



Religious Conflict and the Search for Historical Explanations

This MysteryQuest examines the factors leading to the murder in 1880 of the notorious Donnelly family in southwestern Ontario. Students learn to find evidence in textual sources to support causal explanations as they examine the roots of conflict among immigrant groups in 19th century Canada.

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/05/indexen.html>

Author: Ruth Sandwell

Editors: Ruth Sandwell, Dick Holland

Series Editor: Roland Case

based on an approach developed by The Critical Thinking Consortium (TC²)

www.tc2.ca

Ages

16-18

Courses

Canadian history, social studies, civics

Key Topics

- religious conflict and immigrant relations in 19th century Canada
- historical causation

Critical Challenges

- Identify relevant statements in the assigned documents and draw conclusions about their implications for the role of religious hatred in the conflict in Biddulph Township.
- Do these documents provide enough evidence to justify a more extensive examination of the theory that religious hatred was a main source of the conflict in Biddulph Township?

Broad Understanding

- Students will learn to find evidence in textual sources to support a causal explanation of a historical mystery.
- Students will learn about the conflict, particularly religious tensions, among immigrant groups in 19th century Canada.

Requisite Tools



Background knowledge

- knowledge of the social, economic, and political conditions surrounding the massacre of the “Black” Donnellys
- knowledge of religious conflict, famine, and migrations in the 19th century



Criteria for judgment

- criteria for use of historical evidence (e.g., relevant to the topic, plausible conclusions drawn)
- criteria for sound conclusion (e.g., plausible, supported with accurate evidence)



Critical thinking vocabulary

- historical causation



Thinking strategies

- data charts



Habits of mind

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/05/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.

Suggested Activities

Introduce the idea of causal explanations

- Using the instructions for *Step 1: Think about historical explanations* as a guide, read the fictional story of the death of John Smith to the class.
- Invite students to discuss among themselves the causes of Mr. Smith's death.
- Draw out the importance historians attach to explaining why historical events occurred.
- Invite students to distinguish between particular personal causes (e.g., Mr. Smith had run out of cigarettes, was hit by a car) and broader social influences (e.g., Mr. Smith was a victim of lax law enforcement and indifference to public safety).
- Direct students to read the background information sheet *Causal Explanations in History* for more about historians' search for underlying causes.

STEP 1: THINK ABOUT HISTORICAL EXPLANATIONS

Because the task you are asked to undertake requires looking for the causes of the Donnelly murders, it will be useful to review the kinds of explanations historians are looking to uncover. To help you think about this, read the following fictional story:

Just before midnight one dark, cold, and stormy night, a man named John Smith, an engine mechanic, was sitting in an isolated cabin in the woods. As he reached for a cigarette, he noticed he had only one left. Glancing at his watch, he realized that he had just enough time to hop in his car and drive to the gas station down the road to buy cigarettes before it closed. As his car pulled out of his lane and onto the highway, it was hit by his neighbour, who, returning from a long night of drinking, was unable to stop soon enough on the icy road. Smith was killed instantly. Later, as the townspeople were discussing the sad event, they shook their heads one after another and said, "We always knew that smoking would kill Smith." It is worth noting that local officials had long been warned of the dangers of that part of the highway, especially in winter, and yet they seemed uninterested in doing anything about it. Apparently, this was because the residents of that part of the town did not have any influence with local authorities. Others wondered if the liquor laws had been more faithfully enforced in the town whether the neighbour who smashed into Smith would have been as drunk as he was.

Were the neighbours right? Did smoking kill Smith? Make a list of all the contributing factors leading to Smith's death and the reasons to support each. Which cause seems most significant in explaining how Smith came to be in the situation that brought about his death?

In exploring what or who was really responsible for Smith's sudden death, you are doing what historians do when they look at evidence about the past. They are interested in explaining more than what happened; they want to explain why things happened the way they did. The question "Did smoking kill Smith?" asks for exactly the kind of causal explanations that historians seek. In a sense, what you have been trying to figure out are the underlying factors that contributed to Smith's untimely death. Do you think that drinking and driving or official neglect are more significant underlying factors than Smith's desire for a cigarette?

For more about historians' search for underlying causes, read the briefing sheet *Causal Explanation in History*.

Introduce the Donnelly massacre

- Using *Introduction* as a guide, explain to students the challenge that is the focus of their investigation.
- Using *The Task* as a guide, outline the activities that students will undertake.
- You may want to download and display pictures of the township and other related events.

INTRODUCTION

Early in the morning of February 4, 1880, five members of an Irish immigrant family were murdered in rural southwestern Ontario, allegedly by an armed band of **vigilantes** from the community. No one was ever convicted of these crimes. While "Who did it?" is the most obvious question here, in an important sense the real mystery is *why* these crimes happened at all and *how* we should understand them now.

