

Why did Baby Bridget die 1?

Focus

Whose fault was her death - a case study?

Resources

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|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A. 'The death of Baby Bridget', extract from the historical novel <i>Under the Hawthorn Tree</i> | H. Population growth in Britain and Ireland, 1801-41 |
| B. 'The Famine', a poem by Roisin Hambly | I. Sub-division of land in Ireland, a note |
| C. A woman begging, <i>Illustrated London News</i> , 1847 | J. A rural diet, comment by a visitor to Ireland, 1806 |
| D. Potatoes | K. A funeral at Skibbereen, <i>Illustrated London News</i> , 1847 |
| E. A landlord's house, <i>Pictorial Times</i> , 1846 | L. The village of Mienies, <i>Illustrated London News</i> , 1847 |
| F. The cabins of the landlord's tenants, <i>Pictorial Times</i> , 1846 | M. Famine deaths, a note |
| G. Landlords and tenants in Ireland, a note | |

Lesson 1: The death of Baby Bridget

- A. Divide the class into groups and give each group an edited version of the extract from *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, 'The Famine' by Roisin Hambly and a potato.
Allow each group 5-10 minutes to work out connections between the three items and list the connections as bullet points.
Feedback from each group to establish common themes, such as famine, potato, others.
- B. Carefully distribute resources E-L among the groups.
Groups to decide what conclusions can be drawn from the sources.
Feedback from each group.

Homework task

Either

How did people deal with death during the famine?

Read the accounts of the Famine victims in sources K and L and the note on Famine deaths (M).

What similarities are there in accounts K and L?

(You may wish to include source A, the extract from the historical novel, in your answer.)

Or

Research 5-10 key facts on the Irish Famine with a view to sharing the facts in groups in the next lesson.

Put the IIS CD-ROM on the school network

A. 'The death of Baby Bridget' from *Under the Hawthorn Tree* by Marita Conlon-McKenna

O'Brien Press, 0-86278-206-6, pp 21-5

They pushed in the door. Mother was dozing with Bridget in the chair near the fire. She looked tired and they could tell she had been crying.

Quiet as mice, they reheated some leftover oatmeal and water. They were all tired out, and glad to fall into bed. With arms and shoulders aching, they scarcely had time to notice the normal rumbling hunger pains that came before sleep.

At some time during the night they became aware of their mother's sobs and of Bridget coughing and trying to breathe. Michael came and lay down in the bed beside the girls. They held hands and prayed - every prayer they had ever learned.

'God help us, please help us, God,' they whispered.

No one slept. It was the early hours of the morning before the coughing stopped. Then there was a sudden silence. Mother was kissing the baby's face and each little finger one by one.

'God let the sun come up soon and let this terrible night end,' the children begged.

Suddenly they became aware of their mother's silence. They got up and went over to her. Large tears slid down her cheeks.

'She's gone. My own little darling is gone.' Peggy started to cry. 'I want Bridget back,' she wailed. 'I want her.'

'It's all right, pet,' assured Mother. 'She was too weak to stay in this hard world any longer. Look at her. Isn't she a grand little girl, now she's at rest.'

The baby lay still, as if she were just dozing. Mother told them to kiss her, and one by one they kissed the soft cheek and forehead of Bridget, the little sister they hardly knew.

Mother seemed strangely calm and made them go back to bed. 'At first light, Michael, you must run to Dan Collins and ask him to get Father Doyle. I'll just sit and mind my darling girl for a little while yet.'

Later, Michael set off, his face pale and his eyes red-rimmed. The chill of the early morning made him shiver as he pulled his light jacket around him.

Mother had heated some water and with a cloth she gently washed Bridget, and brushed and brushed the soft blond curls. Eily pulled the old wooden chest from under Mother and Father's bed. As instructed, she opened it. There wasn't that much in it, so she soon found the lace christening robe which her great-grandmother had made. The lace was yellow and old. It was only ten months since Bridget had worn the robe - before, but her little body was so thin and wasted it still fitted her. Dressed in it she looked like a little pale angel, though Eily couldn't help but remember a porcelain French doll she had seen in a shop window in the town once. It stood stiff in a white lace dress with a starched petticoat and long curling real hair. How she had wanted to hold and have that doll. Now she felt the same longing, but much worse. She ached to hold Bridget and never let her go.

Michael came home. They all had a sup of milk and tidied themselves and the cottage as best they could. Dan Collins would get the priest. Father Doyle was a nice man - he and Father were very friendly and sometimes he would drop in for a chat and a bit of company. Father used to say that being a priest was grand, but it was a lonely life.

