



# Deadly Irish History: The Celts

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## John Farrelly Teaching Guide By Peter Heaney

### RATIONALE & THEMES

The Celts were a diverse people who emerged in Central Europe in the mists of ancient time, migrating to populate Ireland about 2,700 years ago.

In their wake, they left behind a cultural trace that has shaped Ireland as a Celtic nation.

This book charts their legacy throwing a light on their way of life in a lively and entertaining way.

The themes included are:

- The origins of the Celts and who they were.
- Their culture and practices.
- Their influence and legacy.
- Their beliefs, gods and heroes.
- How they lived and governed themselves.

### SUMMARY

We learn how the Celts arrived and stamped their settlement patterns on Ireland.

We learn that they were not a cohesive people but rather a disparate range of smaller family groups who generally struggled to live harmoniously with their neighbours.

Raid and counter raid were a common preoccupation and these actions were then raised to heroic status by story and legend.

We learn of their family structures and how they sought to govern themselves by Brehon Law, a code of instruction and guidance designed to establish accord among tribes.

We learn about their society, the harmony they sought with their environment and their vision of who they were, outlined in their sagas and beliefs.

Finally, we learn of their legacy and influence in creating modern Ireland.

### APPROACH

The topics in the book are particularly

relevant to the requirements of the history elements in both the SESE & WAU curricula.

The structure and presentation of the material suggests that a group activity-based approach would be the more effective.

The guide is divided into three sections to reflect and complement the development of their story.

*(Teachers are reminded that current good practice when directing children to Internet research, requires that the site be viewed and approved by the teacher beforehand and that close supervision is maintained during the searches.)*

### Section 1 Who were the Celts Pages 6 - 37

#### SUMMARY

The Celts inhabited a wonderfully rich and imaginative world, first appearing as a powerful influence in Central Europe about 2700 years ago, before migrating West to inhabit Ireland.

The Celts introduced the Iron Age to Ireland as well as dividing the country into provinces and constructing a functioning road network of five great roads to link the provinces.

Celtic society was hierarchical; each tribe ruled by a king with the strata decreasing in rank to the slaves who held no rights and were simply drudges.

Druids were important to the Celts and held significant power to advise and administer the law.

There were no schools and children were educated at home into skills that were appropriate for their rank and gender.

Fostering was a common practice and very young children were often sent to live with other families for years until they reached

maturity.

Young men who were without land roamed in bands (Fianna) outside the society and had to fend for themselves either by foraging or joining as mercenaries to support one tribe fighting against another.

Fighting and stealing from neighbouring tribes was endemic and sagas would be written to exaggerate and praise the deeds of the warriors involved.

Their way of life was entirely pastoral with small tribes living in small farming settlements that depended for survival on husbandry and agriculture.

#### DISCUSSION POINTS

- (Read p12):** The Celts were a people who delighted in fighting and then telling exaggerated tales in their sagas. Why was fighting so attractive for them and why did they like to exaggerate? Is modern inter-county sport a substitute for this necessity to fight and then boast about it?
- (Read pp17-26):** Not everyone in Celtic society enjoyed equal privileges. Today in our society, we offer privilege to some and not to others. Why are some people seen as being more worthwhile? Is it easy to move between the classes in society? How could you manage it?
- (Read p25):** The Celts depended on slaves. Was this fair treatment? How should these types of workers be treated? Is there still slavery in the modern world? How would you feel if you discovered that something you used or wore had been produced by a slave?  
[irishtimes.com/opinion/modern-slavery-is-going-on-right-under-our-noses-1.4081743](http://irishtimes.com/opinion/modern-slavery-is-going-on-right-under-our-noses-1.4081743)  
[rte.ie/brainstorm/2018/0613/970641-does-ireland-have-a-modern-slavery-problem/](http://rte.ie/brainstorm/2018/0613/970641-does-ireland-have-a-modern-slavery-problem/)
- (Read p26):** The Celts believed that everyone should be responsible for the

consequences of their actions. A family became liable if a member was unable to pay. How could this control behaviour? How would you feel if you were made responsible for a brother or sister's debt?