THE TASK

In this MysteryQuest, you are invited to take on the role of advisor to a team of historians beginning research on the Donnelly massacre of 1880 in Biddulph Township. You have been asked to examine selected primary and secondary documents for evidence to support one of the key theories about the reasons behind the massacre: it was the result of religious hatred among Irish immigrants who settled the township in the nineteenth century. First, you will be introduced to the idea of causal explanations in history. Then, you will be introduced to the Donnelly massacre and to the three main theories for the conflict. Working individually or with a partner you will examine five historical documents, looking for evidence of religious conflict. You will then prepare a 250-word report for the historians that summarizes the evidence and offers your own conclusion about whether there is enough evidence of religious conflict to proceed with a more detailed search for evidence of this explanation.

Provide background on the Donnellys

- Using *Step 2: Review the facts of the case* as a guide, duplicate and distribute copies of *The Massacre of the “Black” Donnellys* to students, individually or in pairs.
- You may want to direct students to other links on the main website, found at <http://www.canadian-mysteries.ca/sites/donnellys/home/indexen.html>, to learn more about this notorious family.

STEP 2: REVIEW THE FACTS OF THE CASE

Before proceeding further, you will find it helpful to read *The Massacre of the “Black” Donnellys*. For even more information about this unusual family, go to *Heaven & Hell on Earth: The Massacre of the “Black” Donnellys* and explore the various documents found there.

MysteryQuest 5 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.

- Using *Step 3: Examine the historical causes* as a guide, explain to students that three theories have been offered for the underlying conflict that brought about the Donnellys’ murder.

STEP 3: EXAMINE THE HISTORICAL CAUSES

Now that you have some understanding of the history of the Donnellys, you are ready to explore three theories about the underlying causes of the conflict which led to their murders. Read the briefing sheet *Roots of Conflict in Biddulph Township*. Use the activity sheet *Examining the Roots of the Conflict* to summarize the three factors leading up to the Donnelly massacre and list the evidence to support each causal explanation.

- Distribute copies of the briefing sheet *Roots of Conflict in Biddulph Township* and the activity sheet *Examining the Roots of the Conflict* to students, individually or in pairs.

- Review with students any vocabulary that may cause difficulty, including the terms *Whiteboys* and *Blackfeet*.
- Instruct students to use the information on this briefing sheet and the earlier one on the Donnellys as the basis for summarizing the three main theories. Direct students to record any evidence they find in these briefing sheets to support each theory.
- Arrange for students to share their summaries and evidence with other students. Invite students to indicate which theory was the most likely cause and to support their conclusions.

Examine the primary documents

- Using *Step 4: Look for evidence* as a guide, explain to students that they will now work individually or in pairs to examine five primary documents to see whether religious hatred looks to be a likely underlying cause of the conflict.

MysteryQuest 5
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-eighteenth 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.

STEP 4: LOOK FOR EVIDENCE

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 role of religious conflict in bringing about the Donnellys' deaths. These documents are found in the *Evidence in the Case* section of this MysteryQuest. For each document, complete a separate activity sheet of *Looking for Evidence of Religious Conflict*. You are to briefly answer the following questions:

- What is the nature of the document?
- What do we know about who created it?
- What is the main message?

For each document, identify at least four statements that relate to the causes of the conflict. Record these statements and indicate whether or not each supports the religious hatred explanation. Provide reasons for your conclusion. Make sure the statements you identify are relevant to understanding the causes of the conflict and that the conclusions you draw from the statements are plausible.

- Using *Evidence in the Case* as a guide, introduce each of the primary sources and distribute them to students.

EVIDENCE IN THE CASE

Newspaper article, M. McQuaide, Letter to the Editor, "What Shall Be Our Future?", *Irish Canadian*, February 11, 1880

Newspaper article, "Biddulph Notes – An Offer to Buy the Donnelly Farm Refused", *London Advertiser*, June 24, 1880

Letter, to C. Hutchinson from William Donnelly, June 29, 1880

Diary, William Porte, October 27, 1897

Pamphlet, "The Evils of Wholesale and Improvident Emigration from Ireland" c. 1863

- Distribute copies of *Looking for Evidence of Religious Conflict* to each pair of students. Students will need one sheet for each document they are to examine. In addition to recording information about the nature of the document, its author, and the main idea, students are to note statements that relate in any way to the causes of the conflict. For each statement, they are to indicate whether or not it supports the religious hatred explanation for the conflict and provide reasons for their conclusion.
- If you anticipate that students may have difficulty with this activity, select one of the three shorter documents and demonstrate this analysis with the entire class.

MysteryQuest 5 **Support Materials 4 (Activity Sheet)**

Looking for Evidence of Religious Conflict

Document title: _____

What is the nature of the document?
What do we know about who created it?
What is the main message?

Record statements from the document that relate in any way to the causes of the conflict. For each statement, indicate whether or not it supports the religious hatred explanation for the conflict and provide reasons for your conclusion.