Mid-morning they were all surprised when Dan Collins and his wife Kitty arrived. Kitty ran straight to Mother and kissed her. Their eyes were full of tears and unspoken words.

'Margaret, we are so sorry. Poor little Bridget,' whispered Kitty.

Dan Collins cleared his throat and shifted uneasily. 'There is more bad news, God spare us. Father Doyle is gone down with the sickness himself and will not be able to bury the wee lassie. Already in the village a few have died of the sickness - Seamus Fadden, the coffin maker, being one - so there are no proper funerals ...' He stopped.

Mother let out a high wailing cry. 'What will become of us, what are we to do?' The air hung heavy.

'We'll bury her decently in her own place,' said Dan.

The three children stared at Mother, waiting for her reply. She nodded her head silently.

'Under the hawthorn tree in the back field,' she whispered. 'The children always played there and its blossom will shelter her now.'

Dan motioned to Michael and they left the cottage and disappeared up to the field carrying a spade.

'We've no coffin,' said Mother hoarsely.

Kitty looked around the cottage and begged Eily to help her. Eily cleared her throat. 'What about using grandmother's wooden chest?'

Kitty and Eily pulled it out from under the old bed and lifted it onto the blanket. Mother walked over and nodded silently. Kitty began to take out the family treasures and lay them to one side.

Kitty and Mother started to get everything ready. Eily and Peggy, sensing they were not wanted, ran outside and pulled bluebells and wild flowers. They sucked in deep breaths of air to try and calm their hearts.

Dan came back down the field and went inside. In a few minutes the three adults emerged, Kitty holding Mother's arm and Dan carrying the carved wooden chest.

A light breeze blew and the blossom bowed and waved in welcome. There was a clear blue sky. A family of bluetits sat on the branch of the tree, helping to keep vigil.

Dan and Kitty led them in the prayers and they all remembered the words of Jesus, 'Suffer the little children to come unto me'. They prayed too that they would 'meet again in Paradise'.

Eily and Michael gently placed the flowers beside the chest. Peggy clung to Mother as huge sobs racked her body. Mother stroked her hair. They all sang a favourite hymn of Father Doyle's, then Kitty led them back to the house. She had brought some tea and made a mug for the adults. She made Mother sit down near the fire as she warmed some leftover potato cakes.

For the next few days, Mother stayed in her shift with the shawl wrapped around her, and barely bothered to do anything. Eily and Michael fetched the water, swept out the cottage and searched for food. They wished that Father would come back. Eily was scared. How long would it last?

B. 'The Famine', a poem by Roisin Hambly

In the Spring of '45
I planted my potato crop,
But when I dug them up in Winter
They were black and brown from rot.

There were seven in my family,
Four children under five,
I had to find some food for them,
To keep them all alive.

It wasn't too bad to start with,
But by Autumn '47,
Two members of my family
Had died and gone to Heaven.

That Winter it was long and cold
And every thing was bare,
Then when my lovely wife passed on
I thought it so unfair.

My family were now so thin,
Their faces were so hollow,
They decided to emigrate,
But foolishly I didn't follow.

I saw a soldier selling corn,
No one was around,
I took this opportunity
To knock him to the ground.

I robbed him of his food and money
And quickly ran away,
But sadly I was caught and killed
And left there to decay.

C. Woman begging at Clonakilty, *Illustrated London News*, 1847



WOMAN BEGGING AT CLONAKILTY.

E. A landlord's house, *Pictorial Times*, 1846



F. His tenants' cabins, *Pictorial Times*, 1846



G. Landlords and tenants in Ireland, a note

80 per cent of Irish people lived in the countryside and worked on the land. However, they did not own the land they farmed. Instead the land was owned by about 20,000 landlords. Each landlord had a large estate of thousands of acres. He divided his land into farms and rented them out to tenant farmers. If the tenants did not pay their rent they were evicted from (thrown out of) their farms. Tenants lived in farmhouses or small cabins. Landlords lived in large houses with servants and fine food. Some, called absentee landlords, did not live in Ireland at all, but lived on estates in England.

H. Population growth in GB & Ireland, a note

| | GB | Ireland |
|------|-----------|----------------|
| 1801 | 10.7 | 5.2m |
| 1821 | 14.2 | 6.8m |
| 1841 | 18.5 | 8.2m |

I. Sub-division of land in Ireland, a note

Population growth was higher in some parts of Ireland than others, putting great pressure on land. A common practice, especially in the West, was for tenants to divide their land among their sons. Sub-division created many small farms in Ireland as the sons themselves also subdivided land. Many thousands of families thus had to exist on smaller and smaller plots of land.

