livestock from Ireland to England (to pay for rent, tithing, and taxes) while the Irish people were dying from hunger and famine-related diseases.



There was also strong sentiment in England that Ireland was responsible for its own troubles and that local resources had to be used for relief. The influential newspaper *The Times of London* blamed “Irish character” for hardship in Ireland. An editorial in September 1846 charged that “the Irish peasant had tasted of famine and found that it was good,” because he or she preferred “relief over labour.” Because of sentiments like these, hungry and helpless people were discouraged from seeking what little assistance was available in the workhouses and from charity.

Most families tried to survive the loss of the potato crop by selling their livestock, household possessions, and even their clothing, and waiting for conditions to improve. There were some food riots and a brief and unsuccessful rebellion against British rule in July, 1848. Eventually, as the blight returned again and again, many starving Irish families were forced to leave their homeland on ships bound for foreign shores.

Between 1841 and 1851, one Irish person out of four disappeared from the island. The official population declined from 8,175,124 to 6,552,385 between 1841 and 1851, a loss of more than 1.6 million people due to famine related deaths and emigration (which is a low estimate, as the



Potato plants with blue fungicide

Alan Singer

population was expected to increase over this period by a million or so).⁴ At least 500,000 people were evicted from their homes because they were unable to pay rent on their small farms. Historians estimate that as many as one million people may have died from hunger and disease during the Great Famine.

Irish emigrants traveled to England, Canada, Australia, and the United States. Famine immigrants crowded into Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. By the 1850 United States census, there were 961,719 Irish-born residents. This was 42.8% of the country's foreign-born population.

As for the potato? By 1900, fungus-resistant hybrids were being bred by plant

scientists, and chemists were experimenting with fungicides, but such technology was developed too late for Ireland and its people.

Notes

1. The major source for this section is M. Meltzer's *The Amazing Potato* (New York, HarperCollins, 1992), 40-46.
2. Major sources for this section are Maureen Murphy, Maureen McCann Mileta, and Alan Singer, "The Great Irish Famine (1845-52): An Historical Introduction," *Time & Place, The Newsletter of the New York State Council for the Social Studies* 30, no. 3 (February 2000): 9-14; Peter Grey, *The Irish Famine* (New York: Abrams, 1995); Noel Kissane, *The Irish Famine, A Documentary History* (Dublin: National Library of Ireland, 1995), 172.
3. Cecil Woodham Smith, *The Great Hunger* (New York, Harper & Row, 1962), 147 and 286.
4. Cecil Woodham Smith, *ibid.*, 411.

Questions

1. What year did the potato probably first arrive in Ireland?
2. Who brought the potato to Ireland?
3. Why did the Irish begin eating potatoes?
4. What happened when Ireland rebelled against England rule?
5. Do you think the potato would have become so important without these other events? Why or why not?
6. Describe some of the advantages of the potato as a food crop.
7. What were some disadvantages to the potato as a food crop?
8. Why is the potato considered to be a healthy food?
9. Were the Irish a unique society in their reliance on a single crop for their survival?
10. Why did the Irish remain poor despite an abundance of potatoes?
11. Why were many Irish upset by the tax they had to pay to the Anglican Church?
12. What was the potato blight?
13. Why did the British government take limited steps in response to the food shortage?
14. What happened to the population of Ireland during the famine years?
15. How did the Great Irish Famine affect the population of the United States?
16. In your opinion, was the potato really an “amazing food?” Explain your answer.

Traces of the Written Record

Two primary sources of historical information about the Great Irish Famine are newspaper articles and personal letters and diaries of the time. The Great Irish Famine occurred when the industrial revolution was young and the British Empire was near the height of its colonial powers. The famine challenged the British government, international humanitarian organizations, and other philanthropic groups to provide aid to massive numbers of poor Irish, many living in remote areas, who were suffering from starvation and famine-related diseases. The degree to which people outside of Ireland responded to the crisis continues to draw praise and condemnation more than a century later.

Newspaper Accounts

There was discussion and debate about the Irish famine in newspapers and magazines in Ireland and Great Britain. The text below is from contemporary newspaper articles.¹

"No Apprehension"

The Dublin Evening Post,
September 9, 1845

"We have made rather an ample report of a matter of great importance indeed, namely, the failure of the potato crop—very extensively in the United States, to a great extent in Flanders and France, and to an appreciable amount in England. We have heard something of the kind in our own country—especially along the coast—but we believe that no apprehension whatever is entertained even of a partial failure of the potato crop in Ireland."

