



RED HUGH

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DEBORAH LISSON

Teaching Guide

By Gillian Perdue

RATIONALE AND THEMES This story is set in Ireland in 1587 at the time of Elizabeth I of England. It deals with an exciting period in Irish history and is most suitable for use as part of a History project or investigation. However, it also introduces and develops many universal themes which would interest pupils in the senior cycle in primary school and in the junior cycle in secondary school:

- Irish clans in the 16th century
- Elizabeth I and the anglicisation of Ireland
- Attempts to stamp out Catholicism in Ireland
- Friendship and loyalty
- Family duties and responsibility
- Suffering and loss
- Transition from child into adult

SUMMARY

The story begins in 1587 at a time when England was making a determined effort to take complete control of Ireland and to defeat the power of the Irish chieftains once and for all. This had already been accomplished in Munster, Leinster and Connaught. However, Ulster was proving more difficult to control. We meet Hugh Roe O'Donnell and his parents, Iníon Dubh and 'The O'Donnell'. The O'Donnell has chosen Hugh as his successor, though he will have many rivals for this role. Hugh accompanies his friend, Eoghan O'Gallagher, on a

wine-trading mission to Lough Swilly. Though the boys are young, they are allowed to go. They and their friend, Donal Gorm MacSweeney, are kidnapped. The Lord Deputy, Sir John Perrot, is hoping to use Hugh as a bargaining device with Hugh's father, The O'Donnell. The book deals with Hugh's struggle to cope with his four long years in captivity and his two escape attempts. Hugh's survival in a violent era against all odds and in spite of his self-doubts and self-destructive tendencies makes for a gripping tale – ultimately a tale of loyalty, courage and perseverance.

APPROACH

For the purposes of this exploration, the novel is divided into five sections, covering four or five chapters at a time. However, the pace at which the novel is read is entirely up to the teacher. It may suit to read one chapter a day, or larger blocks. Possible discussion points and activities are listed at the end of each section.

UNIT 1 KIDNAP AND INCARCERATION

SUMMARY

Read pp.7–49.

In Ireland in 1587, three southern provinces are largely under English control with only Ulster proving still

troublesome to England. Power in Ulster rests in the hands of two families: the O'Donnells in Donegal and the O'Neills in Tyrone. Hugh Roe, the red-haired son of Lady Fionnuala (the Iníon Dubh) and The O'Donnell (the O'Donnell chieftain), has been chosen to succeed. Hugh and his friends, Eoghan and Donal Gorm, are kidnapped and kept hostage by Lord Deputy Sir John Perrot. Perrot hopes to win favour with Queen Elizabeth I and outwit his enemies with this daring coup.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Study the map on p.6 showing the location of the Irish clans and strongholds. Can you think of reasons for Ulster's being the last province to succumb to the English?
- Discuss Hugh's vision/dream on p.11. What does it mean?
- Discuss the likely consequences of an alliance between the two most powerful families in Ulster. Why might the English fear such an alliance?
- Arranged marriages were common at this time in Ireland. Discuss the pros and cons of this custom.

ACTIVITIES

1. CHARACTER SKETCH

What have we learned about Red Hugh's character in this opening unit? Write a piece describing Hugh as he

appears, aged almost fifteen. Mention his opinion on: (a) arranged marriage (b) adults in authority (c) the prospect of English rule (d) the Queen of England.

2. SIMILES

A simile compares two things, though they might not really be alike. Read pp.33–34 again, and find and list similes. Discuss the effect of these similes. Do they add to the atmosphere/description of the scene?

3. IRISH MYTHOLOGY

What was a bard? Write a piece describing the job of a bard and the position he held in Irish society at this time. On pp.23–24, some of the most famous Irish legends are mentioned. In class, list them on the blackboard, and divide into small study groups. Each group is to research and read a story and then rewrite it, so that it can be told in class. Remember, it was an oral tradition, so try to tell the story to your friends without using your notes.

4. HIBERNO-ENGLISH

The author has chosen to write in English, even for characters who spoke in Irish. However, it reads as if directly translated from the Irish, eg: 'my father offers you the welcome of his hall and you coming to visit him.' Find ten more examples of this device and list them. What is your opinion of this style? Discuss.

5. CREATIVE WRITING

Read p.11 and decide if Hugh is experiencing a nightmare or a vision. Write about a dream or nightmare you may have had or write about an imaginary vision/daydream.

6. HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Choose: (a) Clothes or (b) Instruments of Imprisonment/Torture as mentioned in this unit. Research and write a brief report. (Remember to describe both Irish and English fashions at this time.) Illustrate your report and display in class.

