

# Celtic Bells: *The Irish In Boston* Educational Guide, Grades K-8



## About the Performance

With fiddle, bodhran (Irish drum), banjo, flute, guitar, and bagpipes, Nancy and Calum Bell tell the story of Irish immigrants in Boston, weaving in their songs and poems of work, humor, protest, longing for home, and longing to feel at home in the New World. In addition to providing a rich connection to history curriculum, this program serves as a starting point for meaningful discussions on culture, race, prejudice, and immigration.



## About the Artists

The Celtic Bells are the mother and son duo of musician, storyteller and fiber artist **Nancy Bell** and multi-instrumentalist **Calum Bell**. Together they perform traditional Irish and Scottish music at sessions and festivals throughout Massachusetts. **Nancy Bell** has been delighting audiences in New England schools, libraries, and festivals for more than twenty years with her fun, hands-on, Historical “Edutainment.” She is a gifted storyteller who weaves music and history together in engaging ways with her songs, fiddle, guitar, and the Bodhran (Irish frame drum). **Calum Bell** has been part of the Celtic Music Scene in Boston since birth. As part of the Bell Family Band, he has been touring and performing since the age of 7. Calum is accomplished on the Irish Flute, Scottish Fiddle, on bagpipes of all kinds, and on guitar and tenor banjo. He performs regularly in the Boston area and teaches.

## Program Learning Goals

1. To understand how the Great Hunger led to mass immigration of the Irish in the 1840s.
2. To examine what cultural and communal strengths enabled the Irish to overcome hardships in their new home.
3. To experience authentic modern Irish music and culture.

## Essential Questions

1. How does music tell the story of a culture?
2. What elements make up a person's culture?
3. What can learning about other cultures teach us?

### **A Letter from the Artists**

Dear Teachers,

When people hear the term “Boston Irish,” they think of happy people wearing green on St. Patrick’s Day celebrating joyously with music, a big parade, step dance, shamrocks and leprechauns. They don’t think of poverty, famine, starvation, and violence. Many people are not aware of the rich Irish Culture or the dark struggle the Irish have faced to become Americans. Their story is full of rich and troubling ethical questions that remain relevant today. Our aim is to bring these issues and this history to life beyond mere facts.

Few groups have influenced the cultural identity of Boston quite like the Irish. Today, nearly 23% of Boston’s population claims Irish ancestry. It is the largest single ethnic group in Boston. Their arrival transformed Boston from a largely white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant city into one that is progressively becoming more diverse. Between 1820 and 1860, the Irish constituted one-third of all of the immigrants to the United States. In the 1840s (due to the Great Hunger in Ireland) they comprised nearly half of all immigrants to this nation. According to data from the US census bureau, Massachusetts is officially the most Irish state in America. As reported in *The Boston Globe*, roughly 21.6% of Massachusetts residents claim Irish ancestry, the highest in the nation. Irish immigrants have left their mark on the region in a number of ways, not the least of which is the name of the basketball team the Boston Celtics.

Their story is both painful and hopeful, and ultimately enduring. When they first came to America, the Irish were ostracized and feared due to their religious as well as their social customs. Boston, like most of America, was still largely Protestant in the mid-19th century. Most of the poor immigrants from Ireland were Catholic. (In Colonial times, Catholicism was outlawed in Boston. Those Irish immigrants who came here during Colonial times had to convert or hide their religious beliefs.) In the 1800s, gangs of militant Protestants roamed the streets of Irish neighborhoods, damaging property and even destroying houses.

The Irish overcame the social forces that starved and uprooted them in their homeland, then sought to make life difficult for them in their new country, not unlike the many other immigrant groups past and present that continue to shape this nation’s identity. The same forces that once worked against the Irish continue to make life difficult for other groups today. There is much we can learn from this story. Thank you for exploring it with us.

Sincerely,  
**The Celtic Bells**

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## Vocabulary

- **Famine:** an extreme shortage of food
- **Immigrate:** to come to live permanently in a foreign country
- **Emigrate:** to leave one's own country in order to settle permanently in another
- **Refugee:** a person who has been forced to leave their country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster
- **Nativism:** the policy of protecting the interests of native-born or established inhabitants against those of immigrants
- **Xenophobia:** dislike of or prejudice against people from other countries
- **Prejudice:** a preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience, hating ideas or people before you even really know them
- **Assimilation:** to become absorbed and integrated into a society or culture
- **Culture:** the customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group
- **Racism:** prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against a person or people on the basis of their membership in a particular racial or ethnic group, typically one that is a minority or marginalized

## Key Facts and Cultural Context for Students

### The Irish Come to America

In just three years, from 1846-1849, nearly one million Irish immigrants came to America to escape starvation as a potato blight killed their crops. Although the blight receded in 1850, the effects of the famine continued to spur Irish emigration into the 20th century. Still facing poverty and disease, many Irish set out for America where they reunited with relatives who had fled at the height of the famine.