"The Potato Disease"

The Illustrated London News,
October 18, 1845

"Accounts received from different parts of Ireland show that the disease in the potato crop is extending far and wide, and causing great alarm among poor farmers. Letters from landlords describe the misery of the poor people around them, and urge speedy intervention on the part of the Government to discover the extent of the calamity, and provide wholesome food as a substitute for the lost potatoes."



Soldiers ejected families and destroyed cottages, 1848

"Emigration"

Galway Mercury, reprinted in *The Freeman's Journal*, April 1, 1846

"The tide of emigration from this port has fairly set in for the season. Already over twelve vessels are about to take their departure from our port, all of them having their full complement of passengers, for various places on the shores of the New World."

"Exportation of Food"

The Waterford Freeman, an Irish paper, October 3, 1846

"When famine is spreading its pall over the land, and death is visiting the poor man's cabin, it is not meet that the food of millions should be shipped from our shores. It is indispensably necessary that grain should remain in the country while scarcity is apprehended. Will not a starving population become justly indignant when whole fleets, laden with the produce of our soil, are unfurling their sails and steering from our harbours, while the cry of hunger is ringing in their ears?"

"Famine and Starvation in the County of Cork"

The Illustrated London News,
January 16, 1847

"In the parish of Kilmoe, fourteen died on Sunday; three of these were buried in coffins, eleven were buried without other covering than the rags they wore when alive. And one gentleman, a good and charitable man, speaking of this case, says—'The distress is so appalling [horrible], that we must throw away all feelings of delicacy'; and another says—'I would rather give 1 shilling to a starving man than 4 shilling 6 pence for a coffin.' One hundred and forty have died in the Skibbereen Workhouse in one month; eight have died in one day! The chairman of the Relief states that 15,000 persons in that wide district are poor; of this 5,000 are entirely dependent on charity."

"Evictions of Peasantry in Ireland"

The Illustrated London News,
December 16, 1848

"A large change is taking place in Ireland. The increase of emigration and the eviction of poor tenant farmers, will, in the course of a short time, end the complaint that there are too many people in Ireland. But this revolution is accompanied by an amount of human misery that is absolutely horrible . . . Whole districts are cleared . . . The ditch side, the dripping rain, and the cold sleet are the covering of the wretched outcast the

moment the cabin is tumbled over him. The most fertile land in the world in this noble county is now thrown out of tillage. No spade, no plough goes near them. There are no symptoms of life within their borders.”

A Personal Diary

As potato crops failed, farmers were not able to pay their rent, because other cash crops (such as grains) were not sufficient to both feed their families and cover rent and other expenses. Thus, many landowners went bankrupt. These journal entries describe conditions in Ireland in the fall of 1847 and the following winter. Their author, Elizabeth Smith, was the wife of a landowner in the County of Wicklow, Ireland.²

October 10, 1847. Little in the papers but failures. Cattle dealers in Dublin have gone and caused immense distress. Not

an offer for a beast of any sort at any of the late fairs.

John Robinson has lost seven thousand pounds by bad debts, trusting people who have failed to pay. . . . He hopes to recover about half this sum when the affairs of some of these firms are wound up.

October 17, 1847. The winter prospects look very gloomy. The destitution is expected to be wider spread than last year, for the very poor will be very nearly as ill off, while the classes above which then relieved them...are in serious difficulties. No money anywhere; the little hoards of cash and goods all spent and nothing to replace wither.

The ministry says the land must support the people on it. Half the country having been left untilled for want of means to crop it, while a million of money was squandered in destroying the roads, much

of it finding its way into pockets full enough before.³

The Queen has ordered the begging box to go round all the English churches for us! Sir J. Burgoyne, head of the Poor Law Commission writes to the *Times* newspaper to entreat charitable subscriptions for the starving districts. Mr. Trevelyan, the Secretary to the Treasury, sends this precious emanation forth to the public with some little agenda of his own to the same tune. One would suppose stones were scarce in Ireland and her rivers dry when no one hoots such drivellers out of the country.

We want no charity. We want a paternal government to look a little after our interests, to legislate for us fairly, to spend what we should have properly among us, to teach us, and to keep a tight rein over idleness, recklessness, apathy. It is plain these people can't do it.

October 17, 1847. Every newspaper brings large additions to the long list of bankrupts; the whole mercantile world is affected by the pressure on the money market. Banks have failed everywhere. Manufacturers, traders, brokers. We can sell nothing, and though a bountiful harvest has filled the country with cheap provisions, no one can buy.