- **(Read p32):** There are many interesting tourist attraction reconstructions of Celtic settlements across the country. Do we really need to know how we lived long ago? Do they tell us anything useful about living today or is it simply curiosity? [craggaunowen.ie](http://craggaunowen.ie)

## ACTIVITIES

### 1. Who do they think they are? (Read p14)

When the Celts invaded Ireland, there were already natives living here.

What do you think they thought of these swaggering newcomers with their fancy iron weapons and gelled hair styles?

Using illustrations and speech bubbles, create a dialogue between two of them in the same comic style the author has used as they discuss their impressions of the new arrivals.

### 2. Tuatha Dé Danann (Read p15)

Next year is the 3000-year anniversary of the arrival of those ancient gods to Ireland. Their disappearance remains a mystery.

To commemorate the anniversary, The O'Brien Press have organized a poster competition to celebrate their magical powers. The posters will use comic book text and illustrations.

Submit an entry.

### 3. Know your Place (Read pp17-25)

In ancient Celtic society, everyone belonged to a particular group and each group had specific roles and privileges.

In groups can you divide the people in modern Ireland into six groups.

Use a pyramid diagram and explain who belongs to each group and what benefits they enjoy.

### 4. Totem (Read p33)

Celts used carved wooden posts to mark their territories. There were serious consequences for anyone who ignored them.

Using the cardboard core from a roll of kitchen paper make your own totem marker to guard the entrance to your bedroom.

You can decorate it with fierce Celtic swirls

and designs.

### 5. Goosey, Goosey (Read p35)

The roundhouse owner has to display a notice to warn everyone about the fierce guard geese he keeps.

Create a suitable one for him that will scare anyone from trying to burgle the roundhouse.

### 6. Easy as Pie (Read p37)

To build a model roundhouse, the author suggests that the length of the wall will be three times the diameter of the roof. How could he possibly know this?

In groups collect some different sized circle shapes and containers. Measure their diameters and then the distances around the outside (**Circumference**).

Can you find an approximate relationship between these two dimensions? Is the relationship the same for every shape?

Can you find the name that the ancient Greeks had for this relationship?

### 7. Fianna (Read pp28-29)

The Fianna were young men who lived wildly and exaggerated their deeds.

Chose a familiar Fianna story or create an original and retell it in the style the author has used with humour and illustrations.

[irelandsmythsandlegends.com/fionn-and-the-fianna](http://irelandsmythsandlegends.com/fionn-and-the-fianna)

### 8. Tara (Read p14)

The Hill of Tara is a world-famous heritage site with many guides available for tourists to read.

However, Bord Fáilte likes the way the author has illustrated and explained the Lia Fáil. They think it will appeal particularly to children.

In groups create similar explanations and illustrations for the other six features in the same comic style and combine them into a short children's brochure.

[discoverboynevalley.ie/boyne-valley-drive/heritage-sites/hill-tara](http://discoverboynevalley.ie/boyne-valley-drive/heritage-sites/hill-tara)  
[megalithicireland.com/Hill%20of%20Tara.htm](http://megalithicireland.com/Hill%20of%20Tara.htm)

## Section 2 Stories and Habits Pages 38 - 80

### SUMMARY

The Celts were primarily agrarian and their calendars and festivals closely followed

the agricultural sequences of their crops and animals, with separate traditions and superstitions attached to each season.

We learn about the food that they cooked and some of the games and sports that they used to divert the boredom of Winter nights or entertain themselves during long Summer evenings.

Storytelling was central to their culture and they created a mythology of exaggerated adventures and heroes.

Appearance was important to the Celts and this was reflected in the attention paid to their clothes and jewellery.

Their weapons were fierce and since they had learned the skills of iron working, they were also superior to the bronze weapons of the natives who lived in Ireland before they came.

