

A HISTORY OF IRELAND IN 100 OBJECTS, A SELECTION 5TH & 6TH CLASS LESSON PLAN

Empty Cooking Pot 19th Century



Sometimes an object can look very ordinary. Even boring.

This is a pot.

A pot with three legs.

Quite a big pot.

Quite a heavy pot.

Nowadays pots come in all shapes and sizes. Pots with long handles and pots with short handles, pots that go on top of the cooker and pots that go inside the oven. But, generally speaking, not big, heavy, three-legged pots like this.

But say 170 years ago you would have seen pots like this in every traditional house in the country. And in those days most people lived in small houses, with one or two rooms. And the most important part of those houses, their very heart, was the fireplace.

This was where the cooking was done. Pots would have been filled with water and placed right in the centre of the small smouldering turf fire. But there was more than just water in these pots. There was something else. A type of food that was so special, so important, so essential to life at that time that it was eaten day or night. The potato.

Now maybe you're beginning to think that things haven't really changed that much. We still have potatoes, after all. We still cook them. We still eat them. But things have changed. A lot. While we might still eat potatoes, we also eat other vegetables like carrots and peas and onions, and we also eat meat and fish and pasta and fruit and, well, the list goes on. A hundred and seventy years ago, there was no list.

Potatoes were all there was.

Potatoes for breakfast.

Potatoes for dinner.

Potatoes for tea.

And now imagine that it's the summer of 1845. You're strolling up to the field to check on the potato crop. The sun is shining. The countryside is green and lovely. It's one of those days when, for no particular reason, you feel really, really good.

And then you notice the leaves. They seem to be covered in strange brown spots. Spots that you've never seen before.

Suddenly you don't feel so good any more. You tell yourself that the spots don't matter. That the potatoes below the surface are grand. Absolutely grand.

You mention it to your neighbour. They say that the leaves of their potatoes are the same. Just the same. You tell each other that everything is grand. Absolutely grand.

And then it's time to dig up the potatoes. Only there are no potatoes, just black, rotten balls of nothing. And the smell. The smell is everywhere.

You run to tell your family. You run to tell your neighbour. But your neighbour's field is just the same. As are the fields down the road and the fields across the river.

Maybe you and your family somehow survive that winter. Maybe you have other potatoes stored away. Maybe you manage to find other food.

And now it's the following year and you're heading out to the potato field again. The sun is shining. The countryside is green and lovely. But, this time you're not strolling. This time you don't feel so good. You're tired and hungry. You have no energy and you're worried. Very, very worried.

And then you notice the spots again ...

There was no potato harvest for five summers in a row. That meant famine.

No food.

No hope.

One million people died of hunger.

One million people left Ireland for ever.

And all the while, pots like this sat empty in the corner.