

Daniel O’Connell and Catholic Emancipation



■ Learning Outcomes

- Explain the Penal Laws.
- Define Catholic Emancipation.
- Discuss the Catholic Association.
- Examine primary source documents.
- Apply critical thinking.
- Link to prior knowledge and the local area.

■ Some Ideas to Begin: Pair/Group Work Discussion

Note: This lesson further explores topics contained within the Interactive Timeline and Map.

1. Connect with prior knowledge and the local area.

- What do students already know about the Penal Laws?
- Did the Penal Laws leave any physical imprints on the local area? Possible discussion points include Mass rocks, hedge schools, non-denominational cemeteries including Goldenbridge and Glasnevin Cemeteries. Classrooms can discuss this topic further by searching the National Folklore Collection UCD Digitization Project, available to view on <https://www.duchas.ie/>. Here you can search keywords (such as those listed as possible discussion points) and returns from different localities.

2. Connecting the past to the present.

In the present day:

- Who can become an elected member of Dáil Éireann?
- Who can vote in general elections in the Republic of Ireland?

For more detail on this see:

https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/government_in_ireland/national_government/houses_of_the_oireachtas/dail_eireann.html#186bf7

Return to this point at the end of the lesson and contrast modern electoral laws with those from the past.

■ Penal Laws: What were they?

The Penal Laws were a series of laws that restricted the lives of Roman Catholics and Protestant Dissenters (for example, Presbyterians who were not part of the Established Church). These laws were added to throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. The Penal Laws controlled many areas of life: including land ownership, education, religious worship, voting, marriage, and holding positions of public office. In Ireland, laws restricting education and religious worship meant that children were often educated in hedge schools and people attended Mass in secret. Rocks - known as Mass rocks - were used as altars

in many areas. Punishments for breaking these laws included fines or imprisonment, and Catholic clergy could face a penalty of death. By the end of the 18th century many of these laws had been repealed. However, some remained in place, including laws that prevented Catholics from becoming Members of the British Parliament.

■ Examples of Penal Laws

Catholics were not allowed to:

- Carry arms (weapons).
- Teach or establish a school.
- Marry a Protestant.
- Vote.
- Own a horse valued at over £5.

■ The Catholic Association

The Catholic Association was founded in 1823. It wanted to achieve Catholic Emancipation: the right for Catholics to be Members of the British Parliament. Prior to this, a Catholic Committee made up of noblemen and professionals campaigned for Catholic Emancipation but had not achieved it. Daniel O’Connell was part of that committee and wanted to establish a new organisation with a wider membership. People were encouraged to join the Catholic Association and membership fees began at one penny a month. This fee - known as the ‘Catholic Rent’ - was affordable to all but the very poor. The Catholic Association grew into a mass movement (very large numbers of people were involved) throughout Ireland and was supported by the Catholic Church. The Association’s work included election campaigns, petitions, peaceful meetings, and demonstrations. Money that was raised from membership fees was used to fund this work.

Catholics were not permitted to be Members of Parliament (MPs). However, Catholics who rented or owned land that was worth more than 40 shillings (£2) could vote in elections. In 1828, a by-election was called for Co. Clare. This election gave O’Connell and the Catholic Association an opportunity. The existing MP for Co. Clare was William Vesey Fitzgerald. He was a Protestant landlord who supported Catholic Emancipation but the British government at the time did not. O’Connell decided to stand against Fitzgerald. If O’Connell was elected, the government would have to face the issue of Catholic Emancipation because O’Connell was a Catholic.

The Catholic Association launched a huge election campaign and Daniel O’Connell won. Voting at this time was done in public as men stated their choice aloud. (It remained this way until the Ballot Act of 1872 introduced secret ballot votes.)

The British Government in Westminster was under the leadership of the Duke of Wellington. They feared that if O’Connell was prevented from becoming a Member of Parliament, a rebellion would begin in Ireland. So in 1829, the British Government passed the Catholic Emancipation Act, and the oath that prevented Catholics from becoming MPs was repealed. At the same time however, the voting qualification in Ireland was increased: from those who owned or leased land to the value of £2, to those who owned or leased land to the value of £10. Many Catholic and Protestant men, especially those from the lower classes, lost their right to vote at this time.

■ Did You Know?

- Legal barriers that could prevent Protestant Dissenters from becoming government officials were in place until 1828.
- The Duke of Wellington was born in Ireland and spent his childhood there. Find out which county he was born in and where he went to school.

'Honest' Tom Steele

Image of O'Connell, with Steele on the left of the image.
Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Ireland.



- Born in Clare in 1788.
- Educated at Ennis Grammar School, Trinity College Dublin, and Cambridge.
- He was an engineer and a scholar of Greek.
- Said to be very genuine, hence his nickname.
- Steele was a Protestant and a supporter of Catholic Emancipation. He became Vice-President of the Catholic Association.
- Steele worked with O'Connell in the Repeal Movement.
- Alongside O'Connell and others, Steele was arrested in 1844. A 'Monster Meeting' had been planned for Clontarf and although it was cancelled by O'Connell, they were found guilty of sedition (encouraging rebellion) and imprisoned for 3 months.
- After the death of O'Connell in 1847, and facing financial ruin, Steele threw himself into the River Thames and tragically died some weeks later on 15 June 1848. His body was brought back to Dublin and he was laid to rest in a vault (like a tomb) next to the O'Connell Round Tower in Glasnevin.