UNIT 2 PRISON DAYS

SUMMARY

Sir John Perrot is recalled to London and a new Lord Deputy, Sir William Fitzwilliam, is appointed in his place. Hugh mac Ferdoragh tells the English that Hugh Roe is his son-in-law, in the hopes of elevating his status. The long-awaited help from Spain finally arrives. Nineteen ships are wrecked off the Irish coast. Those who make it ashore are robbed, stripped, beaten and, in some cases, killed by the local clans. Hugh learns that his own parents delivered thirty high-ranking officers of the Trinidad Valencera into English hands, while the remaining men were brutally murdered. Hugh has two new hostages with him, Hugh O'Toole and Art Kavanagh. Donal and Eoghan have escaped.

Read pp.50–90.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Read p.53 and discuss the emotions Hugh felt on meeting his parents in Dublin Castle.
- Discuss the possible reasons that King Philip of Spain aided the Irish chiefs in their struggle against English rule.
- Why would The O'Donnell choose to buy the 30 high-ranking Spanish officers and hand them over to the English? Would this have been a difficult decision for him and the Iníon Dubh to make? Why?

ACTIVITIES

1. COLOURFUL SPEECH

On p.50, we read that Turlough Luineach 'would weep at parting company with his own spittle.' Irish speech is still idiomatic and full of colour. Make a list of colourful phrases either from the novel or from your own experience. Compare the idiomatic phrase with the actual meaning. Discuss.

2. SYMBOLISM

Many writers use symbols to enrich the story. On p.29, Hugh sees an eagle soaring over the cliffs. This is the last thing he sees before he enters the cabin and captivity. Again, on p.58, he feels he is trapped 'like an eagle in a cage'.

Write a paragraph about the eagle and what it symbolises in this story. Watch out for reappearances of the eagle.

3. MENU WRITING

Sailors from the Armada are described as suffering from scurvy and dysentery. Write a definition of these medical conditions and their causes.

Do these diseases still exist? How would you avoid them? Plan a healthy menu for a sailor nowadays. Now write one for an ill-fated Armada sailor.

4. VOCABULARY EXTENSION

The following words appear in this unit. Consult a dictionary, then write a definition for each. Choose some to put into sentences: inextricably, burnished, pungent, heresy, perfidious, impotent, glimmer, dissembled.

5. HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Queen Elizabeth I had many enemies, the most dangerous of all being King Philip of Spain, a Protestant-hater who saw himself as the champion of the Roman Catholic faith.

Consult your history books or encyclopaedia to research the Spanish Armada and its fate. Divide into small study groups and report to the class on your findings.

UNIT 3 A TASTE OF FREEDOM

SUMMARY

Hugh is moved to a stronger prison cell. After a few days, Donal is recaptured and thrown back into prison with Hugh. The Iníon Dubh has dispatched two clan members who were preparing to challenge Hugh for the chieftainship. After over

three years in captivity, a daring escape is planned with the help of Richard Weston. Rope is smuggled into the prisoners. Finally, they make their escape, and leave the city on foot. Bad weather and Hugh's injured feet slow their pace. The little group disbands and Hugh is recaptured.

Read pp.91–125.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- How do you think Hugh is coping with his ongoing captivity? Discuss the emotions he must have felt on hearing of the burning down of Donegal Castle.
- Hugh feels that his childhood is now long gone – 'buried in a bog ... with three hundred murdered Spaniards' (p.103). What is meant by the 'blood debt' that Hugh feels he is under? When do you think Hugh's childhood ended? Discuss.
- Why did Felim O'Toole send a messenger to Dublin to let them know that Hugh was in their house (p. 118)?

ACTIVITIES

1. NEWSPAPER REPORT

Imagine you have the job of reporting Hugh's daring escape for your local newspaper.

Write the article, explaining how they escaped and draw a map of their route to Castlekevin.

2. LETTER WRITING

Read pp.119–121 where Hugh waits for his enemies to come and get him.

Write a letter from Hugh to his friends or parents describing his feelings as he goes through that torturous day.

3. CONTROLLING OUR EMOTIONS

Hugh is quick to anger, as we've seen on occasion (pp.32, 84, 89, 100). Will Hugh change?

Have you ever lost your temper and/or done/said something you later regretted? Write about it.

4. VIOLENT TIMES

The sixteenth century was a very violent era. List the examples we have read about so far. Find out about life in medieval times. Compare and contrast its harshness with our lifestyle today.

5. HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Find out about gallowglasses. Draw a gallowglass in the clothing he would have worn with weapons he would have had. Display in class with the other pupils' illustrations.

UNIT 4 RECAPTURE

SUMMARY

Hugh is brought back to Dublin Castle where he is tortured and interrogated by the constable. Hugh keeps silent about the whereabouts of fellow escapees. After a life-threatening fever, he finds himself imprisoned with The O'Neill's sons, Art and Henry mac Shane. Hugh and Art become friends, though Henry remains surly, unkind and cunning. Finally, an escape is arranged using the privy and a rope made of torn sheets. Art dies from exposure on the mountainside. Hugh has serious frostbite and only a near-death vision and the reproach 'Where are the champions of Ulster?' goads him into staying alive. At last he is free in Fiach mac Hugh's house in Glenmalure, but he is too weak even to weep with gratitude.