Questions and Investigations

1. Do these newspaper accounts and excerpts from a personal diary seem to be credible sources of historical information? Why or why not?
2. Are these sources in agreement with each other with regard to what was happening in Ireland?
3. Do the reporters from the *Illustrated London News* seem sympathetic to the Irish? What words or phrases do they use that indicate their sentiment?
4. In your opinion, was it the responsibility of the British government in 1845-49 to stop the suffering of the poor in Ireland? Explain your view.
5. Why would Elizabeth Smith write in her journal that “prospects look very gloomy”?
6. According to these journal entries, who was being hurt by events during the Great Irish Famine?
7. Elizabeth Smith says that the Irish do not want charity. What does she feel they do need?
8. If you were a member of the British government, what plans would you propose to address the hardship caused by the potato blight? Explain the reasons for your answer.

Background photo: Traditional stone wall on the Aran Islands

Notes

1. Many of these newspaper articles and cartoons are available at “Views of the Famine,” a website at vassun.vassar.edu/~sttaylor/FAMINE/, created by Steven J. Taylor, Associate Director, Instructional Media Services, Vassar College. See also Noel Kissane's *The Irish Famine, A Documentary History* (Dublin: National Library of Ireland, 1995).
2. David Thomson and Moyra McGusty, eds., *The Irish Journals of Elizabeth Smith, 1840-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 157-158.
3. Many public works projects were badly planned and organized, or left half-finished, leaving roads worse than they had been before—which may be why the author says work crews were “destroying” the roads.

THE DELICIOUS, NUTRITIOUS PRATIE

POTATOES HAVE A REPUTATION as a fattening food among health conscious Americans, but this is an unfair stereotype.¹ The bad rap arises from the way potatoes are usually prepared, either cooked with fat or smothered in it. French-frying sliced potatoes in oil adds 200 "empty calories" (energy provided by fat with no other nutrients) to a typical serving. Adding a single tablespoon of butter or sour cream to a medium-sized baked potato doubles its calories.

Seasoned only with non-caloric spices or low-calorie dressings, a potato can be nutritious as well as delicious. The potato itself has fewer calories than many of the foods people turn to when trying to lose weight. A medium-sized potato weighing 5 ounces that has been baked, boiled, or steamed contains about 100 calories, less than a 1/2-cup serving of creamed cottage cheese, a 3-ounce hamburger, a cup of plain yogurt, or an 8-ounce glass of orange juice. Potatoes are relatively low in calories because they contain almost no fat. Most of the potato's calories come from carbohydrates (mostly starch). The potato is 78% water by weight (water has no calories). Potatoes also contain dietary fiber (especially if eaten with the skin),

providing the bulk that helps dieters satisfy their hunger. In an experiment at an American college, students lived on a 1,000-calorie-a-day potato diet. With belly-filling potatoes included in every meal and snack, the students lost an average of 14 pounds in 8 weeks.²

Potatoes are nutritious because they contain carbohydrates

like starch and sugar (which we need for energy and growth), vitamins (essential chemicals that our bodies need in small amounts), and minerals. The largest concentration of vitamins and minerals is found in the skin and just beneath it, so potatoes are most nutritious when eaten skin and all, or cooked with the skin on and peeled afterward. Potatoes do not contain a lot of protein, but if they are eaten with a dairy product (some milk, cheese, or yogurt), the meal can provide adequate protein, which is the stuff that muscles are made of (and that growing children need especially). Table 1 provides a breakdown of the nutrition in a potato, what you get as percentages of U.S. Recommended Daily Allowances (USRDA) for various essential nutrients.



Rows of healthy potato plants on the Aran Islands

Table 1. Nutrients in a Potato (5 ounces, 100 calories)

Nutrient	% USRDA	Nutrient	% USRDA	Nutrient	% USRDA
Protein	6	Iron	10	Magnesium	8
Vitamin C	35	Vitamin B6	20	Zinc	4
Thiamin	4	Folacin	8	Copper	10
Riboflavin	2	Phosphorus	8	Iodine	15
Niacin	10				

Questions

1. Why do potatoes have a reputation as an unhealthy food?
2. How many calories are in a medium-sized potato?
3. Why are potatoes so low in calories?
4. Potatoes provide 10% or more of which daily requirements?
5. How should one cook a potato to get the most food value from it?
6. Why are potatoes considered a nutrient bargain?
7. In your opinion, should young people be discouraged from eating French-fried potatoes and potato chips because they are cooked in oil? Explain your views.