■ Primary Sources: Working As A Historian

1. Below is an edited verse from a ballad sheet *O'Connell's New Song on Catholic Emancipation*.

The original version is held in the National Archives. This ballad is told from the perspective of Daniel O'Connell and dates from the time of Catholic Emancipation (1829).

Did You Know? A ballad is a song or poem that tells a story. Traditionally, ballads were memorised and passed on to the next generation.

'I have roll'd up a mill-stone against a steep mountain,
By the assistance of O'Gorman Mahon and Sheil,
Back'd by John Lawless of the Order of Liberators,
And the praise-worthy champion brave Thomas Steel.
When we had it at the pinnacle we were sure of being victorious,
We had 7 million Catholics to roll it down headforemost
Going to the City of London we heaved it on before us
It being the conditions of Erin go Bragh.'

■ Pair/Group Work

- a) In your opinion, what is this ballad referring to in the first line?
- b) Do you recognise any of the names mentioned? Using this knowledge, can you make an informed guess about the role of the other people who are mentioned in this ballad?
- c) 'We had 7 million Catholics to roll it down headforemost'. This line refers to support for the Catholic Association. How did the Catholic Association become a mass movement?
- d) Are there examples of opinion in this text?
- e) This ballad dates from a time when the main forms of communication were newspapers and word of mouth. Therefore, did ballads and songs play a strong role in the communication of thoughts and ideas? Discuss.
- f) Was this form of communication accessible to many people? (Think about the advantages of ballads, songs and poems over information that has to be read.)
- g) What are the advantages and challenges of using ballads as historical sources?

Some of the terms in the Keyword List section are useful when discussing and evaluating primary sources.

2. Extracts from a report in *Finns' Leinster Journal*, Saturday, June 28, 1828

CLARE ELECTION – MR.O'CONNELL

'Mr. O'C accompanied by a large deputation of the most influential members of the Association went down early in the week to canvas the County. The election begins on Monday. In the meantime, meetings have been held daily in the different parishes, at which great enthusiasm and unanimity of sentiment were manifested to keep Mr. Fitzgerald out and to effect the return of Mr. O'Connell. Of his success there are few that have any doubt.'

'...Mr. O'C. will be required to take the oath, which of course, he will indignantly refuse. The election of the return will thereupon be declared null and void.'

'This is the most important measure that has ever been taken to bring Parliament to a serious consideration of the injustice of the exclusion laws, and the awful

profanation of the oaths that shut the doors of the Senate against Catholics. We are really astonished that the Irish faction and the English aristocracy do not see the danger of the conduct they are pursuing with regard to Ireland in the present enlightened age...'

'We should like (says the Edinburgh Review) to argue this matter with a regular Tory Lord, who gives his vote steadily against the Catholic question. I render that mere fear does not make you give up the Catholic question....Should you like to see six or seven thousand French or Americans land in Ireland, and aided by a universal insurrection of Catholics?'

Questions

- a. What campaign actions are mentioned in this report?
- b. In your opinion, does the newspaper reporter support Daniel O'Connell? Use evidence from the source to support your answer.

- c. This report mentions the 'exclusion laws'. Can you explain what these were?
- d. This report refers to 'the present enlightened age'. Link to your classroom studies. What was the Enlightenment? Can you think of examples, in other countries, when people fought for greater rights and equality during the Age of Enlightenment?
- e. There is a question in the final line. According to a writer in the Edinburgh Review, what could happen if Catholic Emancipation was not allowed?

3. The Freeman's Journal, Wednesday, July 9, 1828

At half-past six o'clock, the Sheriff, attended by his Learned Assessor, Mr. Kestinge, entered the Court, and took their seats. The Candidates sat on the right and left of the Sheriff. The High Sheriff - Gentlemen electors of Clare, the state of the poll is -

Gross number for D. O'Connell, Esq.
- 2, 057

Ditto for the Right Hon. V. Fitzgerald
- 982

I now declare Daniel O'Connell, Esq. to be duly elected a Knight to represent this county in Parliament. (Tremendous waving of hats and handkerchiefs for several minutes).

- a. By how many votes did O'Connell win the election?

■ General Lesson Activities

Create

1. Write a summary explaining the events that resulted in Catholic Emancipation in 1829.

Discuss

1. How did the Penal Laws affect life and impact society in the past?
2. What is your opinion of the public voting system that was used in the past? What problems may have resulted from this system?
3. In the past, the right to vote was based on property qualifications. Therefore, what groups of people were excluded from voting?

(The information here only refers to men as women did not have the right to vote. To learn more about the struggle for votes for women see the Lesson Topic on the Votes for Women.)

Reflect 3-2-1

Make a List of:

- 3 - Facts that you discovered.
- 2 - Challenges that are faced by historians when using primary source documents.
- 1 - Link between this lesson and information that you previously studied or encountered.

■ Further Reading

- The Dictionary of Irish Biography: Daniel O'Connell
<https://www.dib.ie/biography/oconnell-daniel-a6555> written by Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh.