Life in Rural Ontario During the Late 19th Century: Hardship or Prosperity?

This MysteryQuest examines documents related to the murder of the "Black" Donnellys in order to determine the quality of life experienced by farmers in southwestern Ontario during the mid-nineteenth century. Students consider evidence from visual and textual sources as they assess the challenges and opportunities associated with immigrating to Canada at that time.

A critical thinking challenge to accompany

Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History

Heaven and Hell on Earth:
The Massacre of the "Black" Donnellys

http://www.mysteryquests.ca/quests/19/indexen.html

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based on an approach developed by The Critical Thinking Consortium (TC²)
www.tc2.ca

Ages
14-16

Courses
Canadian history, social studies

Key Topics
- push and pull factors in immigration
- quality of life
- life in 19th century rural Ontario

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Critical Challenge

Taking on the persona of an Irish immigrant in the late 19th century, prepare a letter that clearly states whether you enthusiastically encourage Irish relatives to move to southwestern Ontario, cautiously recommend they move, or suggest they remain in Ireland.

Broad Understanding

- Students will learn to find evidence in visual and textual sources to support a reasoned assessment of the potential challenges and opportunities associated with immigrating to Canada in the mid-nineteenth century.
- Students will learn to consider the significance of the factors that contribute to quality of life when examining an historical issue.

Requisite Tools

Background knowledge

- knowledge of the push factors such as poverty, famine, and the potato blight that caused people to leave Ireland
- knowledge of pull factors that drew immigrants to southwestern Ontario such as cheap land
- knowledge of factors that contribute to quality of life
- knowledge of social, economic, and political conditions that impacted the lives of settlers in southwestern Ontario

Criteria for judgment

- criteria for sound conclusion (e.g., plausible, supported with appropriate evidence)

Critical thinking vocabulary

- quality of life

Thinking strategies

- data chart

Habits of mind

- empathy

Independent Study

This lesson can be used as a self-directed activity by having students individually or in pairs work their way through the guided instructions and support material found at http://www.mysteryquests.ca/quests/19/indexen.html.

Whole Class Activities

On the following pages are suggested modifications of the self-guided procedures found on the MysteryQuest website for use with a class of students. For convenience, each support material and set of directions found on the website is reproduced next to the relevant suggestions for whole class instruction.

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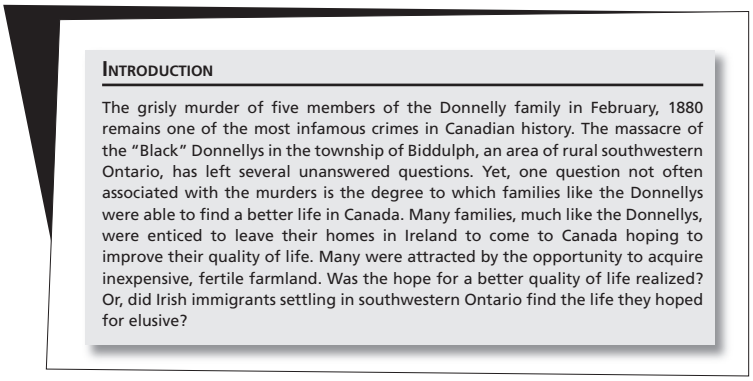
Suggested Activities

Introduce the rural Ontario context

➤ Invite students to reflect on why people today choose to begin a new life in a foreign country and the factors involved in choosing a new country.

➤ Ask students to speculate why rural southwestern Ontario might have attracted settlers during the mid-nineteenth century. How similar or different were the reasons for immigration to Canada in the nineteenth century as compared to the reasons for immigration to Canada today? Encourage students to consider broader concepts such as poverty rather than specific details such as potato famine in making their assessment.

➤ Using the *Introduction* as a guide, explain to students the challenge that is the focus of their investigation.

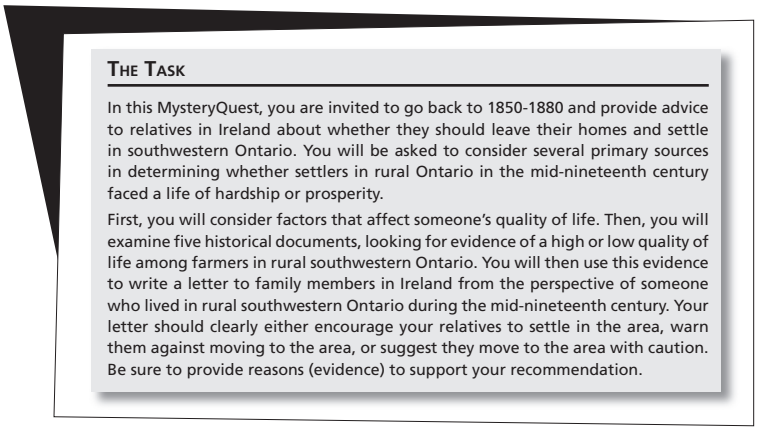


Introduction

The grisly murder of five members of the Donnelly family in February, 1880 remains one of the most infamous crimes in Canadian history. The massacre of the "Black" Donnellys in the township of Biddulph, an area of rural southwestern Ontario, has left several unanswered questions. Yet, one question not often associated with the murders is the degree to which families like the Donnellys were able to find a better life in Canada. Many families, much like the Donnellys, were enticed to leave their homes in Ireland to come to Canada hoping to improve their quality of life. Many were attracted by the opportunity to acquire inexpensive, fertile farmland. Was the hope for a better quality of life realized? Or, did Irish immigrants settling in southwestern Ontario find the life they hoped for elusive?

➤ Using *The Task* as a guide, outline the activities students will undertake.

➤ You may want to download and display pictures of the township and other related events.



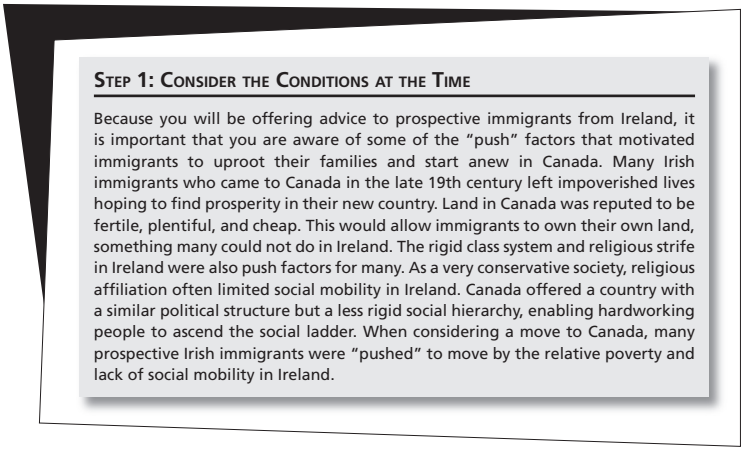
The Task

In this MysteryQuest, you are invited to go back to 1850-1880 and provide advice to relatives in Ireland about whether they should leave their homes and settle in southwestern Ontario. You will be asked to consider several primary sources in determining whether settlers in rural Ontario in the mid-nineteenth century faced a life of hardship or prosperity.

First, you will consider factors that affect someone's quality of life. Then, you will examine five historical documents, looking for evidence of a high or low quality of life among farmers in rural southwestern Ontario. You will then use this evidence to write a letter to family members in Ireland from the perspective of someone who lived in rural southwestern Ontario during the mid-nineteenth century. Your letter should clearly either encourage your relatives to settle in the area, warn them against moving to the area, or suggest they move to the area with caution. Be sure to provide reasons (evidence) to support your recommendation.

Consider the conditions at the time

➤ Using *Step 1: Consider the conditions at the time*, discuss with students the "push" factors that motivated many Irish immigrants to move to Canada in the late 19th century.



Step 1: Consider the Conditions at the Time

Because you will be offering advice to prospective immigrants from Ireland, it is important that you are aware of some of the "push" factors that motivated immigrants to uproot their families and start anew in Canada. Many Irish immigrants who came to Canada in the late 19th century left impoverished lives hoping to find prosperity in their new country. Land in Canada was reputed to be fertile, plentiful, and cheap. This would allow immigrants to own their own land, something many could not do in Ireland. The rigid class system and religious strife in Ireland were also push factors for many. As a very conservative society, religious affiliation often limited social mobility in Ireland. Canada offered a country with a similar political structure but a less rigid social hierarchy, enabling hardworking people to ascend the social ladder. When considering a move to Canada, many prospective Irish immigrants were "pushed" to move by the relative poverty and lack of social mobility in Ireland.

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Examine life in Ireland and Ontario in the mid-19th century

➤ To provide students with some background information, duplicate and distribute to students copies of *The Massacre of the "Black" Donnellys* and *Roots of Conflict in Biddulph Township*.

MysteryQuest 19
Support Materials 1 (Briefing Sheet)

The Massacre of the "Black" Donnellys

The notorious Donnellys were an Irish family who emigrated from Tipperary, Ireland in the 1840s. Like thousands of other Irish immigrants fleeing the devastating potato famine, the extreme poverty and the social unrest in their home country, they settled in rural southern Ontario. The Donnellys took up land in Huron County, and chose to make their home along the Roman Line in Biddulph Township, so named by the Irish Roman Catholics who settled it. And the Donnellys, like most of their neighbours, were Roman Catholic immigrants from around Tipperary, Ireland. James and Johannah Donnelly became squatters (that is, people who took up their land without properly registering their ownership or paying for it).

By the 1850s, conflict, much of it violent, characterized life in Biddulph Township. The community was plagued by sheep killings, arson, numerous fights and brawls, and by murder. And by the 1850s, the Donnellys (and their children James Jr., William, John, Patrick, Michael, Robert, Thomas and Jenny) had established a reputation for picking a fight over just about anything. And some of the residents of the Roman Line in Biddulph Township (all of whom were Catholics), came to blame the Donnellys (Catholics, but friends with Protestants in the area) for every ill that befell the community. An old adage stated: "If a stone fell from heaven, they'd blame it on the Donnellys." Troubles escalated in 1857 when James Donnelly Sr. killed Patrick Farrell, who had purchased the land the Donnelly clan had illegally called their own. To avoid punishment, James hid from authorities for almost a year, sometimes disguised as a woman. He eventually grew tired of the charade and turned himself in to the police. James Donnelly served seven years for his crime. The death of Patrick Farrell served only to strengthen some members of the community's hatred of the Donnellys. But, as court records confirm, the Donnellys were not alone in committing crimes; they lived in a community plagued by arson, assaults and a culture of violence.

The community was not satisfied at the way justice was administered through legal channels in Biddulph Township. A group of disgruntled townspeople established a vigilante committee as a substitute for a legal trial, conviction and sentencing. Their purpose was to punish the wayward Donnellys whose crimes had escalated in the 1870s. Finally, on February 4, 1880 the Donnelly farm was burned to the ground. The bodies of James, his beloved Johannah, son Tom and niece Bridget were in the ashes. Another son, John, lay dead in a separate murder the same night. Evidence suggested that a cruel and vicious mob, a breakaway group of a society called, ironically, "The Peace Society," was to blame. Despite a great deal of evidence (including at least one eyewitness) and two trials, no one was ever found guilty of the crimes.

MysteryQuest 19
Support Materials 2 (Briefing Sheet)

Roots of Conflict in Biddulph Township

Historians do not agree about the root causes of the conflicts that grew up amongst neighbours in Biddulph Township between 1840 and 1880, but no one disagrees that the township was plagued by crimes, violence and hatred. There are three different, but related, explanations for the conflict that ended in the horrific massacre of the Donnellys. Some historians explain the massacre by arguing that the conflicts that escalated into mass murder were the result of ethnic and religious differences brought from Ireland, where centuries of religious conflict, poverty and oppression had pitted Catholics against Protestants. Other historians argue that the cause was less about religious differences than it was about a tradition of lawless violence that religious differences had created. Still others argue that the root of the problem related to land ownership. Let's look at these in greater detail.