Raiding, stealing and battle were a way of life for them and they liked to collect trophies to demonstrate their claims for hero status.

Swagger was an integral part of how they presented themselves. It was important that their prowess was acknowledged and banquets could often end in violence if someone felt slighted by being denied the Curadhmír (**Hero's portion**). The Greeks and Romans considered them to be barbarians.

The Celts recognized a pantheon of gods who had transformed from a mystical group of earlier settlers, the Tuatha Dé Danann, who were renowned for their strength and magical capabilities.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- **(Read p40):** The Celts were close to nature and their survival depended on them having an intimate understanding of these links. How will future historians describe our links to and understanding of our natural environments. What will they say about the things we thought were vital for our survival? Will they find us to have been careful or careless with the world around us?
- **(Read p53):** Much of what we know about the Celts comes from stories. How reliable is this source of information? How could you decide which information is accurate and which sources could be trusted? Today we get our information from many sources. How do you know which information is accurate and who is telling the truth?
- **(Read p66):** There were many reasons why the Greeks and Romans believed that the Celts were barbarians. Was this a reasonable description? How could you

convince the Greeks and Romans that they were mistaken? What arguments and information would you use?

- **(Read pp54-56):** The Celts liked to look well and they used jewellery and hair gel to improve their appearance. Today fashion is still important for some of us. Why do we try to change how we look? Why do people follow fashion and use jewellery and cosmetics to alter their appearance?
- **(Read pp41-42):** The Celts used superstitions to help them make decisions. Why do we continue to use this way to help us decide things? How many superstitions are you aware of using? How do they affect the way you make your decisions?

## ACTIVITIES

### 1. Great Circles (Read p40)

The Celtic year revolved around four major festivals and the author has used a circle diagram to explain how each section followed the previous one.

Using the author's diagram. Create a chart to explain how our modern activities in Samhain, Imbolc, Bealtaine and Lughnasa are linked together in an annual cycle.

### 2. Pork is Perfect (Read p43)

Pork was a common Celtic food and the author has included a recipe. Pork is still popular in Ireland.

In small groups, research a favourite family pork dish and create a recipe and ingredient card to share with the class.

To encourage others to try your dish, include a food critic review describing the dish, the different tastes of all the ingredients and how they combine to create a special flavor.

### 3. Fidchell Strategies (Read pp49-51)

Fidchell was a game of strategy which means that some moves were better than others. The rules of the game were easy, however if you want to win, there are definitely moves that you should avoid.

In groups, play several games together and make a note of which moves put your opponent at a disadvantage and which moves leave you vulnerable.

Now create an illustrated playing guide called **"How to win at Fidchell"** (You can choose a more exciting name yourselves) and include all the tips and strategies you discovered to help you to win.

### 4. A Celtic Tale (Read p53)

The Celts never wrote anything down and each time a story was told, the details changed slightly and became a little more exaggerated.

In groups, choose a story about one of the Celtic heroes. Each of you read the story and then separately record your version in the way the Celts might have done, with lots of drama, excitement and a little exaggeration.

Share your story with your group to see how the versions have changed.

Now, in the style of the author, write a short version of the story with all the exaggeration and unlikely detail removed. Will it be as exciting?

[irelandsmythsandlegends.com/fionn-and-the-fianna](http://irelandsmythsandlegends.com/fionn-and-the-fianna)  
[fairytalez.com/region/irish/](http://fairytalez.com/region/irish/)

### 5. The Weapons (Read pp62-63)

The Celts used their imaginations to create fabulous weapons that had magical powers.

Now use your imagination to create three different fantastic weapons that no Celtic warrior would want to be without.

Design an illustrated sales leaflet for each weapon using hyperbole to describe its function and capability

Include brief examples of testimonials from heroes describing how and when the weapons were used and how they were essential in a battle or a fight with a mortal enemy.