Boxty Pancakes

Boxty Pancakes are a traditional Irish potato pancake served on the eve of All Saints' Day, All Hallows' Eve. Boxty can also be baked as a kind of potato bread. Boxty can be served with a low-calorie spread, like unsweetened applesauce or nonfat, flavored yogurt.³

Ingredients

- 1 1/2 lb. potatoes (5 medium potatoes)
- 1 onion
- 4 cups flour
- 1/4 cup melted butter or margarine
- 1 tsp. baking soda
- Milk or water (about 1/2 cup)
- Dash of salt and pepper

Steps

1. Peel the potatoes.
2. Boil two of the potatoes for 20 minutes (until soft) and then mash them.
2. Grate the other potatoes and the onion. Drain liquid.
3. Mix the grated potatoes and onion, mashed potatoes, flour, salt, pepper, melted butter or margarine, and baking soda.
4. Add just enough water or milk to make a thick batter that will still pour.
5. Lightly oil a frying pan, using just enough so that the boxty will not stick.
6. Heat the oil, then spoon the mixture on the pan. Cook both sides over moderate heat. Serve immediately.



A potato dinner in County Kerry, 1846

Pictorial Times

Other Activities

1. Use cookbooks and science books to learn more about potatoes. Then develop an advertising campaign with posters, slogans, songs, and stories encouraging people to eat low-fat potato recipes.
2. Prepare a research report that describes the importance of the nutrients provided by the potato.
3. Design a poster that illustrates the nutritional value of the potato. Decorate the border with a printed design that has been carved from a potato.
4. Try other traditional Irish dishes using potatoes. Look up Colcannon, for example (see note 3).
5. Create an illustrated recipe book including potato recipes from around the world.
6. Collect international folk tales where potatoes are a part of the story.

Notes

1. A major source for this section is the chapter "Please Pass the Potatoes" in *Jane Brody's Good Food Book* (New York: Norton, 1987), 29-37.
2. A study by Hans Fisher of Rutgers University, cited by Jane Brody, p. 31.
3. This is a variation on a traditional recipe. Many recipes can be found in Theodora Fitzgibbon's *A Taste of Ireland in Food and Pictures* (London: Pan Books, 1995).

Dhia dhuit! My name is Megan O'Rourke. This is the story of how I came to America.

In the winter of 1846 I turned thirteen. My family was Da, Mammy, my younger brothers Danny and Michael, and my baby sister Peggy. Our home was near Ballincollig, a village in the Lee valley not far from Cork city. We lived in a one-room cabin with a thatched roof, with three neighboring cabins all huddled together at a crossroads. Fields of potatoes, praties we called them, and grain surrounded our village.

My friends and I went to a hedge school, meeting outdoors in fine weather by the hedge along the side of the road, where we learned to read and write. Our teacher Mr. Kelly also taught us some Latin and our numbers. The older children learned a little Greek.

As the eldest child, I had many responsibilities. I took care of the little ones in the family. I also went for water to cook our praties and for washing. I stoked the fire and boiled water in a big black pot. I did not mind the hard work. All children my age were working hard. But we had spe-

From County Cork to New York: The Emigration of Megan O'Rourke

(A work of historical fiction)

A Glossary of Terms appears at the bottom of this narrative

cial days that brought us all together. My girlfriends and I danced at the crossroads on many a Friday evening. We put an old wooden door on the ground and made it clatter with our feet. The boys played a game called hurling, with sticks carved of ash wood, a ball, and a goal. On the feast of St. Brigit we would go to the abbey at Ovens to a pattern.

Da was paid eight pence a day when he worked in the big fields, but he wasn't needed every day. We had a small patch where we raised oats and potatoes. We sold the oats to pay for the rent and for a bit of cash for clothes and such. In the old days,

we Irish owned our land, but by 1800 most of our land was owned by English landlords. Many did not even live in Ireland, but relied on an Irish estate manager to collect the rent.

Potatoes are good for you and my family ate a lot of them, about a stone of potatoes a day after a good harvest. We boiled the praties in the big black pot, and fed the skins to the pigs.

When I was small, Betsy, our cow, gave us milk for making

buttermilk to have with our praties. Sometimes Ma added a little fish to our colcannon for flavor. The landlords owned the rights to fish in the rivers, so we had to be sly about catching them.

