‘Ireland in Schools’

**Famine in poetry & song**

1. The Irish Famine in modern poetry
2. Irish history in song1: songs of hunger
1. The Irish famine in modern poetry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poem Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘At A Potato Digging’ by Seamus Heaney</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Digging’ - not about the Famine, but ...</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘The Scar’ by John Hewitt</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Famine, a sequence’ by Desmond Egan</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘The Famine Road’ by Eavan Boland</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘The Famine’ by Roisin Hambly</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Broken Silence’ by Margaret O’Beirne</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
At A Potato Digging (Seamus Heaney)

I.
A mechanical digger wrecks the drill,
Spins up a dark shower of roots and mould.
Labourers swarm in behind, stoop to fill
Wicker creels. Fingers go dead in the cold.

Like crows attacking crow-black fields, they stretch
A higgledy line from hedge to headland;
Some pairs keep breaking ragged ranks to fetch
A full creel to the pit and straighten, stand

Tall for a moment but soon stumble back
To fish a new load from the crumbled surf.
Heads bow, trunks bend, hands fumble towards the black
Mother. Processional stooping through the turf

Recurs mindlessly as autumn. Centuries
Of fear and homage to the famine god
Toughen the muscles behind their humbled knees,
Make a seasonal altar of the sod.

II.
Flint-white, purple. They lie scattered
like inflated pebbles. Native
to the black hutch of clay
where the halved seed shot and clotted
these knobbed and slit-eyed tubers seem
the petrified hearts of drills. Split
by the spade, they show white as cream.

Good smells exude from crumbled earth.
The rough bark of humus erupts
knots of potatoes (a clean birth)
whose solid feel, whose wet inside
promises taste of ground and root.
To be piled in pits; live skulls, blind-eyed.

III.
Live skulls, blind-eyed, balanced on
wild higgledy skeletons
scoured the land in ‘forty-five,
wolfed the blighted root and died.

The new potato, sound as stone,
putrefied when it had lain
three days in the long clay pit.
Millions rotted along with it.

Mouths tightened in, eyes died hard,
faces chilled to a plucked bird.
In a million wicker huts
beaks of famine snipped at guts.

A people hungering from birth,
grubbing, like plants, in the bitch earth,
were grafted with a great sorrow.
Hope rotted like a marrow.

Stinking potatoes fouled the land,
pits turned pus into filthy mounds:
and where potato diggers are
you still smell the running sore.

IV.
Under a gay flotilla of gulls
The rhythm deadens, the workers stop.
Brown bread and tea in bright canfuls
Are served for lunch. Dead-beat, they flop
Down in the ditch and take their fill
Thankfully breaking timeless fasts;
Then, stretched on the faithless ground, spill
Libations of cold tea, scatter crusts.

Digging (Seamus Heaney)
not about the Famine, but ...

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests: snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down
Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft against
the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner’s bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away

Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf.
Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I’ve no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I’ll dig with it.

Famine in Poetry & Song, 3
The Scar (John Hewitt)

There's not a chance now that I might recover one syllable of what that sick man said, tapping upon my great-grandmother's shutter, and begging. I was told, a piece of bread; for on his tainted breath there hung infection rank from the cabins of the stricken west, the spores from black potato-stalks, the spittle mottled with poison in his rattling chest; but she who, by her nature, quickly answered, accepted in return the famine-fever; and that chance meeting, that brief confrontation, conscribed me of the Irishry for ever.

Though much I cherish lies outside their vision, and much they prize I have no claim to share, yet in that woman's death I found my nation; the old wound aches and shews its fellow scar.

Famine, a sequence (Desmond Egan)

1. the stink of famine
   hangs in the bushes still
   in the sad celtic hedges

   you can catch it
   down the line of our landscape
   get its taste on every meal

   listen
   there is famine in our music

   famine behind our faces

   it is only a field away
   has made us all immigrants
   guilty for having survived

   has separated us from language
   cut us from our culture
   built blocks around belief

   left us on our own

   ashamed to be seen
   walking out beauty so
   honoured by our ancestors

   but fostered now to peasants
   the drivers of motorway diggers
   unearthing bones by accident
   under the disappearing hills

The Famine Road (Eavan Boland)

Idle as trout in light Colonel Jones
these Irish, give them no coins at all; their bones
need toil, their characters no less. Trevelyan's
seal blooded the deal table. The Relief
Committee deliberated: Might it be safe,
Colonel, to give them roads, roads to force
From nowhere, going nowhere of course?

one out of every ten and then
another third of those again
women - in a case like yours.

Sick, directionless they worked. Fork, stick
were iron years away; after all could
they not blood their knuckles on rock, suck
April hailstones for water and for food?
Why for that, cunning as housewives, each eyed -
as if at a corner butcher - the other's buttock.

anything may have caused it, spores
a childhood accident; one sees
day after day these mysteries.

Dusk: they will work tomorrow without him.
They know it and walk clear. He has become
a typhoid pariah, his blood tainted, although
he shares it with some there. No more than snow
attends its own flakes where they settle
and melt, will they pray by his death rattle.

You never will, never you know
but take it well woman, grow
your garden, keep house, good-bye.

It has gone better than we expected, Lord
Trevelyan, sedition, idleness, cured
in one. From parish to parish, field to field;
the wretches work till they are quite worn,
than fester by their work. We march the corn
to the ships in peace. This Tuesday I saw bones
out of my carriage window. Your servant Jones.

Barren, never to know the load
of his child in you, what is your body
now if not a famine road?
The Famine (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.

Broken Silence (Margaret O’Beirne)
The granite outcrop, still redolent of animals,
cold ikon now of valley life where
goats were milked, sheep shorn,
and spinning-wheels whirled in the white yard.

They came on horseback, cracking their whips,
drove our beasts to the pound- the lowing
heifer and her calf, the little black cow
of the frothy milk, the spavined donkey
and all-

wisps of animal hair caught
in the briars lift in the wind.
The curlew is silent.

All life has fled the valley,
the very rabbit-holes are derelict.
Summer has silenced the river.
No children play.

Those left pass like ghosts or
crowd the empty hearth
where fowl or ailing lamb once
stirred near the reddened sods.

Sorrow folds like an empty sack as
tears waste down death’s cheek.
Night spreads a shroud.

Tap-tapping on wood in the old church-yard:
coffins for the rich still proud in death-
a hinged one for the poor goes to the pit.

The towns creep with the half-dead;
they kneel and wait
for doors to creak,
for keys in the lock,
for the rasp of a bolt,
for the sight of a loaf
or a bag of meal.

Boats crammed with grain rise
on the tide; bayonets prod the
night air loud with foreign laughter.
These three ‘traditional’ songs about famine and hunger in Ireland were chosen because they are widely available in a range of recording styles. The suggested recordings reflect some of these varied arrangements which evoke different atmospheres and moods.

The words and music are attached together with those of ‘The Leaving of Liverpool’ and the lyrics of three modern songs by The Pogues (‘Thousands are Sailing’), Sinéad O’Connor (‘Famine’) and Derek Warfield (‘Doolough “The Song of the Famine’.

Publication

Although about the Great Famine, the songs were not written at the time of the Famine but later in the nineteenth century or early twentieth century. For instance, ‘The Famine Song’ (‘Oh, the praties they are small’) used to be quoted in anthologies as a song of the famine period. In fact, the air was learnt in South America and ‘does not sound Irish’, while words were written by A.P. Graves and first printed in 1897. ‘Skibbereen’ was written after the Famine, but there seems no agreement on the exact date. ‘The Fields of Athenry’ was first published in the 1880s with a very simple tune, very different from the modern hit recording by Paddy Reilly (words by Pete St John, 1979).

Their value in history teaching

First, the songs and the music provide excellent stimulus material. The Alias Acoustic Band’s arrangements of ‘The Famine Song’ is particularly effective in evoking a darkly tragic and threatening atmosphere.

Secondly, the songs underline the enduring mark the Famine left on Irish folk memory and the way in which the Famine was used by Irish nationalists to condemn British rule in Ireland, citing it as a spectacularly conclusive demonstration of the failure of the Act of Union of 1800 to provide fair and responsible government.

Political songs, such as ‘Skibbereen’, accused the British government of having conspired to destroy the Irish nation. The relation of tragic scenes was linked with a denunciation of oppression and calls for vengeance, as in the last stanza of the Alias Acoustic Band recording:

Oh father, dear, the day will come when on vengeance we will call
When Irishmen both stout and stern will rally one and all
I’ll be the man to lead the van, beneath the flag of green
And loud and high we’ll raise the cry, ‘Revenge for Skibbereen’.

In 1913, at the height of the crisis over the Third Home Rule Bill, Sinn Féin reprinted a broadside - ‘New song on Skibbereen where thousands patiently lay down and died for want of food’.