[kidsconnect.com/language/hyperbole-examples/](http://kidsconnect.com/language/hyperbole-examples/)  
[mathworksheets4kids.com/hyperbole.php](http://mathworksheets4kids.com/hyperbole.php)

### 6. An Táin Bó (Read pp62-64)

Cattle raiding was so popular for the Celts that it was almost a sport.

Perhaps they held the Championships during Lughnasa?

If RTE had been available then, they would have sent a commentary team to broadcast the event.

In groups, write and perform the commentary for a typical cattle raid including pundits who will be able to give expert opinion on the detail of the event. You could do it in the style of an All-Ireland semi or final.

### 7. An Curadmír (Read pp67-69)

The Hero's Portion was the choicest part of the meal, reserved for the hero. It was much sought after as a public declaration of hero status.

At the dinner table in your house, what would the curadmír look like? Who would get it, and what sort of arguments would there be over awarding it?

In the style of the author, describe the drama surrounding the characters at the table and the discussion about who should be awarded the portion. Remember the Celts loved hyperbole.

### 8. The Lost Tribes (Read p73)

A stone has slipped in the passage tomb at Newgrange and revealed a fascinating series of drawings and marks that shed some light on what really happened to the lost tribes who inhabited Ireland before the Celts. It also reveals who the Tutha Dé Danann really were and the source of their awesome powers.

In groups use your imaginations to recreate a panel with these ancient drawings and explain what they reveal about these events in the mists of Ireland's ancient past.

## Section 3 Legacy Pages 81 - 140

### SUMMARY

The Celtic world was peopled with strange beasts and frightening demons. Their traditions were oral and required tremendous feats of memory for the druids. The druids also used human sacrifice for divination.

The Celts experienced the spiritual in the natural world around them and built a huge temple offering at Eamhain Mhacha which is still visible today.

Their art was ostentatious and many bronze artifacts and jewellery pieces remain, decorated with elaborate swirls and designs.

Although the Celtic tradition was oral, they did use a simple writing system called Ogham. This system of short straight lines was only suitable for brief messages and many believe that it was a simple druid code system.

The Brehon Laws covered every aspect of their lives and were used to resolve disputes. These laws were administered by a Brehon who had memorized the entire code. Some of the laws took the form of a taboo and there are many examples of these in Celtic mythology.

Fostering was a common practice for the Celts and children would often be sent to live with another family until they reached

adulthood. This had the effect of creating stronger unity between different families and tribes.

The leadership of any tribe was held by a king. Although a privileged position, he could be held responsible for any disasters that befell the tribe and might have to pay with his life to discharge the misfortune that they believed had caused the disaster.

Modern Ireland considers itself to be Celtic and shaped by their cultural legacy. There is tremendous global interest in the Celts and their contribution to modern Europe. For this reason, many tourists visit Ireland to experience the phenomenon of the legacy of the Celts.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- **(Read pp86-87):** Omens and superstitions were very real for the Celts and controlled how they lived and what they did. Why did they use these to help make decisions? Are superstitions and omens important for us? Why do some people still feel uncomfortable ignoring them even today?
- **(Read pp94-97):** The Celts liked elaborate ornamentation on the things they wore or used. Style was important; but how is the function of a sword improved by the design on it? Why do we still use decoration to try and improve the function of something? If the performance of a car comes from the engine which is hidden under the bonnet, why bother with decoration on the doors and windows? Why do we still use decoration today? Is it necessary?
- **(Read p103):** The Celts had elaborate rituals that they used to try to tell the future. Today, we are still fascinated by the future and try to uncover it in different ways. Why do we want to know the future? Is it necessary or even advisable for us to be able to tell the future? How might it affect what we do today if we knew what will happen tomorrow? Would it be a benefit for us?
- **(Read p107):** The truth was important to the Celts. Should the truth be told in every circumstance? Which virtue do you admire most? Which is the most important one for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? What difference would it make if this virtue was missing?
- **(Read p138):** The Celts had a strong tradition of artistic talent, and the Arts remain a cornerstone of modern Ireland. What are the benefits of the Arts or of being artistic? Why do others admire this quality in the Irish? Which of the Arts

do you admire or think that you have a talent in? How has this enriched your contribution to your families and friends? How does this talent make you feel about yourself?