We thought our treatment by the English was unfair. When the English Parliament made Ireland part of the United Kingdom in 1800, they said Ireland was an equal part of the kingdom. But we felt like a colony. The United States belonged to England, too, not so long ago. Many Irish people wanted an independent Ireland, just like the people in America had their own country. Irish men and women who had



Stone farm houses built beside a canal near Tullamore



Elderly farmer stacks peat near Tullamore

Abbey – a church that is part of a religious community
Blight – a disease caused by a fungus that destroyed potatoes
Bog – damp lowlands not useful for farming

Colcannon – potato and cabbage soup **Dhia dhuit** – hello
Gombeen men – Merchants who lent money at an exorbitant rate
Gorta mór – great hunger

gone to America fought in the American Revolutionary War. Many who stayed fought in the Irish rising in 1798. The English won that awful fight, and Ireland became but a part and parcel of the United Kingdom.

Even before the great hunger, what we call the *górta mór*, life was hard. People would go hungry while they waited for the praties to grow. Some years the crop wasn't very good and that meant people had to sell their possessions just to buy food.

Sometimes Da walked to the big farms in County Tipperary to work during the harvest to make a little extra money. Because of our hard work, my family always got by somehow. We also knew that even if one harvest was small, the praties would come back the next year and everything would be all right.

But starting in the fall of 1845 things were not all right. The praties rotted in the ground with a horrible smell. Fields of potatoes grew black overnight. Those we had stored under some peat rotted, too. It was the blight. That fall, we did our best to survive. We searched the fields for the few potatoes that had not been ruined by the blight. My Da sold Betsy, so at least we had money to pay rent. Mammy went to town and sold some of our household goods. All winter Da and Mammy worried because there was not enough money for both food and rent. Times were so hard we had to eat the seed potatoes we were saving to plant in the spring. Da had to buy seed potatoes to sow for the 1846

crop. We planted them, as we always did, on St. Patrick's Day.

As the summer came to Ballincollig, we all hoped for a good harvest. The fields were green again, and everyone was hopeful. Then the blight returned, and field after field turned black. People cried, "Heaven protect us!" A second hungry summer meant famine. There were other crops to be harvested, like oats and barley, but they belonged to the landlord. Grain became more and more expensive. Some shopkeepers took advantage of the food shortage to raise their prices. Others gave us credit at a very high price. We called them "gombeen" men, and the people hated them.

Some yellow corn came from America. We heard the English government had bought it for the Irish. The corn was dry and hard as rock and there was no mill hereabouts to grind it. We tried boiling some, but it was still hard and hurt the stomach. Finally, Da had to sell our new crop of oats to get money to pay our rent. People sold everything they had to buy food and pay rent.

There was some government work on

the roads for the poorest men, but they said Da was too well off to get the work. Next door, the baby boy died of fever, with all the women keening over him. Soon so many were dying that people grew silent. No longer did villagers gather to honor the dead with a proper mourning and funeral. The *górta mór* had begun.

As if we weren't suffering enough, the winter of 1846-47 was the worst I ever saw. There were icy rains and high winds. We rarely have snow in Ireland, but that winter it snowed, too. We were cold and hungry, but we were better off than some of our neighbors, because we had put aside a little money for hard times. Not one of us was sick. Most important, we were together.

Some landlords reduced the rent or gave people more time to pay because of the famine. Some landowners became poor themselves when they helped tenants by creating work or by buying food. When families could not pay the rent, they were put out of their houses by soldiers. We saw a family stand in the yard while soldiers set fire to the thatched roof and then knocked down the old stone walls. Families tried to find shelter at the edge of a bog or in a ditch along the road. People wandered the countryside begging. We were lucky. Our landlord put off our rent, hoping we could pay after the next good harvest.

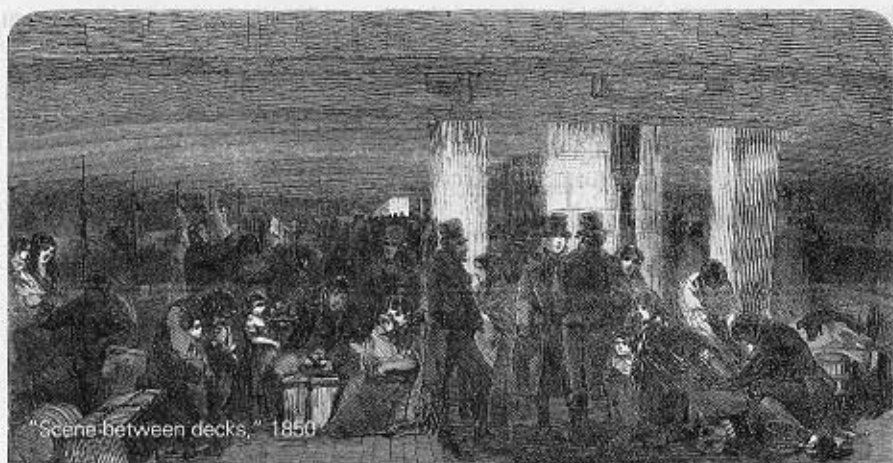
Even while the Irish were hungry and starving, boatloads of food were leaving Ireland. The grain that we paid as rent was sold overseas by the land-



Famine-era workhouse in Athlone

Keening – crying **Parliament** – the legislature of England
Pattern – a gathering to say prayers and then celebrate
Praties – potatoes

Quaker – a member of the spiritual Society of Friends, a Protestant Christian group, founded in England, with influential members at the time in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia



lords and their agents. In some towns there were riots when people attacked shops or wagons that were taking our grain to ships bound for England. The lad next door took a few bags of oats from a cart traveling on the Cork road. He was arrested and imprisoned at Spike Island until he was sent to some far-off place called Van Diemen's Land in Australia.

The English and their newspapers liked to tell the Irish people that Ireland was part of the United Kingdom. But when famine came, they told us that it was up to us to take care of ourselves. Fortunately, there were good people who reached our little village. English Quakers opened a soup kitchen, which helped us survive the coming winter. A Quaker woman told me that American Quakers had organized a relief campaign. School children sent their pennies. Even the prisoners at Sing Sing in New York state gave money. The Choctaw Indians of Oklahoma, who had their own story of sorrow and suffering, collected money and sent it to Ireland. I thought America must be a wonderful place.

In the spring of 1847, the only relief that the English government offered to the desperate Irish was the poorhouse. There were poorhouses built before the famine in every district in Ireland. They were for the

old, the sick, and the mentally disabled. They were almost like jails. When the famine came, they grew overcrowded, and disease spread quickly among the residents. The worst thing about the poorhouses was that families were separated when they entered. Men lived in one wing, women in another, and children in a third. Mammy said we would never go to the poorhouse. Whatever happened, she said, we would always stay together.

That spring we were desperate because we'd eaten the seed potatoes that we usually saved for the next year's planting. The English refused to provide "seed potatoes," even though this meant famine for sure. When Da heard there was to be no seed potatoes, he made a decision—we would leave our beloved Ireland. We would go to America. Our neighbors were talking about leaving for places like Quebec or St. John's in Canada, or Australia, or England. We were afraid that we would never see each other again. The night before the O'Rourke family left Ballincollig, people held an "American Wake," the women crying on each other's shoulders, the men talking quietly beside the wall.

Early the next morning, the whole family walked into Cork, our luggage in handcart. There Da sold a few tools, pots, and

pans. Then we walked twelve miles further to Queenstown harbour, where we bought passage for New York aboard *The Merchant*. We stood on the deck watching the coast of Ireland slip away. Someone sang "*Táim ag imeacht thar sáile*," "I'm going over the sea." Mammy cried, but we children were too excited to be sad.

Our journey of 3,000 miles took three weeks. *The Merchant* was poorly equipped to carry people. It brought lumber from Canada to England, and its owner was glad to fill up the ship with Irish who could pay for the return voyage west. When we got out into the Atlantic and were forced to stay below deck, the trip became a nightmare. At first, we were all seasick. We ate hard biscuits and drank water stored in barrels. There was no water for washing and no sanitation for 200 passengers. I would have given cattle more care than what we got. People sickened living in those crowded quarters. Ship fever spread from family to family. Mammy and Peggy caught the fever. Mammy got so weak that we thought she would die, but she awoke in the morning with her fever broken. Beside her, our little Peggy was silent. She did not move at all.

There was no Catholic priest with us on that coffin ship, so there could be no funeral. We wrapped little Peggy in a sheet. The captain said a prayer and then buried



"First night in America," 1850

Rising – an uprising or insurrection against British rule of Ireland

Ship fever – typhus, which is caused by a bacteria, spread by lice and fleas, and is very contagious

Stone – an English or Irish measure equal to 14 pounds

Táim ag imeacht thar sáile – "I'm going over the sea," often spoken when people left Ireland to live in another land

her at sea. Our little Peggy was so young and innocent, we knew her soul went right to heaven. There were many others who did not survive the trip. Maybe ten. I did not care to count.