An Irish immigrant, having suffered an arduous voyage to get to this country, arrived and found that life in America was complicated by prejudice, poverty, and disease. Despite all this, they worked hard, loved America, and helped each other. They collaborated politically to gain a voice in government.

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## Key Facts and Cultural Context for Students, continued

### A (Rough) Timeline of the Irish Experience in Boston

- 1700s** ● **Catholicism is outlawed** in Boston. Irish who immigrate have to conceal their faith or convert to Protestantism.
- 1837** ● **The Broad Street Riot:** Local firemen on their way home from a fire came across an Irish Catholic funeral procession. They got into a brawl which grew to include 800 people hitting each other with sticks, bricks, and stones. A crowd of 10,000 formed to watch the fight. Eventually, the mayor had to call in the state militia to stop the riot. Thankfully, no one was killed, but the only ones arrested and jailed were Irish.
- 1846-1849** ● **The Potato blight** in Ireland causes nearly a million Irish to immigrate to America.
- 1847** ● **“Black 47”** was the nickname of the worst year of the famine.
- 1849** ● A **cholera epidemic** sweeps Boston and hits the poor Irish neighborhoods very hard. More than 500 Irish people die from living in unsanitary conditions.
- 1854** ● The **“Know Nothing” party**, with its nativist and anti-Catholic agenda, takes control of the Massachusetts legislature and passes laws barring Catholics from being buried in public cemeteries, and requiring children in public schools to read from the Protestant bible. They raid catholic schools and convents on trumped up pretexts and deny church officials any control over church property.
- 1860s** ● By now, over two thirds of female domestic servants in Boston are Irish. Irish men work in construction helping build the townhouses on Beacon Hill, clear the land for North Station, and build then business district behind Faneuil Hall.
- 1861-1865** ● **The American Civil War:** As most Irish-Americans settled in Northern cities like Boston and New York, they were called to serve in the Union Army. Many Irish-Americans formed their own regiments which embraced Irish customs like Catholic Mass and priests. These units became known for their valor and bravery and earned the respect of their fellow Americans who had formerly disdained them. More than 150,000 Irishmen, many of whom were not yet citizens, joined the Union Army out of loyalty to their new home. Their bravery and acts of patriotism caused the other Americans to start thinking of them differently and soften the rampant anti-Irish discrimination going on in the country.
- 1884** ● **Hugh O'Brian** becomes the first Irish Catholic Mayor of Boston
- 1960** ● **John F. Kennedy**, the first American president of Irish Catholic descent, is elected.
- 1998** ● The **Boston Irish Famine Memorial** is erected at the corner of Washington and School streets on the Freedom Trail.

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## Key Facts and Cultural Context for Students, continued

### Irish Music

Newly arrived Irish immigrants found American customs difficult to understand. They had trouble assimilating at first. As their neighborhoods grew, they began to blend their own old traditions from their home country with new American ones, forming a distinctly Irish-American culture. Music played a big part in this. Irish immigrants brought with them the fiddle, the flute, and the bodhran (Irish drum).



Bodhran



Irish flute



Fiddle



### The Oral Tradition

Calum and Nancy play all of their music “by ear.” This means that they were not formally trained to read music. They learned to play by watching and listening to other members of their community play music, who then helped them to learn. This is called “The Oral Tradition,” in which things are handed down from person to person.

## Pre-Performance Discussion Questions

- What are some of the hardships that a group of immigrants faces as it tries to establish a new home in a foreign land?
- Can you think of times when you felt misunderstood, homesick, or not fitting in?
- How do you think playing music may have helped Irish immigrants facing poverty and discrimination?
- What things can family members “hand down” to one another? How are recipes, stories, traditions, or music handed down in your family?

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**Pre-Performance Activity: Cultural Holidays**

**Learning Goals:**

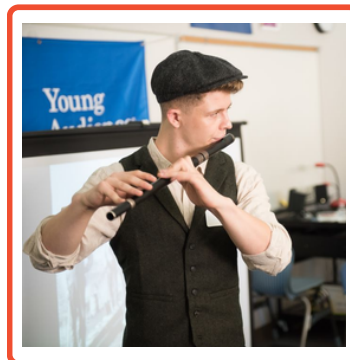
- To identify different cultural holidays and their significance in students' cultures.
- To explore the diversity of cultural traditions.

**Directions:**

1. Discuss St. Patrick's Day and its significance to Irish culture. The Irish celebrate St. Patrick's day on March 17th. Celebrations include music, dancing, eating traditional foods and beverages, and telling stories. Four-leaf clovers, leprechauns, rainbows, pots of gold are all Irish symbols brought into American culture, generally shown on St. Patrick's Day to indicated good luck, wealth, and prosperity.
2. Ask students about traditional holidays that they observe with their families. What traditions, foods, games, stories, or music make the holiday unique?
3. Have each student pick a favorite holiday and identify one family tradition that makes that holiday special. Create a short presentation to share with the class about this tradition. This could include photos, drawings, stories, food, and/or songs.
4. Reflect on the similarities and differences in everyone's traditions.