Religious Hatred

Religious conflict in Ireland had originated with Oliver Cromwell's conquest of that country in 1695. His decision to settle wealthy English Protestants in Ireland created a class of powerful Protestant landlords who extracted huge rents from the poor Irish Catholics who farmed their land. Many of the English landlords did not even live in Ireland, and thereby did not maintain their lands, or care for their tenants in times of hardship as had been the custom. The Irish Catholics were even denied the right to own land. Eventually they lost even their customary right to farm "common" lands (lands that were used by everyone in common to raise livestock or crops). Without customary forms of economic support, and with ever higher rents, Irish Catholics were driven into ever greater poverty. Many were forced to rely on potatoes as their only source of food.

In the mid-eighteen century (around 1750) a secret society called "The Whiteboys" was created by poor Catholics to exact revenge on the wealthy Protestant landlord class for the suffering the Catholics endured. The Whiteboys insisted that members swear an oath that they would have no contact with Protestants; they were not to trade with them, work with them willingly, or even talk with them. As time went by, the Whiteboys not only terrorized Protestants, but any Catholics who associated with Protestants, killing their livestock, burning their houses and barns, and even resorting to murder. Those Catholics who associated with Protestants, or who objected to the reign of terror and violence of the Whiteboys, were called in Biddulph Township "Blackfeet" (for more detail on this term and its origins, see http://www.donnellys.com/Questions.htm). In the 1850s, Biddulph Township held an almost perfect balance of Whiteboys and Blackfeet. As you might suppose from the term "Black" Donnelly, James Donnelly patronized both Catholic and Protestant businesses, and he even made a financial donation to the building of the local St. James's Anglican Church.

A Culture of Lawless Violence

Other historians have examined the history of religious violence in Ireland – violence that was particularly intense around Tipperary – and do not deny that violence was originally sparked by the terrible injustices that Protestants inflicted on Catholics from the time of Cromwell's conquest of 1695 until Irish Catholics were "emancipated" in 1829. They argue, however, that by the time Irish Catholics, including the Donnellys, moved from Tipperary to Biddulph Township, Ontario in the 1840s, differences between Catholics and Protestants were less important than the culture of violence that defined Irish Catholic society. Religious differences and religious tolerance were simply excuses, these historians argue, for secret societies like the Whiteboys to impose their own "laws" on their neighbours. The culture of violence was based on the decision of secret societies to take the law into their own hands, convicting and sentencing those who disobeyed them. They were, in other words, vigilantes (for more background on vigilantes, see http://faculty.ncwc.edu/toconnor/300/300lect10.htm).

Conflict over Land

Still other historians argue that issues related to land ownership were to blame for the numerous acts of violence to people and property within the community. In Biddulph Township, like other areas of Canada in the nineteenth century, it was in part the promise of land ownership that had encouraged thousands of families to leave their native country. For many peoples arriving in Canada in the nineteenth century, it was no longer possible in their native countries to own land, due to a variety of economic and political factors. Canada, however, had an abundance of land that was cheap by any standard. Canadian laws regulated how land was to be purchased, and often it dictated what settlers had to do to their lands in order to buy it at cheap prices. But sometimes these laws were not followed, and some settlers, like the Donnellys, did not legally purchase their land before living on it. And laws were not always applied equally to all purchasers. Some historians argue the feuds in Biddulph Township were related to questionable practices relating to land.

➤ Ask students to identify the push and pull factors in the briefing sheets. You may want to discuss explicit messages and inferences with students and invite them to identify possible factors that are inferred.

➤ Using *Step 2: Examine life in Ireland and Ontario in the mid-19th century*, provide references for further information about life in southwestern Ontario.

STEP 2: EXAMINE LIFE IN IRELAND AND ONTARIO IN THE MID-19TH CENTURY

Before proceding further, you will find it helpful to read *The Massacre of the "Black" Donnellys* and *Roots of Conflict in Biddulph Township*.

For more information about life in southwestern Ontario, read the introductions to the following "Context" sections:

- Immigration
- Lucan and Farming Life
- Religious and Ethnic Strife

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Consider quality of life

➤ Using *Step 3: Consider quality of life* as a guide, discuss with students the factors indicating quality of life.

➤ You may choose to list the factors on a chart for later reference.

Step 3: Consider Quality of Life

The task you are asked to undertake requires judging the quality of life of farmers in rural Ontario around 1850-1880. What factors determine the quality of a person's life? Notice, "quality of life" is a broader term than "standard of living," which is a more narrow measurement of economic wellbeing. The Economist has developed a quality of life index based on seven factors:

1. Material wellbeing
2. Healthy life
3. Positive family relations
4. Supportive social and community life
5. Job security
6. Political freedom and security
7. Gender equality

Gather evidence of quality of life

➤ Using *Step 4: Gather evidence of quality of life* as a guide, direct students to work individually or in pairs to select any five of the primary documents listed in *Evidence in the Case*.

Step 4: Gather Evidence of Quality of Life

Your next task is to work on your own or with a partner to examine five historical documents that might shed further light on the quality of life experienced by settlers in rural southwestern Ontario around 1850-1880. Select any five of the primary documents from the list found in *Evidence in the Case*.

As you read each document, look for evidence that shows the presence or absence of the previous mentioned indicators of quality of life. Be sure to consider the source of the document. Is the document representative of life for the average farmer or does it reflect the quality of life of an elite in the community? Use the two pages of the chart *Evidence of Quality of Life Factors* to summarize the evidence that each quality of life factor was present or absent. After you have gathered evidence from the five documents for each factor, rate on a scale from +2 (fully present) to -2 (completely missing) the extent to which settlers in the late 19th century enjoyed these quality of life indicators.

Evidence in the Case

Journal article
Thomas McQueen's report on the County of Huron, 1858

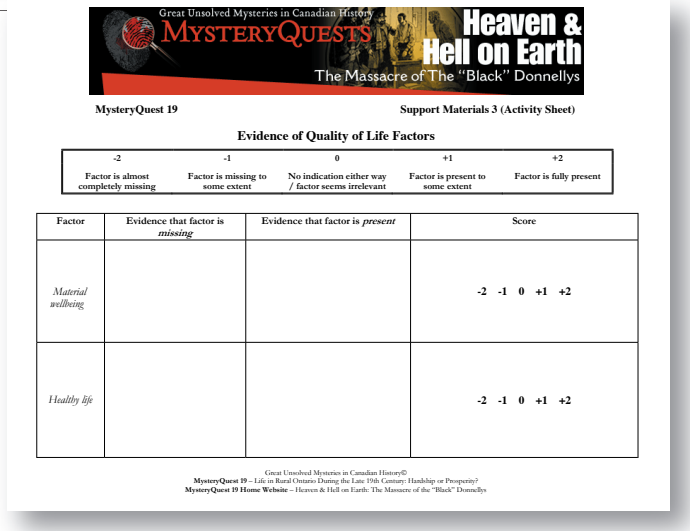
Books
W.D. Stanley, "The Township of Biddulph: Short Sketch of Municipal History and the Official Life, With Some of the Most Important Municipal Events from the Pioneer Days of 1830 to 1912", 1912
Jennie Raycraft Lewis, "Sure An' This Is Biddulph", (Unknown: Biddulph Township Council, 1964)

Letter
Robert and Mary Ritchie to James Ritchie, Ireland, January, 1847, National Archives of Canada, James Ritchie Fonds, MG24 I199

Personal essay
National Archives of Canada, John O. Hanley Fonds, MG29, B11, Box 16, File "Irish Catholics", John O. Hanley, "Remarks on Protestantism", n.d.

Letter to the Editor
M. McQuaide, "What Shall Be Our Future?", *Irish Canadian*, February 11,

➤ Duplicate and distribute to students copies of *Evidence of Quality of Life Factors* to summarize the evidence that each quality of life factor was present or absent. Remind students to rate the extent to which settlers enjoyed these quality of life indicators.



