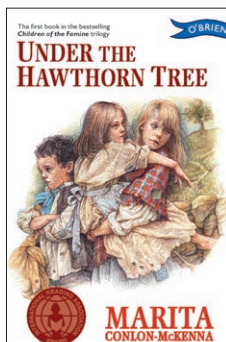


UNDER THE HAWTHORN TREE



by Marita Conlon-McKenna, illustrated by Donald Teskey

ISBN: 0-86278-206-6 • €6.95 pb • 160 pages

In the autumn of 1845 a strange and deadly disease appeared on much of the potato crop in Ireland. The crop of 1846 was a total failure and this meant disaster for the Irish people, most of whom depended on the potato for food. Disease and famine stalked the land and people died in their thousands. Families were forced to sell clothes and treasured possessions in order to buy the yellow corn imported from America; men, weak with hunger, were forced onto road-building schemes in order to earn the pittance that might mean the difference between life and death. Many were so desperate that they fought to be allowed into the feared workhouses, where fever and disease spread rapidly in the overcrowded conditions. It was to escape the workhouse that Eily, Michael and their young sister Peggy took to the roads. The horrors endured by the three children are graphically yet sensitively portrayed as we follow them in search of their great-aunts in far-off Castletaggart.

LANGUAGE – ENGLISH

- ◆ Vocabulary extension: Pestilence, despatched, forage, calloused, idyllic, frugal.
- ◆ Descriptive writing: The author refers to the Irish countryside as 'green and lush, fine green pasture land all around' (p.56), she also describes in detail the wildflowers, birds and animals (pp.19, 25, 29, 65, 91). What is the effect of these descriptions? Do they lighten the atmosphere of the story and/or highlight the horrors the children witness on their journey?
- ◆ Discussion: 'No-one uttered a greeting or a kind word of comfort to the sorry band' (p.56). Suggest reasons why the inhabitants of the cottages and cabins declined to speak to the travellers. What words of comfort might they have offered? Would such words have consoled those on their way to the workhouse?
- ◆ Discussion: 'Time had taught him a lesson ... Things were better left unsaid' (p.12). Examine these statements and discuss if it is always best to leave things unsaid. What might Michael have said to those in a position to relieve his suffering and that of others?
- ◆ Discussion: Bob Geldof organised Band Aid, Live Aid and recently has campaigned to reduce debts of the developing world. Initially he was influenced by Michael Buerk's TV documentary and he used modern technology and the media to relieve suffering. Had these resources been available in the mid-1800s, would the outcome have been different? Discuss how one person can shape international opinion.
- ◆ Discussion: 'There was no God, and if there was he was a monster' (p.125). Michael was forced to this conclusion by the scenes he witnessed outside the workhouse. On whom might he have laid the blame? What events could he witness today that might cause him to think similar thoughts?
- ◆ Discussion: The 'strange religious folk' who set up the soup-kitchen in Kineen (p.79) might well have been Quakers. Why did the old man fear that 'the heathens would try to convert them' (p.82)? Might he have refused help from the soup-kitchen? Would he have been right to do so? Might the parents of a family have refused help for the same reasons and would they have been right? Did Eily make the right choice?
- ◆ Discussion: Daily newspapers and magazines

featured cartoons and editorials that made many English people believe the famine was caused by the laziness and bad practices of Irish farm labourers. Assess the impact of ill-judged reporting of a disaster on the willingness of the public to contribute to famine relief.

LANGUAGE – GAELIGE

- ◆ Meath na Gaeilge: The Great Famine (*An Gorta Mór*), resulting in death and emigration on a massive scale, is cited as one of the main reasons for the decline of the Irish language in the nineteenth century. Suggest reasons why English was more important than before, and why people felt the necessity to learn the language as quickly as possible.
- ◆ Rann: 'Prátaí ar maidin, Prátaí um nóin, Is dá n-éirínn istoiche, Prátaí a gheobhainn.' What does this saying tell us about the daily diet of the Irish in the early 1840s?
- ◆ Scéal: Read extracts from the classic *Mo Scéal Féin* by an tAthair Peadar Ó Laoghaire in which he writes about An Gorta Mór.

SESE – HISTORY

- ◆ Local studies: Homes. Study the description of the O'Driscoll cottage (pp. 9–13, 33, 53) and Mary Kate's cottage (pp.14–15, 61–63) and compare homes of the poor with homes of the landed rich (pp.135–138). For reconstructions of labourers' cottages/cabins, visit the Ulster-American Folk Park near Omagh, Co Tyrone (Tel: 048 82256330).
- ◆ Local studies: Schools. Eily was sitting in the schoolroom when she first heard news of the potato blight (p.10) and Peggy later expressed a wish 'maybe to go to school' (p.88). Most Irish families of the time strongly supported the recently established National School system and paid money they could not really afford to send their children to school. Why might they have placed such importance on education? Visit the Omagh Folk Park to see a reconstructed schoolroom or contact the Irish Museum of Education, CICE, 96 Upr Rathmines Rd, Dublin 6 (Tel: 01-479 0033).
- ◆ Eras of change and conflict: The Great Famine. When the potato blight first appeared in 1845, the Prime Minister of England ordered that Indian corn should be sold cheaply to the hungry. Margaret was obliged to sell her lace

shawl and wedding gown in order to buy 'a large sack of yellow meal' (p.33). Later, Relief Committees organised building schemes. John O'Driscoll was forced to work for a pittance on a road-building scheme (pp.15, 37–38). Soup-kitchens, such as the one that gave the children mugs of soup and a bowl of mutton stew (pp.79–82), were not government-funded until 1847. Visit the Dunfanaghy Famine Museum, Co Donegal or Strokestown House, Co Roscommon for information on the Great Famine. Contact the NCDE Resource Centre, ncde@eircom.net or Tel: 01-662 0866 for information and resources on current famine crises in the developing world.

SESE – GEOGRAPHY

- ◆ Natural environments: Soil. Potatoes were the staple food as they could be grown easily and did not need much land. By the 1840s, potatoes were eaten at every meal. The most common type of potato grown in Ireland before the famine was called a 'lumper' or 'horse-potato', find out more about this potato type. Eily and her family ate 'greyish leftover spuds' for breakfast (p.12), leftover potato cakes after the funeral (p.25) and potato skins when they were collecting turf (p.19). Examine the relationship of the potato to Irish soil types and learn of natural methods of fertilising the soil and protecting it from fungus attack. Why weren't the crops rotated in the mid-1800s? List the advantages of crop rotation. How do moulds/fungi differ from other plants?
- ◆ Human environments: Famine: Becoming aware of the causes and effects of famine **or** Development Aid: Coming to appreciate the inequalities between the developed and the developing world, exploring some of the issues and problems associated with aid.

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- ◆ Myself: The nutrients necessary in a balanced diet to help in development and staying healthy. Examine the usual diet of an Irish labourer, and say which nutrients are present. When the children cooked rabbit, carrots and wild onions they had difficulty 'trying to digest such good nourishing food' (p.77) and they thought fish and turnips 'a meal fit for a king' (p.94). As they became weaker they could not hunt and were reduced to adding 'flower heads, grass, leaves' to the water 'along with a tiny bit of grain' (p.120). Why did cow's blood save them (pp.129–130)?