[history.com/topics/ancient-history/celts](http://history.com/topics/ancient-history/celts)  
[bbc.co.uk/irish/articles/view/720/english/](http://bbc.co.uk/irish/articles/view/720/english/)

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. The Beasts (Read pp82-83)

The fantastic beasts that the Celts believed in had many unpleasant powers.

In groups, create a saga that includes all of them.

You will need to select a hero first to compete with them and design an exciting plot.

Use your imagination to build an incredible tale with lots of hyperbole and drama.

#### 2. Threes (Read pp88-89)

One of the druids has a problem. His magic 3 x 3 square is broken. The nine numbers (1-9) have fallen out and he needs to replace them so that all the vertical and horizontal lines add to the same number (15).

The square is useless without the numbers in the correct places and he needs the magic for an important ceremony.

Help him to put the numbers back in the correct places and then explain what he needs the magic for.

[nrich.maths.org/1376](http://nrich.maths.org/1376)

#### 3. Swirls (Read p94)

The Celts used elaborate swirls and designs to decorate everything they used.

Think of the things that you use every day in class and create a unique Celtic motif that could be printed onto each of them.

Design an illustrated catalogue of the different things you use in class with the motif and an attractive Celtic livery.

#### 4. Ogham Mac Elathen (Read p101)

Ogham has sent a message to Lugh warning him about what the Sidhe intend to do.

Unfortunately, Ogham can't count very well and the message has only six strokes carved into it instead of seven. The message has been changed.

In groups, decide if this was a minor or a dramatic change and write a short account of what happened and what Lugh did and how the confusion was eventually solved. Did Lugh manage to protect his wife?

#### 5. Skills (Read p114-115)

Deirdre describes some of the skills she needs to learn while Ferdia hopes to acquire warrior skills.

In groups, decide the skills that boys and girls need to be useful and independent adults in today's world.

Use a Venn diagram with two interlocking sets, one for boy's skills and one for girl's skills. Use the common area for shared skills.

Which areas will have the most skills?

Write a brief explanation for your choices.

[topnotchteaching.com/math/teaching-venn-diagrams/](http://topnotchteaching.com/math/teaching-venn-diagrams/)

#### 6. Hello (Read p120)

Ferdia sits down beside Deirdre and tries to start a conversation. However, he is shy and finds it difficult to talk to girls.

Can you help him to get the conversation started? What should he say and how should he behave?

Make a list of three topics that he could talk about and then give him advice on how to start the conversation and then keep it going.

#### 7. 4500AD (Read pp127-128)

It is the year 4500AD, two and a half thousand years from now. We are long gone, however, some of the things we used can still be found.

A team of future archeologists are excavating a newly discovered site near to where you live now.

Will they find any of your old belongings? Will they be surprised or puzzled by what they discover?

In small groups, make an inventory of the ten most interesting things they might find and record their explanations for what they might have been used for.

Will any of the objects defy explanation for them?

#### 8. The Scroll (Read pp137-138)

To help launch 'The Celts' book, The O'Brien Press have decided to offer a name scroll as a prize for one lucky winner.

Your name will be written in illuminated Celtic script and there will be a brief citation to praise all your outstanding qualities in the best Celtic exaggerated style.

Make a copy of the scroll that you would like to receive.

#### 9. The Celts (Read p139-140)

The influence of the Celts both in Ireland

and across the world is wide and varied.

In groups, use a large sheet of paper to create a 'mind map' diagram, explaining the contribution the Celts have made to our modern world.

Write THE CELTS in the middle of the page and then use lines and bubbles radiating off from this to record what you believe the Celts have added to make the world a better place. You can add illustrations and colourful Celtic designs to the chart.