Read pp.125–165.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Did Hugh feel brave as he faced torture in the dungeons in Dublin Castle? What is your opinion of his decision to say nothing?
- Discuss this quote: 'Prison made a mockery of freedom's quarrels.' Do you think Henry mac Shane agreed with this?

- Why did the Iníon Dubh fear for Hugh's life in the event of The O'Donnell's death (pp.142–143)?
- What do you think of Henry's behaviour, leaving his brother and Hugh to fend for themselves?

ACTIVITIES

1. VOCABULARY EXTENSION

The following words appear in this unit: preferment, congenial, encumbrance, eradicate, coercion, veneer, complicity, perversity, intractable.

Arrange in alphabetical order and write a definition for each, consulting a dictionary where necessary.

2. HURTFUL WORDS

Words can hurt as much as physical violence and can lead to further violence and disagreement.

Discuss the insulting expressions used by the characters, eg. 'as black as an Englishman's guts' (p.104), 'yon old red Morrigu' (p.141), 'hell-spawn of that monster' (p.141). Read p.141 and discuss the argument between Hugh mac Ferdoragh and the Iníon Dubh. Find examples of insults, threats and boasts.

Write a short dialogue that takes the form of a modern-day argument between friends. Does the argument end if more insults are added? Write an ending for the argument. Act out in class.

3. DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

Read p.164 where Hugh's suffering is vividly described. Write about an injury or illness you suffered using similes and vivid writing to show the reader what it really felt like.

4. FIELD TRIP

Arrange a class trip to Dublin Castle, visiting the Bermingham Tower, the Chapel Royal and the State Apartments.

Trace the route Hugh and Art took out of the city. You could also visit St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, where Hugh created a disturbance (see pp.75–79).

For information on places in Ulster connected with Red Hugh, visit <http://homepage.eircom.net/~vod/>.

UNIT 5 RESPONSIBILITIES OF FREEDOM

SUMMARY

Hugh rests and tries to recover from severe frostbite for a week, but Glenmalure is not a safe haven and, though far too ill to travel, he embarks on the dangerous journey home to Rathmullen with Turlough O'Hagan as his guide. He is reunited with Eoghan O'Gallagher and Donal Gorm MacSweeney. There are many problems though, with Ulster split into factions supporting rivals for the chieftaincy and Donegal Friary still occupied by the English. Hugh suppresses his desire for revenge and bloodshed, forms a temporary alliance with MacSweeney and starves the English out of the Friary. However, once again, there is a price to be paid for his actions. He has two toes amputated; and faces the future – more solitary than a prisoner in a cell as chieftain among his own people.

Read pp.166–213.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Why do you think Hugh still has nightmares about Art's death on the mountainside? Was there any way in which it was convenient that a possible rival for the chieftainship died?
- We have seen already how speaking without thinking has cost Hugh dearly. Read p.173 and discuss the risk posed by Walter Reagh and his big mouth.
- Why do you think Hugh was confused to meet an Englishman that he liked and respected (p.180)? Look up the word 'prejudice' and discuss the mutual fear, suspicion and ignorance between the Irish and the English at this time.

ACTIVITIES

1. PREMONITION



Look up the meaning of premonition and second sight. Write a definition.

Write an account of the part played by premonition in Hugh's adventure. Do you think Hugh believed in this phenomenon? Give reasons for your answer. Use the internet or an encyclopaedia to find out about modern-day psychics.

2. RELIGION

What religion was Red Hugh? Do you think his religion was important to him? Give reasons for your answer (see p.184). Masses were said or sung in Latin at that time. Find out about plainchant or plainsong, the ritual melody of the Christian Church.

3. DIARY ENTRY

Read p.184–186 where Hugh finally meets Róis O'Neill, his supposed wife. Write a diary entry describing your feelings after that first meeting from either Hugh's or Róis' perspective.

5. SELF-CONTROL AND RESPONSIBILITY

Do you think Hugh has finally accepted his responsibilities (see pp.169, 202, 207)?

Discuss Hugh's realisation that 'bravery without brains is a dangerous virtue.'



Denotes activities that are suitable for both senior cycle primary school use and junior cycle secondary school use.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR, DEBORAH LISSON



DEBORAH LISSON is an award-winning Australian author of young adult fiction. Her passion for the story of Red Hugh O'Donnell led her to research this book in Ireland. Red Hugh later won a Western Australia Premier's Award.

HISTORICAL BIOGRAPHIES: Red Hugh, Strongbow, Brian Boru – This series aims to give historical facts accurately but also to build a sense of the personalities responsible for shaping Irish history. This blend of fact and fiction includes imagined dialogue and reconstructions of events and provides a lively account of these larger-than-life characters.

More historical novels from The O'Brien Press:



Strongbow by Morgan Llywelyn is an adventure story of the life and times of Richard, a Norman knight, and of Aoife, the King of Leinster's daughter.
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* **Winner of the Bisto Book of the Year Award (Best Emerging Children's Author) 1991.**

