

Irish Immigration to the United States and its Aftermath

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“Every immigrant is a citizen of two nations, torn between the opportunities of the New World and their memories of the Old. But for few is this so true, or so poignant, as for the Irish in America.”

Introduction

Three of the principal reasons which induce people to emigrate are poverty, persecution and the desire for self-improvement. If one adds to the total of those who left more or less to their own accord, those persons who were transported or whose occupations took them overseas to live, perhaps for the rest of their lives, the numbers of emigrants leaving Europe between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries are enormous (Yurdan, 1990).

Of course, only a small percentage of all those emigrants to North America was Irish: it was the proportion who left in comparison to the total population of the country which was exceptionally high. Not that this was a new trend, for the Irish have always had been noted for their willingness to travel, particularly to mainland Britain. St. Patrick himself, as long as the fifth century AD, took part in this coming and going, admittedly doing it the opposite way round, for he left England to settle in Ireland. Even today, Irishmen will sometimes define a Scotsman as an Irishman whose ancestors could swim, and those Vikings who were almost certainly the first Europeans to land in North America probably set out from an Irish port such as Limerick.

The mention of emigration in relation to Ireland immediately calls to mind the unfortunates who fled the Famine of the mid-1840s onwards. In 1848, the wave of emigrants left, mainly for America was much more superior in number sharing some common characteristics: their striking poverty and their beliefs. They were Catholic.

The problem we are dealing with is the case of the Irish Catholic immigrants to the United States during the period of the Great Hunger and the following years. Estimations say that a million and a half Irish left the island towards North America. On their arrival they suffered an outrageous discrimination from the American people only compared to the one suffered by black people (still slaves at that moment).

An Overview about Irish Immigration

Today, some 40 million Americans can trace all or part of their ancestry to those 7 million Irish immigrants. Likewise, nearly every one of the 5 million people who now live in Ireland has relations in the New World.

The origins of Irish immigration to the New World are buried in the remote past. In the sixth and seventh centuries, Irish missionaries left their homeland to spread Christianity. One of them, the legendary St. Brendan, supposedly sailed west across the Atlantic and discovered America long before the Vikings or Columbus. St. Brendan's voyage may be fictitious, but even today Irish folklore records ancient memories of mythical lands and journeys beyond "the western ocean."

Apart from these legends, the historical record of Irish immigration to the New World begins

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in the 17th century, when between 50,000 and 100,000 people left Ireland, most of them transported overseas as indentured servants. Others came as prisoners, Irish rebels and felons. They had been sentenced by British courts to long terms of banishment and involuntary servitude on the sugar plantations of the West Indies or on the tobacco plantations along the banks of the Chesapeake.

During the 18th century, Irish immigrants came in much larger numbers, perhaps as many as a half-million, looking for land on the frontiers of Pennsylvania, the Carolinas, and elsewhere in colonial America. Most of those who left Ireland during the decades immediately before and after the American Revolution were Protestants and came from Ulster, Ireland's Northern Province. Some were Anglicans; a few were Quakers, Methodists, and Baptists.

However, most were Presbyterians of Scottish ancestry, the so-called "Scotch-Irish", who brought to America such historically familiar names as Jackson and Buchanan, Wilson and Crockett. In the 1600s their ancestors had moved from the Scottish Lowlands to Northern Ireland, in a migration organized by the British Crown known as the Plantation of Ulster. Now, in the 1700s, oppressed by high rents and resentful of tithes and taxes, hundreds of thousands of Scotch-Irish left Ulster and crossed the ocean to what their Presbyterian ministers optimistically called "the land of Canaan."

After the American Revolution, during the 19th and 20th centuries, the Scotch-Irish and other Irish Protestants continued to immigrate to the United States and, increasingly, to Canada. But in the 1790s and early 1800s the Scotch-Irish were joined by a new and much larger stream of Irish immigrants. They came not only from Ulster but also from Ireland's eastern, southern, and western provinces, Leinster, Munster, and Connacht. These new immigrants would have distinctly different reasons for leaving Ireland and distinctly different experiences in America, in large part because they were Catholics.

Of course, even prior to the American Revolution, a small number of Irish Catholics settled in the New World. But it was in the early 19th century that Ireland's Catholics began their mass exodus overseas: to Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, even to South Africa and Argentina –but primarily to the United States. During the half-century before the Great Irish Famine of 1845-50, perhaps a million Irish, about half of them Catholics, came to North America. From the Famine years until today, another 5.5 million Irish immigrants have come to the United States, the great majority of them Catholic.

These vast migrations of human beings were of enormous historical significance, for they shaped the future of both American and Irish societies, just as they shaped the lives and families of the immigrants themselves. For Ireland, the results of sustained mass emigration have been devastating. Between 1841 and 1926 the population of that small island fell by half, from about 8.5 million to only 4.25 million. Many Irish have blamed what they regard as Ireland's social stagnation and cultural conservatism on the long, enervating drain of young, vibrant, and dissatisfied men and women. Even today, as the Irish playwright John B. Keane laments, "Emigration in Ireland is a predominant way of life."

For the United States, however, the results of Irish immigration were mostly positive. The Irish brought labor, skills, capital, and sheer energy to build the farms, cities, industries, and transportation network that laid the foundations of much of America's prosperity. Indeed, it would be difficult to list briefly the many Irish American contributions to the history of the United States.

By 1776 the Irish comprised at least 10 percent of the population of the Thirteen colonies. And in many areas, such as Pennsylvania, they were active participants in the American Revolution. Eighty-five years later, more than 200,000 Irish immigrants fought in the American Civil War, the great majority on the Union side (Miller and Wagner, 1994).

The Irish, Catholics and Protestants alike, became prominent in American agriculture, business, the labor movement, religion, culture, sports, and politics. Irish immigrant farmers, lumbermen, and canal –and railroad-builders helped push the nation's frontier even westward.

Irish entrepreneurs, including banker Thomas Mellon and mine-owner Marcus Daly, built many of the nation's giant corporations. Other Irish Americans, such as Terence Powderly and "Mother" Jones, helped create the labor unions that battled the corporations to secure decent wages for Irish immigrants and for workers of other nationalities. Bishop John Hughes of New York and Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore built the Catholic Church into the nation's largest

denomination, while Irish Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Methodists played major roles in shaping their churches in America.

In American literature and drama, few have analyzed the human condition and the American Dream more eloquently than Irish American novelist James T. Farrell or playwright Eugene O'Neill. In the world of sports, few have enjoyed greater success or popularity than boxer John L. Sullivan, the son of an immigrant from County Cork. And, finally, from the very beginning the Irish have been unusually prominent and successful at all levels of American politics, and no fewer than ten Presidents –including Jackson, Wilson, Kennedy, and Reagan– have traced their ancestry back to Ireland.

However, for the Irish immigrants themselves, and for their descendants, the results of migration were more mixed and ambiguous. Today, Irish Americans enjoy higher social status and greater wealth and influence than almost any other ethnic group. But the long history of Irish immigrations is tinged with sadness, anger, and even tragedy.

Many Irish immigrants, past and recent, did not want to leave Ireland, even for the United States. Often they regarded themselves not as voluntary immigrants seeking opportunity, but as involuntary “exiles,” compelled to leave Ireland by “British tyranny” and “landlord oppression.” Many assuaged their fears and resentments with the fond belief that the United States was a fabled “promised land” –with “gold and silver (lying in) the ditches, and nothing to do but gather it (up),” as one young immigrant dreamed. However, although a few found their *caisleáin óir*, or castles of gold, in America, great numbers quickly discovered that such illusions were false.

Most Irish Catholic immigrants, especially in the 19th century, were poor and unskilled and had to begin life anew at the very bottom of the American socioeconomic ladder. Further, most Irish newcomers, particularly the large majority who were Catholic, did not receive friendly welcomes from native-born American Protestants. The society that these Irish encountered in the United States was not initially or automatically tolerant and pluralistic: the Irish had to make it so, through strength of numbers and determined efforts, often against bitter opposition. On both sides, but especially for the immigrants themselves, the period of mutual adjustment was long and painful.

Eventually, despite much collective suffering and many individual failures, the Irish Catholics were successful, achieving great prosperity and prominence in all walks of American life. However, the burden of their Irish heritage and the scars of the immigrant experience often proved enduring.

Even those immigrants who achieved security or success in the United States passed on to their children and grandchildren a heritage tinged with bitterness. Sometimes they expressed a certain skepticism or ambivalence about the so-called American Dream that had cost them so much to achieve. More often they channeled a strong resentment, or even a burning hatred, toward the British government and the Irish landlords whom they held responsible for having forced them to leave Ireland as unwilling exiles.

As a result, a profound homesickness was widespread among the Irish in America, even among “comfortable” immigrants such as Maurice Woulfe. Despite that homesickness, and as Woulfe himself suspected, most Irish immigrants understood they could never really return “home” to Ireland –and very few ever tried to do so. Like Woulfe, they would live and die in America –and raise offspring who, try as they might, could never fully comprehend what their fathers and mothers had endured.

Thus, perhaps of all the different nationalities that came to the United States from Europe, Ireland’s Catholics most forcefully and poignantly reflected the painful ambiguities of the immigrant experience. On the one hand, the Irish have risen with great determination to the heights of political, cultural, and economic life in America. On the other hand, they have nurtured a deeply felt longing for an often idealized image of old Ireland –the “Emerald Isle.”

These seemingly contradictory impulses were passed on to succeeding generations, but they were most acute for the Irish immigrants themselves –for those whose lives transformed, and were transformed by, the histories of both their abandoned and their adopted countries (Miller and Wagner, 1994).

Life in Ireland

To understand the above mentioned details, it is necessary to go back to Ireland and have a general perspective of life in that country. In the Irish, or Gaelic, language the act of leaving Ireland was most often described by the word *deoraí*. *Deoraí* translates into English not as "emigration" but as "exile". Similarly, When Irish poets and peasants described the act of emigration, they said, "*Dob éigean dom imeacht go Meirice,*" meaning "I had to go to America," or "Going to America was a necessity for me." Thus, in the traditional Irish Catholic worldview, emigration was involuntarily -the result of fate or force, not of individual ambition. And although the Irish language declined rapidly in the 19th century, the same sentiments were translated and reproduced in the new English dialects spoken in the Irish countryside -and in those Irish songs and ballads that portrayed emigration as tragic exile.

Of course, it was not simply their language that disposed the Irish to regard emigration to America as exile or banishment -it was the impact of English conquest and colonization on Irish Catholic society and culture. The physical and political consequences of that conquest can still be seen: in the ruined castles gracing the island's landscape, in the armed border dividing the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland; and in the murals and graffiti adorning the walls of Belfast and the other war-torn cities of the north. The psychological scars are less visible, but equally enduring, both in Ireland -and in Irish America.

The rich and lovely valley of the Boyne River, in County Meath, about 50 miles north from Dublin, witnessed the birth and the political death of traditional Irish Catholic society. At Newgrange, impressive stone monuments, "passage graves" for ancient Irish chieftains, were constructed more than 5,000 years ago, long before the coming of St. Patrick and Christianity to Ireland. Not far from Newgrange is the Hill of Tara, the ceremonial capital of ancient Ireland, where the High Kings of Gaelic society were crowned and appointed. A few miles away are the ruins of medieval castles and of Catholic churches and monasteries, such as the Cistercian Abbey at Mellifont. Also lying in the peaceful river valley is the broad field on which raged the Battle of the Boyne. In that great conflict of July, 1690, the Irish armies of the deposed Catholic English King, James II, were defeated by the Protestant forces led by King William of Orange.

As early as 1530s, English Protestant rulers such as King Henry VIII, his daughter Queen Elizabeth, Oliver Cromwell, and William of Orange had tried to conquer Catholic Ireland for reasons compounding equal measures of politics, prejudice and greed. Again and again, Irish lords and chieftains, fearing the loss of their estates and their religion, had risen in revolt: under the leadership of Hugh O'Neill in 1590s, Owen Roe O'Neill in the 1640s, and Patrick Sarsfield and the Catholic King James in 1688. Each time the Irish lords were crushed.

Many of their leaders and followers fled into exile in Catholic France or Spain and were replaced as landlords and tenants by Protestant English and Scottish colonists. By the time of the great defeat at the Boyne in 1690, even the Gaelic bards, whose songs and poems had once spurred the Irish into battle against the hated foreigners, had abandoned hope that Catholic Ireland could ever rise again.

In the years following their victory at the Boyne, the Protestant colonists and the British governments imposed on Catholic Ireland a vast system of social, political and economic control known as the Protestant Ascendancy. Nearly all land in Ireland was confiscated and given over to about 10,000 Protestant families, a few hundred of whom owned so much land that their estates and mansions dominated the landscape. Most Catholics were reduced to the levels of tenant farmers, peasants, laborers and servants.

Those Catholics fortunate enough to lease farms from their new masters were obliged to pay increasingly higher rents for the privilege of tilling the soil formerly owned by their ancestors. If they fell behind in their rent, or if the landlords' profits were better served by grazing cattle or sheep, the farmers would be evicted and their homes-even entire villages-would be leveled to the ground. In addition to rents, Catholic farmers had to pay tithes for the maintenance of the Protestant Church of Ireland. Although Catholics still comprised more than 75 percent of the island's population, the church of their landlords was now the legally established religion (Miller and Wagner, 1994).

Countdown to the Great Hunger

Still, certain circumstances favourable to population increase were present in Ireland during this period. First, and most important, there was an abundant supply of incredibly cheap food, easily obtained, in the potato, and the standard of living of the time was such that a diet of potatoes was no great hardship. With the addition of milk or buttermilk potatoes form a scientifically satisfactory diet, as the physique of the pre-famine Irish proved. Arthur Young contrasted the Irishman's potato diet favourably with the contemporary English laborer's bread and cheese. The Irish, he wrote, "have a bellyful... I will not assert that potatoes are a better food than bread and cheese but I have no doubt of a bellyful of the one being much better than half a bellyful of the other".

Next, far from acting as a deterrent, the miserably low standards of Irish life encouraged young couples to marry early. No savings were necessary, no outlay was required; a cabin was erected for little or nothing in a few days, the young couple secured a scrap of land, owned a pot, perhaps a stool, not always a bed. Marriages were "daily contracted with the most reckless improvidence. Boys and girls marry literally without habitation or any means of support, trusting, as they say, to Providence as others have done before them". In fact, nothing was to be gained by waiting. Asked why the Irish married so young, the Catholic Bishop of Raphoe told the Irish Poor Enquiry of 1835: "They cannot be worse off than they are and... they may help each other". Women were chaste. Irish females, stated George Nicholls in his Report on Ireland, were "very correct in their conduct", and his own impressions were "highly favourable of their morals"-there was "no need to make provision for bastards". Girls married at sixteen, boys at seventeen or eighteen, and Irishwomen were exceptionally fertile; "... for twelve years 19 in 20 of them breed every second year. Vive la pomme de Terre!" wrote Arthur Young; and travelers in Ireland before the famine invariably comment on the troops of children to be found in every cabin. When the famine drove tens of thousands across the Atlantic, it was found that in the Irish immigrant slums of Boston, where infants under five years of age died at the rate of 61 per cent., the Irish nevertheless increased in numbers, because of their high birth-rate (Woodham Smith, 1962).

The Irish are fond of children, and family feeling is exceptionally strong. Moreover, in pre-famine Ireland children were a necessity. A Poor Law did not begin to operate until 1838, and then its provisions were limited; thus a man and woman's insurance against destitution in old age was their children.

There was too, barbarous and half-savage though conditions might be, one luxury enjoyed by the Irishman which favoured the survival and rearing of children -his cabin was usually well warmed by a turf fire. Ill-clothed though he was, sleeping as he did on a mud floor, with his pig in the corner, the Irish peasant did not have to endure cold, nor did his children die of cold. They were warm; they were abundantly fed -as long as the potato did not fail.

By 1841, when a census, was taken, the population had reached 8,175,124, and Disraeli declared that Ireland was the most densely-populated country in Europe; on arable land, he asserted, the population was denser than that of China.

It seems possible, moreover, that the census figure may be too low. Though the enumerators of 1841 were largely members of the Irish Constabulary, superior to their predecessors and a "highly disciplined body of men", much time, local knowledge and courage were needed to climb into the wild mountain glens, to penetrate the bogs and track down the communities of evicted and unemployed who existed in caves, sod huts and under tree-roots. An intelligent relief officer wrote that the Census of 1841 was "pronounced universally to be no fair criterion of the present population". He had tested it in Co. Clare and found the population to be one third greater than had been recorded; therefore in 1845 when famine came the population might well have been above nine millions.

For this closely-packed and rapidly-increasing people the only outlet -with the exception of parts of Ulster- was the land. Ireland has never been industrialized; such deposits of coal and iron as she possessed were "unfortunately of more significance to the geologist than the economist", and in 1845 the few industries she did possess were moribund. A remnant of the famous Dublin poplin weavers worked fifteen hours a day for about twelve shillings a week;

in the once-prosperous woolen industry, production had fallen about fifty per cent in the last twenty years, and three-quarters of the frieze, thick woolen cloth, worn by the peasantry, was dumped by England. The fisheries of Ireland, too, were undeveloped, and in Galway and Mayo the herring fishermen were too poor to buy salt with which to preserve a catch.

Even on the land, agricultural employment, as it was understood in England, did not exist. Labourers were not regularly employed on farms because Irish farms were too small to require hired labour; over 93 per cent consisted of fewer than thirty acres. Ten years before the famine, the Poor Enquiry of 1835 stated that three-quarters of the labourers in Ireland existed without regular employment of any kind, and the economist, Nassau Senior, told the Government that for thirty weeks of the year, that is, for the whole of the year except when potatoes were being cultivated, 2,385,000 persons were without employment because there was absolutely no work to offer them. Unless an Irish labourer could get hold of a patch of land and grow potatoes on which to feed himself and his children, the family starved.

The consequence was the doom of Ireland. The land was divided and sub-divided, again and again, and holdings were split into smaller and still smaller fragments, until families were attempting to exist on plots of less than an acre, in some cases half an acre.

Farms had already been divided by middlemen and landlords but the sub-division which preceded the famine was carried out by the people themselves, frequently against the landlord's will. As the population increased and the demand for a portion of ground grew more and more frantic, land became like gold in Ireland. Parents allowed their children to occupy a portion of their holdings because the alternative was to turn them out to starve; the children in turn allowed occupation by their children, and in a comparatively short time three, six, or even ten families were settled on land which could provide food only for one family.

The possession of a piece of land was literally the difference between life and death. "Ejectment", the House of Commons was told in April, 1846, "is tantamount to a sentence of death by slow torture." Turned off the land, evicted families wandered about begging, "miserable and turbulent." Since no employment existed they crowded the already swarming lanes and slums of the towns lived in ditches by the roadside until, wasted by disease and hard-ship, "they die in a little time."

As a result of the desperate competition for land, rents in Ireland were enormously high, eighty per cent to a hundred per cent higher than in England. High rents were further encouraged by the practice, generally followed in Ireland, of letting land by advertising for "proposals" and disposing of it to the highest bidder. Only on the best-managed estates, generally those owned by large proprietors, were the character and record of the tenant taken into account. Lord Gormanston, for instance, had let land to a witness before the Devon Commission at four shillings an acre less than he was offered elsewhere. But where landlords were greedy or in debt, the people's anxiety to secure a piece of land, or the fear of losing land already occupied, was so great that offers went beyond its value.

An immense and increasing number of people were too poor to make an offer to rent land, and this unfortunate class, mainly poor day-labourers, eked out an existence by means of a method of hiring land, called conacre.

Conacre was a contract by which the use of a portion of land was let, to grow one crop. Conacre was not a lease but a licence to occupy, and the relation of landlord and tenant was not created. Very small portions of land were let in conacre; in Tipperary, a quarter-acre was more common than half an acre; in Queen's Country, it was reckoned that half an acre of conacre would support a labourer's family.

The owner of conacre manured the soil and prepared it for the reception of seed; the hirer provided the seed, planted it, and performed all subsequent operations. Rent was high; £10 or even £12 to £14 an acre on good ground, and about £6 on poor ground. But the Devon Commission did not consider conacre rents "enormous", having regard to the crop which could be obtained in a normal season.

The whole of this structure, the minute subdivisions, the closely-packed population existing at the lowest level, the high rents, the frantic competition for land, had been produced by the potato. The conditions of life in Ireland and the existence of the Irish people depended on the potato entirely and exclusively.

The potato, provided it did not fail, enabled great quantities of food to be produced at a trifling cost from a small plot of ground. Sub-division could never have taken place without the potato: an acre and a half would provide a family of five or six with food for twelve months, while to grow the equivalent grain required an acreage four to six times as large and some knowledge of tillage as well. Only a spade was needed for the primitive method of potato culture usually practised in Ireland. Trenches were dug and beds –called “lazy beds”– made; the potato sets were laid on the ground and earthed up from the trenches; when the shoots appeared, they were earthed up again. This method, regarded by the English with contempt, was in fact admirably suited to the moist soil of Ireland. The trenches provided drainage, and crops could be grown in wet ground, while cultivation by the spade enabled potatoes to be grown on mountain sides, where no plough could be used. As the population expanded, potatoes in lazy beds were pushed out into the bog and up the mountain, where no other cultivation would have been possible.

The potato was, moreover, the most universally useful of foods. Pigs, cattle and fowls could be reared on it, using the tubers which were too small for everyday use; it was simple to cook; it produced fine children as a diet, provided that it did not fail.

Yet it was the most dangerous of crops. It did not keep, nor could it be stored from one season to another. Thus every year the nearly two and a half million labourers who had no regular employment more or less starved in the summer, when the old potatoes were finished and the new had not come in. It was for this reason that June, July and August were called the “meal months”: there was always the danger that potatoes would run out and meal would have to be eaten instead, the labourers would then have to buy it on credit, at exorbitant prices, from the petty dealer and usurer who was the scourge of the Irish village –the dreaded “gombeen man.”

More serious still, if the potato did fail, neither meal nor anything else could replace it. There could be no question of resorting to an equally cheap food. No such food existed, nor could potato cultivation be replaced, except after a long period, by the cultivation of any other food. “What hope is there for a nation that lives on potatoes!” wrote an English official.

Yet the British Government felt no apprehension about the potato crop. It was the problems arising from Ireland’s perennial rebelliousness and from the swarming, poverty-stricken “surplus” population, as it was called, that absorbed the attention of Parliament, and when the exclusive dependence of the Irish on the potato was deplored it was on moral grounds, as proving the improvidence and lack of energy of the Irish people.

There were, however, voices crying in the wilderness, and contrary to the usual course of history the voices were official. The Devon Commission reported in 1845, on the eve of the famine, giving warning in grave terms of the dangerous state of Ireland. The report was dismissed on the grounds that it did not “contain anything of striking novelty” and “there was nothing in it that everyone did not know already, and a timid bill based on its recommendations giving Irish tenants a right to compensation for improvements in certain restricted circumstances was denounced as “a violation of the rights of property” and withdrawn. The Devon Commission more over was only one of many. In the forty-five years since the Union no fewer than 114 Commissions and 61 Special Committees were instructed to report on the state of Ireland, and without exception their findings prophesied disaster; Ireland was on the verge of starvation, her population rapidly increasing, three-quarters of her labourers unemployed, housing conditions appalling and the standard of living unbelievably low.

True, an “Act for the more effectual relief of the Poor in Ireland”, an Irish Poor Law Act, had been passed in 1838, but its object was not so much to mitigate the sufferings of the Irish poor as to prevent them from coming over into England. George Nicholls, who drafted it, admitted as much; the vast numbers of Irish, he wrote, who “crossed the Channel in search of the means of living... made it a matter of policy, as it assuredly was of humanity, to endeavor to improve their condition; and nothing seemed so equitable or so readily effective for the purpose as making property liable for the relief of the destitution in Ireland, as was the case in England –in other words establishing some kind or Poor Law.”

In vain it was pointed out that the problems of poverty in England and Ireland were totally different, that the immense amount of destitution in Ireland would entail a gigantic expenditure if a poor law was to be effective. Workhouses for hundreds of thousands would have to be erected,

and the annual cost would be at least five million pounds a year: there was no possibility of raising such a sum in Ireland.

The British Government's mind was made up. The property of Ireland must support the poverty of Ireland, and a menace to England be removed. George Nicholls was sent to Ireland for six weeks, his first acquaintance with the country; after that the opinion of "the most representative Irish that could be consulted" was set on one side and on July 31, 1838, the Irish Poor Law Act became law.

The British Government, however, concerned as it was with Irish disaffection, with the recent alarm of the Repeal agitation, and with religious differences—much of the last session of Parliament before the famine was spent in debating an increase in the grant to the Catholic seminary of Maynooth—continued to contemplate the condition of the Irish people with "imperturbable apathy."

Meanwhile, in 1844, a report was received that in North America a disease, hitherto unknown, had attacked the potato crop (Woodham Smith, 1962).

To understand the magnitude of the disaster that the blight which affected the potato crop in Ireland caused, it is important to highlight the way of living of the Irish people and their basic needs.

The rights to a piece of land meant the difference between life and death in Ireland in the early 1800s. The population was exploding, and with hundreds of thousands without work, entire families managed to exist on a section no bigger than half an acre, growing nothing more than row after row of potatoes, but what was the alternative?

There were famine years before the blight struck and the English rulers were well aware of the problems arising out of the economic structure they had forced on the Irish. During the first 45 years of the 19th century at least 150 committees and commissions of inquiry, appointed by the British Parliament, had made their reports on the State of Ireland. But nothing happened (Wooham Smith, 1962).

Although emigration to America began in earnest more than a hundred years earlier, the Famine years, from 1846 to 1851, were marked by an urgency to get away as never seen before. Ships had always sailed in the spring and summer months. Now, the clamour for a passage saw vessels of every kind and size, with bunks hastily raised in the holds, departing in the autumn and winter too. They braved the worst of the weather—the bitter cold, ice, gales, fog, storms and heavy seas, short days and long nights, could not deter these desperate people. Desperation was the distinctive feature of the Famine sailings.

For an island nation during the last century, the sea was the only link with the outside world. The black waters of the Rive Liffey, where they enter Dublin Bay, provided perfect anchorage for as many as 4,000 ships, registered to the port of Dublin, in the mid-1800s. Small cutters and sloops carried the mail, cattle and agricultural produce for the English markets and the expanding passenger trade to Liverpool. Colliers and schooners kept local industry thriving while the big three-masted barques and brigs traded on the high seas. Dublin was the home port for 300 square-rigged ships sailing to every corner of the world, though few were fitted out to carry human cargo until the Famine arrived. Every day the cobblestones on Custom House Quay would ring with the sound of horses' hooves and creaking cart wheels and the shouts of men in a hurry. Dockside gangs unloaded cargoes from recent arrivals on to barges plying busily along the canals leading into the old city.

The year 1846, which marked the beginning of the Famine Emigration, saw the start of a dramatic change in the scene on Dublin's quays. The *Irish Quarterly Review* would subsequently record this scene as follows:

A procession fraught with most striking and most melancholy interest, wending its painful and mournful way along the whole line of the river, to where the beautiful pile of the Custom House is distinguishable in the far distance, towering amongst the masts of the shipping.

Melancholy, most melancholy, is the sight to the eye not only of the Dublin citizen or resident, but to the eye of every Irishman who is worthy of being so called and indeed, the spectacle is one of sadness and foreboding. A long continuous procession... a mixed stream of men, women and children, with their humble baggage, who are hurrying to quit for ever their native land!

It is not a departing crowd of paupers but unhappily an exodus of those who may be regarded as having constituted, as it were, the bone and sinew of the land; the farmers and comfortable tenantry, the young and strong, the hale and hearty, the pride and the prime of our Nation! (Laxton, 1997)

The Coffin Ships

The crossing of the Atlantic was in fact the first ordeal the immigrants had to face before reaching America. Many of the ships adapted for the Irish emigrant trade were small, old and unseaworthy. They were often manned by poorly trained crews and officers who care little for the welfare of the passengers traveling in the bowels of the ship. Both before and during the Famine, sailing ships commonly put to sea without adequate water, provisions, medical assistance or cooking and sanitary facilities. Voyages usually lasted for five to six weeks, but passages of more than twice that length were common, extending the misery of physical privation and outbreaks of disease.