J. A rural diet, comment by a visitor to Ireland, 1806

Upon average, a man, his wife and four children, will eat thirty-seven pounds of potatoes a day. The family live on potatoes and buttermilk six days a week; the Sabbath is generally celebrated by bacon and greens ... An Englishman, seeing a number of fine florid children in a cabin, said to the father: 'How do your countrymen manage to have so many fine children?' 'It is the potato, sir,' said he.



THE FAMINE IN IRELAND.—FUNERAL AT SKIBBEREEN.—FROM A SKETCH BY MR. H. SMITZ, CORK.

K. Funeral at Skibbereen, Co. Cork, *Illustrated London News*, 1847

'The body of a young man is laid on a cart; a second man whips the horse into action; a third stands by with a spade; onlookers gossip and argue: this well-observed scene shows us death stripped of all dignity.'



THE VILLAGE OF MIENIES.

L The village of Mienies, *Illustrated London News*, 1847

Here dogs devoured the unburied dead and 'the gnawed and mangled skeleton' of a man named Leahey was 'contended for by hungry dogs'.



M. Famine deaths, a note

About one million people died during the Irish Famine. Historians cannot be sure of the exact number since accurate records were not kept owing to the vast number of people dying. People died from diseases like dysentery, typhoid and cholera as well as starvation. There were so many deaths that burial rituals, such as keening and wailing, so important to the Irish, had to be overlooked. In fact, bodies were often taken away in carts to be buried, without coffins, in mass burial places (Source K). Sometimes, the bodies were not found until they were half-devoured by dogs or rats.

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Famine deaths

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|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  | <p>‘The deaths in my native place were many and horrible. The poor famine-stricken people were found by the wayside, emaciated corpses, partly green from eating docks and nettles and partly blue from cholera and dysentery.’</p> |  |
| <p>1A. Funeral at Skibbereen, Co. Cork, one of the worst hit areas <i>Illustrated London News</i>, 30 January 1847 <i>‘The body of a young man is laid on a cart; a second man whips the horse into action; a third stands by with a spade; onlookers gossip and argue: this well-observed scene shows us death stripped of all dignity.’</i></p> | <p>1B. Dáothí Ó Ceanntabhnaíl, national teacher, Croom, Co. Limerick</p> | <p>1C. The village of Mienies <i>Illustrated London News</i>, 13 & 20 February 1847 Here dogs devoured the unburied dead and ‘the gnawed and mangled skeleton’ of a man named Leahey was ‘contended for by hungry dogs’.</p> |

The death of Baby Bridget

Each death caused distress and suffering to already distraught families. The following is an extract from an historical novel about the Famine, *Under the Hawthorn Tree* by Marita Conlon-McKenna, O’Brien Press, 0-86278-206-6, pp 21-5. The extract describes how one family was affected by the death of their ten-month-old baby, Bridget.

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Quiet as mice, they reheated some leftover oatmeal and water. They were all tired out, and glad to fall into bed. With arms and shoulders aching, they scarcely had time to notice the normal rumbling hunger pains that came before sleep.

At some time during the night they became aware of their mother’s sobs and of Bridget coughing and trying to breathe. Michael came and lay down in the bed beside the girls. They held hands and prayed - every prayer they had ever learned.

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Mother seemed strangely calm and made them go back to bed. ‘At first light, Michael, you must run to Dan Collins and ask him to get Father Doyle. I’ll just sit and mind my darling girl for a little while yet.’

Later, Michael set off, his face pale and his eyes red-rimmed. The chill of the early morning made him shiver as he pulled his light jacket around him.

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1. a. Make notes on how the main characters in *Under the Hawthorn Tree* reacted to Bridget’s death. You could include how they prepared for her funeral. Set it out like the table below:

| | Reactions to Bridget’s Death |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Mother | |
| Eily | |
| Peggy | |
| Michael | |
| Dan & Kitty Collins | |

- b. Or, write a journal entry for Eily entitled: ‘May, 1846: The day we buried Bridget’.

Express her feelings and fears, as well as recording the events of the day.

2. What circumstances surrounding the burial added to the mother’s grief?
3. Compare Bridget’s burial to the burial of the young man in source A.
4. Read the accounts of the Famine victims in sources B and C. What similarities are there in the different accounts? (You may wish to include source A and the extract from the novel in your answer.)

Extension tasks

1. There are many customs associated with burying the dead in Ireland. Find out what you can about these. The following keywords may help: keening, wake, respect for the dead.