A different contemporary message

Such lines appear in songs circulated sometime after the disaster. By contrast, contemporary ballads (see overleaf) tried to sustain hope in a better future in Ireland or America (A and B) or protested only against badly managed relief (C).

Recordings of these contemporary songs do not seem to be available.

Main source

A. A New Song on the Rotten Potatoes (1847)

You landlords of Ireland I'd have you beware,
And of your poor tenants I'd wish you'd take care;
For want of potatoes in the present year
From the crutch to the cradle [they] are - trembling with fear.

See how starvation meets us in the face,
But relief is expected from each foreign place.

Through Ireland the potatoes do rot in the field,
If you were to see them it would make your heart bleed;
If they don't get relief, then the poor must prevail
And fight till they die for their corn and meal.

Then next try the landlords and see what they'll do,
For they know the potatoes are rotten all through;
Tell them for your rent that you'll give them good bail.
Before that you'll part with your corn or meal.

If then to your wishes they will not comply,
Then tell them at once that you'd rather to die,
For your family is starving for want of the grain,
Then why should you part with your corn or meal.

There are some of those landlords playing their pranks
And sending the tenants - to draw on their banks,
They'll have them like foxes all caught by the tail,
And then you must part with your corn and meal.

Let the Whigs and Repealers all join heart and hand,
And likewise the Tories to come on one plan,
To boldly come forward and never to fail,
And then we will have both our corn and meal.

Come cheer up good people, you need never fear,
For the rents they must fall upon this present year,
Sure they can't tyrannize or attempt to prevail
To make you to part with either corn or meal.

Do not be down-hearted, but cheer up once more,
The provision is coming from each foreign shore,
Good beer, flour and butter, rich sugar and tea,
From Russia and Prussia and America.

The potatoes have failed since -the year forty-five;
The labour will flourish and trade will revive.
Public works and railroads will commence without fail,
And then we can purchase both corn and meal.

So now my good people, you need never fear,
Old Ireland will prosper on this present year,
But instead of potatoes believe what I say,
We'll have a cheap loaf with a good cup of tea.

B. A New Song Called the Emigrant's Farewell to Donegal (c. 1846)

Good people on you I call, give ear to those lines you soon shall hear,
Caus'd me to weep deprived of sleep for parting from my relations dear;
My hardships here I can't endure, there's nothing here but slavery,
I will take my lot and leave this spot and try the land of liberty.

Farewell dear Erin, fare thee well, that once was call'd the Isle of Saints,
For here no longer I can dwell, I'm going to cross the stormy sea,
For to live here I can't endure, there's nothing here but slavery,
My hearts oppress'd, I can find no rest, I will try the land of liberty.

My father holds five acres of land, it was not enough to support us all,
Which banishes me from my native land, to old Ireland dear I bid farewell.
My hardships here, I can't endure, since here no longer I can stay
I take my lot and leave this spot and try the land of liberty.

My love, you know that trade is low, provisions they're exceeding high,
We see the poor from door to door craving their wants we can't supply,
To hear their moans, their sighs and groans, with children naked cold and bare,
Cray, say relief, it renewes my grief as we have nothing for to spare.

So now my dear you need not fear the dangers of the raging sea,
If your mind is bent I am content, so now prepare and come away.
She says, my dear if you'll agree to marry me, I'll quickly prepare,
W'll join our hands in wedlock's bands and we will stay no longer here.

It was in the year of 46 I was forced to leave my native land,
To old Ireland I bid adieu and to my fond relations all,
But now I'm in America, no rents or taxes we pay at all,
So now I bid a long farewell to my native and old Donegal.

C. The Kenmare Committee (1847?)

The farmers are taxed every quarter
As a means to keep paupers secure,
But doctors, priests, parsons and guardians
Have plundered it all from the poor.
There were not such wrongs since the creation
As is practised on each of our tribe.
We are dropping with want and starvation
And those villains elated with pride.
The Praties They Grow Small

Praties are potatoes. This song is about the blight and its effect on the potato crop. It also mentions the singer's wish to escape from the horrors of the famine and from the landlords.

Oh, the praties they grow small, 
Over here, over here.
Oh, the praties they grow small
And we dig them in the fall,
And we eat them skins and all.
Over here, over here.

Oh, I wish that we were geese,
Right and left and night and morn.
Oh, I wish that we were geese,
For they fly and take their ease,
And they love and die in peace,
Eating corn, eating corn.

