



## The truth about coffin ships? An investigation

The Irish Famine and the flight to North America  
Return of passenger ships arriving at the Port of Quebec 1847

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Internet links

- Task 1* Famine memorial (PowerPoint)
- Task 3* The History Place - Irish Famine: <http://www.historyplace.com/worldhistory/famine/coffin.htm>  
Out of Ireland - A Watery Grave: <http://personal.nbnet.nb.ca/rmcusack/Story-32.html>  
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- Task 4* Famine ships in Quebec, 1847: [http://iisresource.org/Documents/irish\\_famine\\_ships\\_1847.xls](http://iisresource.org/Documents/irish_famine_ships_1847.xls)

# Teacher notes

## Central theme

The central theme of the activity is to get students to think about widely held perceptions of the Famine, or in this case the flight across the Atlantic which was precipitated by the Famine. The traditional, popular view is that the starving migrants fled across the sea in appalling coffin ships.

## Tasks 1 & 2

Tasks 1 and 2 are likely to reinforce this view. This is of course deliberate, in order to then make the comments in some of the better web sites and the patterns revealed in the data more of a revelation. The key learning point is not that the traditional story is right or wrong, but that the story is complex, and popular memory is often selective. As a result, elements of the bigger story are sometimes left out of popular memory. Task 1 is further supported by a PowerPoint file containing the two images. You could use this on a whiteboard and get students to observe points about the imagery of the monument.

## Fact or fiction?

Task 2 is interesting in terms of the fact that diary is fictional. When it was first published this was somewhat unclear and caused confusion and controversy. Students might be interested in following up this little sideline in the story. Here are two extracts which might generate interest. The information could also be used as part of the task of course.

Following the very successful publication of *Famine Diary* by Wolfhound Press in 1991, widespread interest in the subject has led some historians to question the existence of Gerald Keegan, and the authenticity of the original diary. However, I have no hesitation in standing over this fictionalised version as an accurate representation of the conditions and events of the period.

James J. Mangan FSC

## STOP PRESS - PUBLISHER'S NOTE 1 April 1992

During the printing of this edition, the controversy generated by the publication of *Famine Diary* reached a significant climax. Some critics questioned the authenticity of the Keegan diary on which it is based, alleging that the diary was a work of fiction written by Robert Sellar, who published the first printed version under the title *Summer of Sorrow*. Consequent on this controversy, Radharc Films, who intended to use part of the original diary in their television series on the Irish famine, took steps to check authorship. With advice from the Gardai and help from AFRI, Radharc commissioned a study to check the allegation that the diary was written by Sellar. Dr Michael Famngdon studied the text of Keegan's diary, and that of its introduction by Sellar, using modern analysis techniques of cumulative sum stylometry, which he has used in presenting evidence to the Central Criminal Court, Dublin and at the Old Bailey, London. His summary conclusions are clear:

1. In my opinion Robert Sellars is not the author of *The Diary of Gerald Keegan*.
2. The samples from the *Diary of Gerald Keegan* are, in my opinion the mixed utterance of two or more people. However, most of the sentences are by the same person, not Robert Sellars.

### Task 3

Task 3 will probably need managing and adapting according to your class. You may feel happy enough to let them take a free search of the Internet. You may wish to confine certain students to one site or even one part of a site. Extracts from two of the sites have been copied into word files to make the more accessible, both technologically (in case your connection is unavailable) and also in terms of the level of demand. Clearly all need viewing in advance of use in class. In task 3 it is also important to discuss issues of tone and style, just as with task 2. This is not set out formally in the task, but it is a potentially valuable tool for stretching more able students or the issue of reliability could be discussed in a whole class format, perhaps feeding back on responses to task 3.

A final technical point for task 3 – sites such as these sometimes close down. You can usually find an archive copy of the site at [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org). Type the address you were looking for into the ‘Way Back’ machine and it should appear.



### Task 4

The primary purpose of creating this data was to allow students to exercise their powers of analysis on a large, completely authentic, historical document. In its electronic form, opportunities open up to young people which were unavailable even to those who compiled the information in the first place. The various queries should all be relatively easy to perform using Excel’s search, sort and graphing functions. Remember that Excel will also perform calculations such as percentages, averages and totals.

The final three columns of the file are highlighted in yellow. This is because they did not appear in the original. They are calculations based on the data. You may want to remove these before showing the file to students and get them to create these columns. It should be stressed that the thought process about which calculations to make and searches to carry out are just as important as the actual results themselves.

The final stage of the task is an attempt to help students to summarise their learning. If you have access to voting handsets you could use these questions to ‘poll’ student views.

# Coffin ships: the investigation

The Irish Famine and the flight to North America

## What were the coffin ships?

Ireland was devastated by a terrible famine from around 1845-51. Around a million died and a further 1.5 million emigrated. Most went to Britain where they hoped to work and save enough money for a passage to North America.

The coffin ships were the ships which were used to transport Irish emigrants hoping for a better life in North America. Thousands died on these ships, often in appalling conditions. In this investigation you are going to examine this aspect of Ireland's history. But remember, it is also Britain's history - Ireland in the 1840s was part of the United Kingdom.

## Task 1: The memory of the coffin ships

These two pictures are photographs of the Irish National Famine Memorial in County Mayo in Ireland. Of all of the images which could have been used, this memorial chose to focus on the coffin ships.



This shows us what a powerful impact the coffin ships have had on the memory of Irish people.

But why have they had such an impact?

Study the images closely and work out:

1. What messages the artist is trying to send with this memorial.
2. How the artist uses images rather than words to get the messages across.

See also PowerPoint exercise at [http://iisresource.org/Documents/famine\\_memorial.ppt](http://iisresource.org/Documents/famine_memorial.ppt)

See appendix for hard copy.

## Task 2: A view from on board a coffin ship

### Extract from Gerard Keegan's Famine Diary 1847

*April 9. We sailed at daybreak this morning. Our ship, the Naparima, with estimated accommodation for three hundred, has over five hundred on board. It will indeed be a prosperous voyage for the charterers and the Captain who gets five pounds for each passenger. The Naparima is an ancient tub of a vessel that has reached a ripe old age. Her creaking timbers will be severely tested if we run into rough weather.*

*After dropping the pilot at Kingstown three days' rations of sea biscuits were served. They were tough and somewhat mouldy but the people were so famished that they ate them without complaint. Unfortunately almost all of them were consumed the first day. About half of the passengers had no place to bed down for the night. They tried to rest on bundles and chests on the floor of the steerage quarters. What I have seen today of the Naparima bears out some of the details I have already quoted about the whole system of transporting Irish emigrants. It is not an exaggeration to say that anything that will stay afloat and carry a sizable number of passengers is being put into service. I heard that a lot of the boats were built for Canadian lumber export. Some are dismantled when they reach England so that the structural timbers can be used. Others return to Canada with a human cargo as ballast. They take from six weeks to three months to cross the ocean. The holds are dark, cavernous dungeons fitted with narrow movable bunks for the emigrants. There are no lights, no portholes, and no ventilation except for what fresh air enters from the two hatchways.*

*The legal allowance is thirty-three inches, in width, for each passenger, but the crowding on the Naparima allows only about half of that. By noon hour today the air was already foul and if fever breaks out I fear for the worst. It is an ideal place for disease to spread.*

### Task 2A

Read this extract carefully.

Try and find phrases or sentences which tell us about:

1. Overcrowding
2. Whether anyone made profits from the emigrants
3. Food and water
4. Quality of the ships
5. Conditions on board ship
6. Laws or regulations

### Task 2B

Look at the tone of the language in this extract.

Do you get the impression that this account is a reliable source for the historian looking at how the Irish emigrants crossed the Atlantic?

### Task 3: Coffin ships on the web

Does the memory of the coffin ships still live on today?

One of the best places to find out about how people remember past events is by searching the Internet.

In this task your job is to look at some web sites which comment on the coffin ships.

1. The History Place - Irish Famine: <http://www.historyplace.com/worldhistory/famine/coffin.htm>
2. Out of Ireland - A Watery Grave: <http://personal.nbnet.nb.ca/rmcusack/Story-32.html>
3. The Worst Coffin Ships: [http://www.obeirnefamily.cwc.net/issue6/worst\\_coffin\\_ships.htm](http://www.obeirnefamily.cwc.net/issue6/worst_coffin_ships.htm).

Your teacher may give you sections of these sites to look at, or let you search for your own.

After looking at one or more of the sites, compare the impression you get from this site with the impressions you formed in Tasks 1 and 2.

Record them in a table like this.

Aspect of the coffin ships	What the Keegan diary said	What the web site(s) said
Overcrowding		
Whether anyone made profits from the emigrants		
Food and water		
Quality of the ships		
Conditions on board ship		
Laws or regulations		
Add other points or issues here		

#### Task 4: How do we make our minds up?

Did task 3 help you develop a clear view on the coffin ships, or did it make things more confused?

You probably found out that not all ships were coffin ships. However, this would depend on which sites you looked at.

Another puzzle is that the diary extract in Task 2 is actually a work of fiction. It was written by a Canadian Catholic priest. Although he did not hide the fact it was fiction, he argued that it reflected the truth of what happened.

*So, how do we make our minds up?*

A. One valuable piece of evidence which has survived is the port record for ships arriving in Quebec (Canada) in 1847 - available as an MS Excel file at

[http://iisresource.org/Documents/irish\\_famine\\_ships\\_1847.xls](http://iisresource.org/Documents/irish_famine_ships_1847.xls).

All ships first called at the small island of Grosse Ile in the St Lawrence River.

Your task is to search through the data on these ships and see what conclusions you draw.

Here are some questions to get you started ...

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which were the busiest months at the port?</li> <li>• What was the average length of a passage?</li> <li>• Were there big variations in the average length of a passage at different times of year?</li> <li>• Is it possible to say where the ships generally came from?</li> <li>• How long did ships have to stay in quarantine?</li> <li>• How many ships only took cabin passengers?</li> <li>• How many ships only had steerage passengers?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did a long spell in quarantine always lead to a large number of deaths?</li> <li>• Did many ships have no deaths either on the voyage or in quarantine?</li> <li>• Which 5 ships had the worst death rates?</li> <li>• How many ships had death rates over 50%?</li> <li>• How many ships had death rates of less than 10%?</li> </ul>
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B. After you have tackled these queries, try as many searches and queries as you can think of for yourself.

C. Finally, decide whether you think the popular memory of the coffin ships reflects the complete story.

To help you decide, study the following statements and see which of them you agree or disagree with.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Coffin ships – this phrase sums up the whole story of injustice and misery very well					
The coffin ships should certainly be remembered, but there were an awful lot of ships which were not coffin ships – they have been forgotten					
The whole thing happened so long ago there is no point remembering					
Some of the web sites gave a misleading impression that all ships were coffin ships					
Gerald Keegan’s Diary might have been fiction but it was basically true					
The fictional diary was probably an accurate account of one type of ship					

# The Famine Memorial in Mayo



Beautiful setting – contrast with harshness of memorial

Gaunt masts – almost like skeletons

Figures are shown as skeletons – death and hunger



Timbers of ship remind us of the ribs of the hungry people who travelled in them

Ship looks frail – coffin ships were often not seaworthy

Here we can see the 'ribs' close up

The figures represent the dead – they are 'haunting' the memorial