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MysteryQuest 19 **Support Materials 3 (Activity Sheet)**

Evidence of Quality of Life Factors

-2	-1	0	+1	+2
Factor is almost completely missing	Factor is missing to some extent	No indication either way / factor seems irrelevant	Factor is present to some extent	Factor is fully present

Factor	Evidence that factor is *missing*	Evidence that factor is *present*	Score
Material wellbeing			-2 -1 0 +1 +2
Healthy life			-2 -1 0 +1 +2

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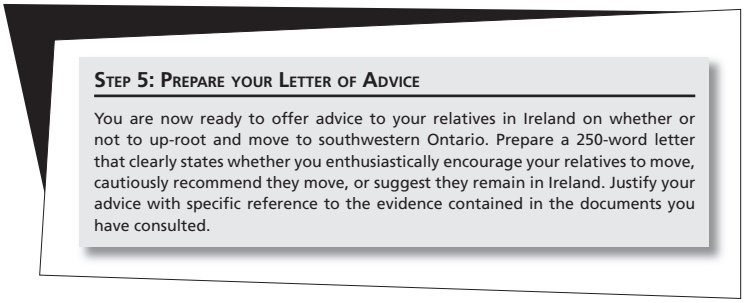
Prepare letters of advice

➤ When students have completed the *Evidence of Quality of Life Factors* chart, invite them to discuss their findings in groups.

➤ Ask students if, based on the evidence they found in the documents, they would recommend family members in Ireland uproot their family and move to southwestern Ontario. Remind students to consider the quality of life experienced by many Irish farmers in the nineteenth century and the quality of life they should expect when they settled in Canada.

➤ Using *Step 5: Prepare your letter of advice* as a guide, instruct students to prepare a 250-word letter to relatives in Ireland on whether or not to move to southwestern Ontario. Remind students to take a clear stand either in favour of the move, against the move, or in favour of the move with concerns, and to justify their advice with specific reference to evidence contained in the documents.



➤ Before or after students complete their letters, you may choose to hold a 4-Corners class debate in which students go to one of four corners representing a view. The four corners would represent the following four positions: Strongly In Favour of the Move, In Favour of the Move with Reservations, Strongly Opposed to the Move, and Moderately Opposed to the Move. Invite students to move to the corner that best represents their point of view based on the evidence they uncovered. After sharing their reasons with other students in the corner, invite students from each corner to defend why they chose the corner they did. Encourage students to consider changing corners if they find the arguments and evidence presented convincing.

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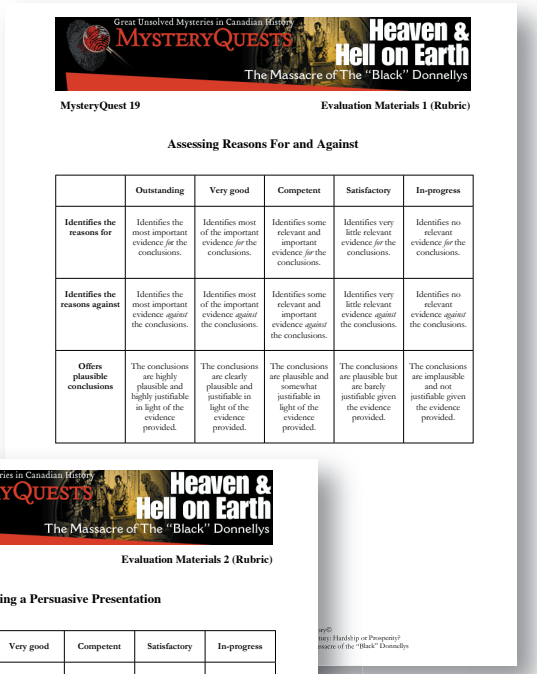
Evaluation

➤ Use the rubric *Assessing Reasons For and Against* to evaluate student completion of the charts. Use the rubric *Assessing a Persuasive Presentation* to assess students' justifications of the conclusion presented in their letter to a family member in Ireland.



