



The Great Famine | War and Change: Ireland 1918-1924

Books Reviewed:

[The Great Famine](#) [1]

Books Reviewed:

[War and Change: Ireland 1918-1924](#) [2]

Issue:

[171](#) [3]

Reviewer:

[Clive Barnes](#) [4]

Editorial Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

2

The notion that the past never leaves us is confirmed by these two titles in a new primary school history series from Evans. Unlike most of the other titles in the series, these seem to be designed mainly for the Irish curriculum rather than the English, and deal with subjects that continue to have a tragic resonance on the island: the Famine and the Irish Civil War of the 1920s. Both books are conventional in presentation, dividing their subjects into double page topics, using contemporary photographs and illustrations, highlighting terms in the glossary, and offering suggestions for further research or classroom activities. They use a variety of sources and seek to look at their subjects from different points of view. However, both, I think, have problems in conveying their subjects effectively to the 10- and 11-year-olds for which they are intended. Neither book seems to give enough space to the background to its subject. Sometimes the vocabulary seems inadequate to the work it is asked to do: is it quite right to say that those landowners who evicted their famine stricken tenants were 'cruel?', while those who reduced their rents were 'kind'? Sometimes students are asked to answer questions to which the authors have given no guidance. Another difficulty is the emotive nature of these subjects - witness the modern Republican wall painting in Belfast shown in Brougham and Farrell's title which graphically depicts the Famine as 'Britain's Genocide by Starvation' (students are not invited to debate whether this is an accurate description, though the inclusion of the illustration would seem to make the question inevitable). To be fair, the books are intended for classroom use and have copious guidance for teachers (and exceptionally supportive parents) at the back, and the authors of both books are aware of the difficulties they face in presenting 'a balanced view'. As the guidance to the Irish history curriculum itself puts it: 'Complex issues are involved, and while these have to be simplified for the child, care should be taken not to leave him/her with a simplistic understanding of the past.'

Running Order:

6

Links:

[1] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/the-great-famine>

[2] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/war-and-change-ireland-1918-1924>

[3] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/171>

[4] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/clive-barnes>