Finally, on a gray morning, we arrived in New York at a pier in the East River. There were so many ships, and we had never seen so many people, all of them milling about. I'd thought Cork was big, but New York City seemed endless. We were starved and dirty and grieving, so I cannot explain the sudden hope that sprang into my heart when we first saw that sooty skyline.

Officials came aboard and looked at Mammy. They decided she was getting better and could leave the ship. I later learned that many people who had come to Canada arrived with fever and were kept in fever

sheds on an island in the St. Lawrence River.

Da has found us a place to live near where our ship landed, a neighborhood called the Five Points. It is full of people like ourselves—poor Irish men and women, children running about, all looking to make a new life. Every building is crowded to bursting. As summer comes on, it gets hot. Da has found work as a laborer on the docks. He works long days lifting heavy boxes and barrels, crates swinging over his head, but he is already saving pennies toward better living quarters.

Outside of Five Points, people aren't very friendly to us. They say the Irish live in shacks with their pigs, have too many wild children. They say we were dirty. Well, we are doing the best we can. We will show New Yorkers what fine citizens the Irish will

be when we have a chance to work, to go to school, and make our own lives.

We have heard that the Irish in New Orleans have it much harder. The work on a canal there is very dangerous and there is a lot of disease. In Philadelphia, people have fought the Irish in the streets, and in Boston there are signs saying "NO IRISH NEED APPLY." We've talked about moving west, where the skies are big and open, but Da says we have the best chance in New York, so here we'll stay. Maybe when I'm grown up I'll go out west.

Often I miss the Irish land... the wind from the sea mixed with the smell of a peat fire, but I'm glad we came to America. In Ireland in 1847 there was no hope. Here, at least, there is hope.

Questions

1. What was the O'Rourke home like in Ireland?
2. What was life like for Megan in Ireland?
3. What was the blight, and when did it first appear?
4. What did people do to survive the hard times?
5. Why were many Irish angry at the English?
6. What was the trip like to the United States?
7. How were the Irish treated when they arrived in the United States and Canada?

Activities

1. **Class Discussion:** Has anyone here ever moved to a new home? Why do people move? Was anyone here born in another country? Do you have parents, grandparents, or friends who were born in another country? Why is it sometimes very hard to move?
2. **Writing Assignment:** Imagine the year is 1847 and you are an immigrant from Ireland. Write a letter to family and friends left behind in Ireland. In your letter, explain whether you think they should move to the United States (see sidebar).
3. **Class Debate:** Should the British have donated grain, exported from Ireland for taxes and rent during the famine, to the hungry Irish? Role play the views that might have been taken by an Irish tenant farmer, an English landlord, a Canadian ship captain, and an American Quaker.

4. **Art Project:** Create dioramas based on the story "The O'Rourke Family Comes to America."

5. **Further Reading:** Read and discuss adolescent literature (see page 15) about the Great Irish Famine.

A Letter Home

Student Historical Fiction

Dear Beloved Friend,

How is everything in my old beloved Ireland? Oh, how I do miss home. I remember every little thing that I loved so dearly. I miss the pure and fresh air and the green valleys. Make sure you speak to my mama and papa about me because I know how much they worry about me.

During the voyage to America there was much suffering. Many of the passengers got very sick with fever. When we arrived we had to be placed in quarantine.

New York City is nothing like Ireland. It is much busier and the American people are not friendly. They hate all Irish immigrants. The good news is that there is no potato famine here. There is enough to eat.

Uncle Keith made arrangements for me to work for the railroad. The Americans pay us low wages that provide us with barely enough to live.

The employers only think how they can get the most work for the lowest pay. Our living conditions aren't any better. The Irish live in worse housing than goats and sheep.

They call us drunken fools and wretched, filthy, bestial looking Irish. It gets harder and harder to ignore the comments. Americans taunt Irishmen to get us to fight.

My dear beloved friend, please do not tell my parents of these hardships. I do not want them to worry or for them to come here themselves. I will send food, clothing, and other items home.