Oh, we're trampled in the dust,
Over here, over here.
Yes, we're trampled in the dust,
But the Lord in whom we trust
Will give us crumb for crust,
Over here, over here.

Famine in Poetry & Song, 8
SKIBBEREEN

Em Bm Em Bm

Oh, father dear, I oft-times hear you talk of Erin's Isle, Her lofty scene and valley green, her mountains rude and wild,

G F#m D Bm

They say it is a pretty place wherein a prince might dwell,

Em Bm Em Bm

Then why did you abandon it? The reason to me tell.

My son I loved our native land with energy and pride
Until a blight came on the land and sheep and cattle died,
The rent and taxes were to pay, I could not them redeem,
And that's the cruel reason why I left old Skibbereen.

It's well I do remember that bleak December day,
The landlord and the sheriff came to drive us all away;
They set the roof on fire with their demon yellow spleen,
And that's another reason why I left old Skibbereen.

It's well I do remember the year of forty-eight,
When I arose with Erin's boys to fight against the fate,
I was hunted through the mountains for a traitor to the queen
And that's another reason why I left old Skibbereen.

Oh father dear, the day will come when vengeance loud will call,
And we will rise with Erin's boys and rally one and all,
I'll be the man to lead the van beneath our flag of green,
And loud and high we'll raise the cry: 'Revenge for Skibbereen'.

Famine in Poetry & Song, 9
THE FIELDS OF ATHENRY

By a lonely prison wall
I heard a young man calling
Nothing matters Mary when you’re free,
Against the Famine and the Crown
I rebelled they ran me down
Now you must raise our child with dignity

Chorus

By a lonely harbour wall
She watched the last star falling
And that prison ship sailed out against the sky
Sure she’ll wait and hope and pray
For her love in Botany Bay
It’s so lonely round the fields of Athenry.

Chorus

low, lie the fields of Athenry, where
once we watched the small free birds fly.
Our love was on the wing. We had dreams and songs to sing. It’s so

Famine in Poetry & Song, 10
THE LEAVING OF LIVERPOOL

This song is sung by a sailor. His ship is ready to leave Liverpool for California. When he returns from this long journey he says he will marry his girlfriend whom he is leaving behind.

Fare you well the Prince's landing stage,
River Mersey fare you well.
I'm off to California,
A place I know right well.

CHORUS:
So fare you well my own true love,
When I return, united we shall be.
It's not the leaving of Liverpool that grieves me,
But my darling when I think of you.

I'm off to California,
By the way of the stormy Cape Horn,
And I will send you a letter, love,
When I am homeward bound.

(CHORUS)

I've shipped on a Yankee clipper ship,
Davy Crockett is her name;
And Burgess is the captain of her,
And they say she's a floating hell.

(CHORUS)

The tug is waiting at the pierhead
To take us down the stream,
Our sails are loose and our anchor secure,
So I'll bid you good-bye once more.

(CHORUS)

Yankee = North American
clipper = fast sailing ship
Thousands are Sailing by The Pogues

The island it is silent now
But the ghosts still haunt the waves
And the torch lights up a famished man
Who fortune could not save

Did you work upon the railroad
Did you rid the streets of crime
Were your dollars from the white house
Were they from the five and dime

Did the old songs taunt or cheer you
And did they still make you cry
Did you count the months and years
Or did your teardrops quickly dry

Ah, No, says he 'twas not to be
On a coffin ship I came here
And I never even got so far
That they could change my name

Thousands are sailing
Across the Western Ocean
To a land of opportunity
That some of them will never see
Fortune prevailing
Across the Western Ocean
Their bellies full
And their spirits free
They'll break the chains of poverty
And they'll dance
In Manhattan's desert twilight
In the death of afternoon
We stepped hand in hand on Broadway
Like the first man on the moon

And 'The Blackbird' broke the silence
As you whistled it so sweet
And in Brendan Behan's footsteps
I danced up and down the street

Then we said goodnight to Broadway
Giving it our best regards
Tipped our hats to Mister Cohan
Dear old Times Square's favourite bard

Then we raised a glass to J.F.K.
And a dozen more besides
When I got back to my empty room
I suppose I must have cried

Thousands are sailing
Again across the ocean
Where the hand of opportunity
Draws tickets in a lottery
Postcards we're mailing
Of sky-blue skies and oceans
From rooms the daylight never sees
Where lights don't glow on Christmas trees