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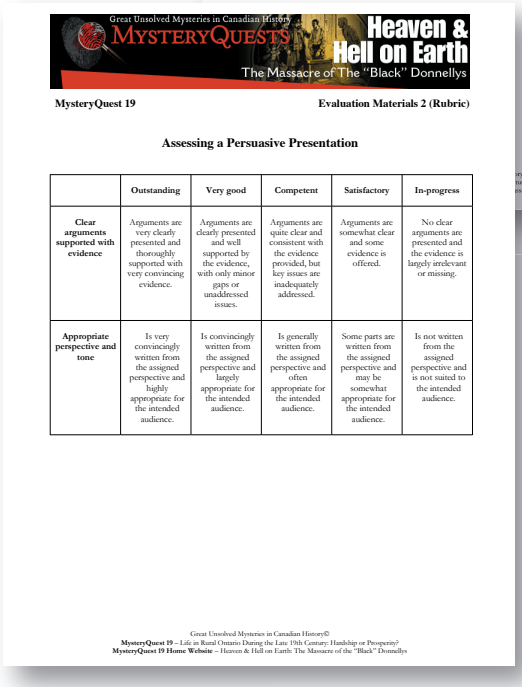
MysteryQuest 19 **Evaluation Materials 1 (Rubric)**

Assessing Reasons For and Against

	Outstanding	Very good	Competent	Satisfactory	In-progress
Identifies the reasons for	Identifies the most important evidence *for* the conclusions.	Identifies most of the important evidence *for* the conclusions.	Identifies some relevant and important evidence *for* the conclusions.	Identifies very little relevant evidence *for* the conclusions.	Identifies no relevant evidence *for* the conclusions.
Identifies the reasons against	Identifies the most important evidence *against* the conclusions.	Identifies most of the important evidence *against* the conclusions.	Identifies some relevant and important evidence *against* the conclusions.	Identifies very little relevant evidence *against* the conclusions.	Identifies no relevant evidence *against* the conclusions.
Offers plausible conclusions	The conclusions are highly plausible and highly justifiable in light of the evidence provided.	The conclusions are clearly plausible and justifiable in light of the evidence provided.	The conclusions are plausible and somewhat justifiable in light of the evidence provided.	The conclusions are plausible but are barely justifiable given the evidence provided.	The conclusions are implausible and not justifiable given the evidence provided.



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MysteryQuest 19 **Evaluation Materials 2 (Rubric)**

Assessing a Persuasive Presentation

	Outstanding	Very good	Competent	Satisfactory	In-progress
Clear arguments supported with evidence	Arguments are very clearly presented and thoroughly supported with very convincing evidence.	Arguments are clearly presented and well supported by the evidence, with only minor gaps or unaddressed issues.	Arguments are quite clear and consistent with the evidence provided, but key issues are inadequately addressed.	Arguments are somewhat clear and some evidence is offered.	No clear arguments are presented and the evidence is largely irrelevant or missing.
Appropriate perspective and tone	Is very convincingly written from the assigned perspective and highly appropriate for the intended audience.	Is convincingly written from the assigned perspective and largely appropriate for the intended audience.	Is generally written from the assigned perspective and often appropriate for the intended audience.	Some parts are written from the assigned perspective and may be somewhat appropriate for the intended audience.	Is not written from the assigned perspective and is not suited to the intended audience.

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Extension

➤ Invite students to work individually or as a class to pursue the suggested activities listed in *Extension*.

Extension

What additional evidence would you need?
Describe the amount and kind of additional evidence you would need to more accurately conclude whether or not prospective emigrants should leave Ireland in search of a better quality of life in rural southwestern Ontario.

Examine additional documents
Locate other historical documents in *Heaven & Hell on Earth: The Massacre of the "Black" Donnellys* that provide more complete evidence to illuminate the quality of life experienced by farmers in southwestern Ontario in the mid-nineteenth century.

Explore other challenges
Apply your detective skills to other mysteries associated with the "Black" Donnellys. MysteryQuest 5 invites you to determine the underlying cause for the brutal murder of this family; MysteryQuest 10 challenges you to assess the credibility of the evidence of an eyewitness account to the murders.

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