Statement in the document	Conclusions about the cause of the conflict	Reasons for this conclusion
	<input type="checkbox"/> a cause that has little to do with religious conflict <input type="checkbox"/> a cause that might involve religious conflict <input type="checkbox"/> a cause that definitely involves religious conflict	
	<input type="checkbox"/> a cause that has little to do with religious conflict <input type="checkbox"/> a cause that might involve religious conflict <input type="checkbox"/> a cause that definitely involves religious conflict	
	<input type="checkbox"/> a cause that has little to do with religious conflict <input type="checkbox"/> a cause that might involve religious conflict <input type="checkbox"/> a cause that definitely involves religious conflict	
	<input type="checkbox"/> a cause that has little to do with religious conflict <input type="checkbox"/> a cause that might involve religious conflict <input type="checkbox"/> a cause that definitely involves religious conflict	

Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History®
 MysteryQuest 5: Religious Conflict and the Search for Historical Explanations
 MysteryQuest 5 Home Website - Heaven & Hell on Earth: The Massacre of The "Black" Donnellys

Come to a conclusion

- Using *Step 5: Prepare your recommendation* as a guide, ask students to discuss their findings in groups once they have completed charts for each of the documents they have analysed.
- Present the critical challenge: Do these documents provide enough evidence of religious conflict in Biddulph Township to justify a more extensive examination of this theory?
- Hold a class debate or assign students individually to prepare a 250-word report presenting and defending their conclusions in light of all of the primary and secondary documents examined.

STEP 5: PREPARE YOUR RECOMMENDATION

When you have examined the documents and completed a chart for each, you are now ready to answer the question "Do these documents provide enough evidence of religious conflict in Biddulph Township to justify a more extensive examination of this theory?" Prepare a 250-word report that clearly indicates how likely it is that religious conflict was a main source of the conflict that involved the Donnellys. Justify your conclusion with specific reference to the evidence contained in the primary and secondary sources you have consulted.

Evaluation

- Use the rubric *Assessing Inferences Drawn from Evidence* to evaluate student completion of the charts. Use the rubric *Assessing Historical Conclusions* to assess students' reports and justification of their conclusion.



MysteryQuest 5 Evaluation Materials 2 (Rubric)

Assessing Historical Conclusions

	Outstanding	Very good	Competent	Satisfactory	In-progress
Clearly explains the important evidence	Identifies and very clearly explains the most important evidence for the conclusion.	Identifies and clearly explains most of the important evidence for the conclusion.	Identifies some relevant and important evidence for the conclusion; explanations are generally quite clear.	Identifies very little relevant evidence for the conclusion; explanations are only occasionally clear.	Identifies no relevant evidence for the conclusion; none of the explanations are clear.
Offers plausible conclusion	The conclusion is highly plausible and highly justifiable in light of the evidence provided.	The conclusion is clearly plausible and justifiable in light of the evidence provided.	The conclusion is plausible and adequately justifiable in light of the evidence provided.	The conclusion is plausible but barely justifiable given the evidence provided.	The conclusion is implausible and not justifiable given the evidence provided.

Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History©
MysteryQuest 5 - Religious Conflict and the Search for Historical Explanations
MysteryQuest 5 Home Website - Heaven & Hell on Earth: The Massacre of the "Black" Donnellys



MysteryQuest 5 Evaluation Materials 1 (Rubric)

Assessing Inferences Drawn from Evidence

	Outstanding	Very good	Competent	Satisfactory	In-progress
Identifies relevant and important evidence	Identifies the most important and relevant statements in the documents.	Identifies the required number of relevant statements, including most of the important ones in the documents.	Identifies some relevant statements in the documents, but the important ones are omitted.	Identifies some relevant statements in the documents, but none of the important ones are included.	Identifies no relevant statements in the documents.
Draws plausible inferences	Draws highly plausible inferences about the implications of the statements; provides convincing reasons for the inferences.	Draws plausible inferences about the implications of the statements; provides good reasons for the inferences.	Draws generally plausible inferences about the implications of the statements; provides reasons for some of the inferences.	Draws some plausible inferences about the implications of the statements; provides little justification for the inferences.	Draws generally implausible inferences about the implications of the statements; provides very little justification for the inferences.

Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History©
MysteryQuest 5 - Religious Conflict and the Search for Historical Explanations
MysteryQuest 5 Home Website - Heaven & Hell on Earth: The Massacre of the "Black" Donnellys

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 conclude whether or not the Donnelly massacre was largely motivated by religious conflict.

Examine additional documents

Locate other historical documents in *Heaven & Hell on Earth: The Massacre of the "Black" Donnellys* that provide more complete evidence to support each of the theories behind the conflict.

Learn more about the Donnellys

Apply your detective skills to another MysteryQuest associated with the Donnellys, or explore the Prelude section of the MysteryQuest home site to learn more about the history of the Donnelly family.