But we dance to the music
And we dance Thousands are sailing
Across the Western Ocean
Where the hand of opportunity
Draws tickets in a lottery

Where e'er we go, we celebrate
The land that makes us refugees
From fear of Priests with empty plates
From guilt and weeping effigies
And we dance
Famine by Sinead O’Connor

OK, I want to talk about Ireland
Specifically I want to talk about the ‘famine’
About the fact that there never really was one
There was no ‘famine’
See Irish people were only ALLOWED to eat potatoes
All of the other food
Meat fish vegetables
Were slipped out of the country under armed guard
To England while the Irish people starved
And then on the middle of all this
They gave us money not to teach our children Irish
And so we lost our history
And this is what I think is still hurting me

See we’re like a child that’s been battered
Has to drive itself out of it’s head because it’s frightened
Still feels all the painful feelings
But they lose contact with the memory

And this leads to massive self-destruction
ALCOHOLISM DRUG ADDICTION
All desperate attempts at running
And in it’s worst form
Becomes actual killing

And if there ever is gonna be healing
There has to be remembering
And then grieving
So that there then can be forgiving
There has to be knowledge and understanding

An American army regulation
Says you mustn’t kill more than 10% of a nation
‘Cos to do so causes permanent ‘psychological damage’
It’s not permanent but they didn’t know that

Anyway during the supposed ‘famine’
We lost a lot more than 10% of a nation
Through deaths on land or on ships of emigration
But what finally broke us was not starvation
BUT IT’S USE IN THE CONTROLLING OF OUR EDUCATION
Schools go on about ‘Black 47’
On and on about ‘The terrible ‘famine’
But what they don’t say is in truth
There really never was one

So let’s take a look shall we
The highest statistics of child abuse in the EEC
And we say we’re a Christian country
But we’ve lost contact with our history
See we used to worship God as a mother
We’re suffering from POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER
Look at all our old men in the pubs
Look at all our young people on drugs
We used to worship God as a mother
Now look at what we’re doing to each other
We’ve even made killers of ourselves
The most child-like trusting people in the Universe
And this is what’s wrong with us
Our history books THE PARENT FIGURES lied to us

I see the Irish As a race like a child
That got itself bashed in the face
And if there ever is gonna be healing
There has to be remembering And then grieving
So that there then can be FORGIVING
There has to be KNOWLEDGE and UNDERSTANDING
Doolough ‘The Song of the Famine’ by Derek Warfield

Introduction
We see it on our TV the symptoms we know well
Despair on human faces, as children’s belly’s swell
And Ireland’s generous memory so marked with painful stains
Responds with helpful kindness to relieve the hunger pains
Communications see to it no famine now is hidden
And victory for concerning hands sees nonchalance forbidden
Ah! But Doolough
No guarding souls could hear the stressful cries
And generations pass us by and tears are still disguised

Oh the Famine was to Ireland just one more hateful crush
That started with plantations and Cromwell’s cruel push.
The coercion of the Union a parliament denied
No native voice to speak for rights saw misery supplied
The absentee the bailiff and gombeen men galore
Reduced a noble people to beggars by the score.
And mansions gold and riches saw England’s rulers fed
While Ireland’s fields and ditches were littered with our dead.

Chorus
No ears could hear the crying and the powerful men were deaf
And eyes that seen the dying saw seeds of hate were left
The shuffling feet of innocents surrendered on the road
No bowl of maize but roadside graves relieved those starving hoards
Doolough you remind us with the valley of your name
How power n’ greed and bigotry make skeletons of shame.

The women and the children who ate turnips in the field
Whose lips were seen of grassy green they searched the fields for weeds,
Their death it mattered little, a million maybe two
To the rulers and Victoria was like Hitler to the Jew.
Potato crops they failed, we’re told there’s nothing could be done
And soup it would be offered where the Papish church is strong
T’would never be accepted in Somerset or Kent
That they perished on the roadside and sold their food for rent

Chorus
No monuments remember the ships of death that sailed
And some survived to work and toil where others may have failed.
To Quebec’s streams of liberty, to Pampas grass so tall
Went the children of the Famine where freedom’s bell would call.
The coffin ships and cholera and sea it claimed its share
In the year of, 1850 Ireland’s towns and street were bare
And do the Great Hunger when children starved to death
And Doolough remember county Mayo where men and women wept

Chorus