*Until we meet again, Daniel O'Brien**

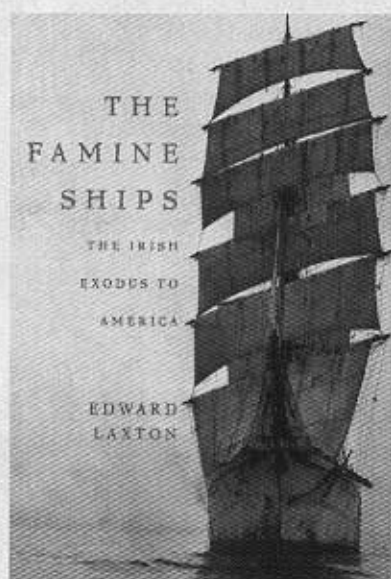
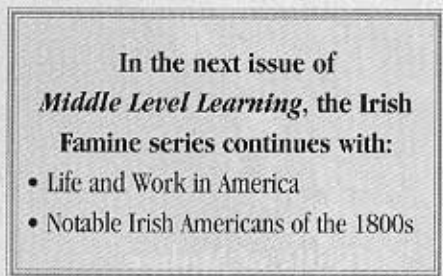
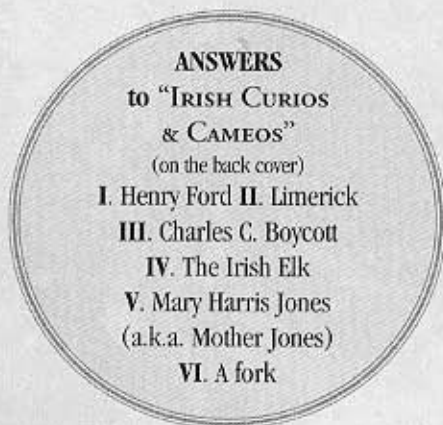
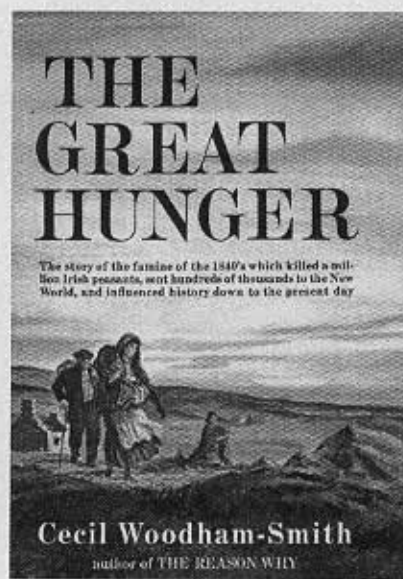
* a.k.a Grace Cho, a student in the seventh grade class of Cheryl Smith, Hicksville Middle School, Hicksville, New York

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IRISH CURIOS & CAMEOS

STEVEN S. LAPHAM

Can you guess the answers to these riddles of Ireland from the hints provided on this page? Try your luck.

I. William and his entire family left the tenanted farm at Ballinascarty, Ireland, in 1847, the worst year of the famine, and sailed to America. His mother did not survive the journey, probably succumbing to typhoid fever. William eventually bought a farm in Michigan and raised a family. He had a son, Henry, who was 12 years old when he fell off a horse. While recuperating from the fall, Henry set up a small machine shop in one of the farm buildings and began tinkering with small engines. As an adult, he pioneered mass production and became a millionaire. Who was this entrepreneur and industrialist?

II. A form of poetry with a galloping meter and a rhyme scheme—A, A, B, B, A—was invented by Edward Lear and named after this county. For example,

There was an Old Man in a tree
Who was horribly bored by a Bee
When they said, "Does it buzz?"
He replied, "Yes, it does!"
"It's a regular brute of a Bee!"

What is the name of this Irish county?

III. A rent rebellion by Irish tenant farmers on Achill Island against this landlord's agent became synonymous with protests in which consumers refuse to purchase a product. What was the land agent's name?

IV. The *Megaloceros* roamed throughout Europe 12,000 years ago. Well-preserved fossils, with antlers spanning up to 12 feet, have been found in the peat bogs of Ireland. What is the common name of this extinct beast?

V. Born in 1830 near County Cork, Mary emigrated to Canada, then to the United States. Her husband died of yellow fever in 1867, and her home burned in the Chicago fire of 1871. She became a labor organizer, leading coal miners in strikes in Virginia, West Virginia, and Colorado.

At age 89, she was arrested for her part in a walkout at a steel plant. What was her name?

VI. A connoisseur would never use a knife to open a baked potato. The blade flattens the surface and alters the desired fluffy texture. Instead, he would press the ends of the potato together to open and "blossom" it—after cutting a dotted line with a utensil. What is this utensil?

Cliffs of Moher

Answers on Page 15