**Extensions:**

- In addition to special holiday traditions, traditional music was handed down for hundreds of years, long before cell phones and CDs. Listen to a favorite song over and over until you know all the words and can sing it by yourself without the recording. Now teach it to someone else who has never heard it without the recording. How can you help them learn the song?
- Pick a favorite family recipe to make and share with the class. What makes this food special to you?



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**Post-Performance Discussion Questions**

- Why was it important for the Irish to work together politically to get their own representatives elected? How do you think humor in the song “Charlie on the MTA” may have helped candidate O’Brian get elected?
- What are some of the ways the Irish people helped each other to assimilate? Did they have to give up any important aspects of their culture?
- What do you think made Americans more welcoming to the Irish over time?

**Post-Performance Activity: Immigrating to America**

**Learning Goals:**

- To explore the history and reasons people immigrate to the USA.
- To understand the experiences of immigrants.

**Directions:**

1. Discuss the history of immigration in the USA. What do students know about immigration in the past as well as in the present? What about populations who did not immigrate to this country?
2. In pairs or small groups, have students interview each other about their families. Questions can include:
  - How many generations of your family have lived in the USA?
  - Where does your family come from?
  - Do you have immigrants in your family? If so, why did they come to America?
  - Do you have family that lives outside of the USA? If so, where? How are their lives similar or different to your life in the USA?
3. Have each student write interview questions to ask someone who has immigrated to the USA. Questions can include:
  - What has been the most fun for them?
  - What has been the hardest?
  - What has surprised them the most?
  - What do they miss most about their home?
  - Is there anything they wish could be different?
  - What would make their life a little easier?
4. Have students interview a relative, neighbor, or friend who has immigrated to the USA. Encourage them to record the interview and take notes about their answers.

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**Post-Performance Activity, continued**

**Directions, continued:**

5. Using the interviewee's responses, create a presentation to share with the class about the immigration stories.
6. After the presentations, reflect on the stories presented. What were common themes?

**Extension:**

- Pretend you are an Irish person who has just come to America in the 1850s. Write a letter home to your brother or sister and describe the opportunities here. What is good about America? What is unpleasant?



**Further Resources**

- [Irish Traditional Music Archive](#)
- Campbell Bartoletti, Susan: *Black Potatoes: The Story of the Great Irish Famine, 1845-1850*, Clarion Books (2005)
- Neale, Cynthia G.: *The Irish Dresser: A Story of Hope During the Great Hunger*, White Mane Pub (2004)
- O'Donoghue, Sean: *The Disaster of the Irish Potato Famine: Irish Immigrants Arrive in America (1845-1850)*, Powerkids Press (2015)
- Raum, Elizabeth: *Irish Immigrants in America: An Interactive History Adventure, You Choose Books* (2008)

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### Curricular Connections

#### Arts Standards: Music

##### Creating

- Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work. (M.Cr.01)
- Organize and develop artistic ideas and work. (M.Cr.02)

##### Performing

- Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work. (M.P.06)

##### Responding

- Perceive and analyze artistic work. (M.R.07)
- Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work. (M.R.08)
- Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. (M.R.09)

##### Connecting

- Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art. (M.Co.10)
- Relate artistic ideas and works to societal, cultural and historical contexts to deepen understanding. (M.Co.11)

#### English Language Arts and Literacy Anchor Standards

##### Writing

- Write narratives to develop experiences or events using effective literary techniques, well-chosen details, and well-structured sequences. (W.PK-12.3)

##### Speaking and Listening

- Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally. (SL.PK-12.2)
- Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric. (SL.PK-12.3)



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**Curricular Connections, continued**

**History and Social Science**

**K**

- Topic 1: Civics: classroom citizenship (HSS.K.T1)
- Topic 2: Geography: connections among places (HSS.K.T2)
- Topic 3: History: shared traditions (HSS.K.T3)

**Grade 1**

- Topic 1: Civics: communities, elections, and leadership (HSS.1.T1)
- Topic 2: Geography: places to explore (HSS.1.T2)
- Topic 3: History: unity and diversity in the United States (HSS.1.T3)

**Grade 2**

- Topic 2: Geography and its effects on people (HSS.2.T2)
- Topic 3: History: migrations and cultures (HSS.2.T3)
- Topic 4: Civics in the context of geography: countries and governments (HSS.2.T4)

**Grade 3**

- Topic 1: Massachusetts cities and towns today and in history (HSS.3.T1)

**Grade 4**

- Topic 4: The expansion of the United States over time and its regions today (HSS.4.T4)
- Topic 4a: The expansion of the United States over time and its regions today: The Northeast (HSS.4.T4a)

**Grade 7**

- Topic 4a: Physical and political geography of Europe (HSS.7.T4a)

**Grade 8**

- Topic 4: Rights and responsibilities of citizens (HSS.8.T4)