Passage in steerage was a nightmare. The emigrants were crowded together in the ship's dark, dank, holds, usually with only two square feet of space each. Only children had room to stand upright, and the narrow sleeping berths each held at least four people. These quarters were rarely or never cleaned, as a result "the filthy beds were teeming with abominations, ... the narrow space between the berths ... breathed up a damp and fetid stench." Many ships arrived with streams of "foul air issuing from the hatches –as dense and palatable as seen on a foggy day from a dung heap."

Some Irish passengers came supplied with whiskey and tried to drink their way through the tedium and unpleasantness of the voyage: Most simply tried to remain on deck as much as possible, to escape the lice and odors below. However, when storms struck their vessels, as they did almost invariably on the North Atlantic crossing, the emigrants were forced back into the steerage. There they lay for the duration of the storm, without fresh air, quaking with fear, praying, cursing and vomiting, while the howling wind and crashing waves smashed and tossed the fragile crafts –sometimes bringing their dreams of the "promised land" to a tragic early end.

Irish refugees of the Great Famine experienced all the usual horrors of the Atlantic passage – and others that were exceptional. Many of the Famine emigrants were not only suffering from the debilitating effects of malnutrition before they embarked, but also carried with them the germs of typhus, dysentery and even cholera. During "Black '47", mortality rates among Irish passengers were as high as 40 percent in these vessels known as "coffin ships". Including those who died in the waterfront slums of North American cities, or in the quarantine camps, as many as 50,000 Irish died *en route* to North America (Miller and Wagner, 1994).

The Irish coming to the U.S

"Although in Ireland life was brutal, immigrating to the United States was not a pleasant experience. Referred to as the American Wake, those who chose to immigrate knew they would never see Ireland or their families again, and with poor communication over large distances, it was probable that the "wake" was the last time they would even hear of each other again. The only future left in Ireland was ever increasing poverty, disease, death, and oppression. America became their dream, their second chance for a brighter future."

Irish immigrants arrived in masses on overcrowded ships, branded Coffin Ships because the conditions were so deplorable; these ships were, for the most part, not even sea worthy. Even as the immigrants docked in American ports they learned life would continue to be a fight of endurance, a fight for survival. Many unfortunate immigrants found themselves snatched by dock loafers who preyed on the ignorance of immigrants; these dock loafers who would compel the Irish immigrants: men, women, and children, into favored tenant houses, charging the immigrants outrageous fees for this "service." Many immigrants remained too impoverished to escape or move on." (Marshall, 1988)

Free land did not appeal to the early Irish immigrants looking to escape the Potato Famine: they rejected the land, because the land had rejected them; yet they always spoke reverently of their Irish homeland. Most of the larger cities had an "Irish" or "Shanty Town" where the Irish would gather to commiserate their struggles, encourage each other, and celebrate together. (Miller and Wagner, 1994)

Rise of the Irish

Following the Civil War, Irish laborers once again provided the backbreaking work needed for the enormous expansion of rapidly industrializing America. They ran factories, built railroads in the West, and worked in the mines of Pennsylvania, Virginia and Montana. They were carpenter's assistants, boat-builders, dock-hands, bartenders and waiters. In an era when there were virtually no governmental constraints on American capitalism, the Irish organized the first trade unions and conducted strikes when necessary for higher wages, shorter hours, and safer working conditions.

Single Irish women found work as cooks and maids in houses belonging to wealthy families on Beacon Hill in Boston and along Fifth Avenue in New York, and in most other big cities. Many lived inside the homes in the servants' quarters and enjoyed a standard of living luxurious by comparison to the life they had known in Ireland or in the tenements. These women were cheerful, kind-hearted, hardworking and thrifty, always managing to save a little money out of their salary for those back in Ireland. From 1850 to 1900 an estimated \$260 million poured into Ireland from America, bringing over more family members and helping out those remaining behind.

The women also donated generously to their local Catholic parishes for new parochial schools and the construction of stained-glass churches with marble statues and altars. The beautiful cathedral-like buildings became great sources of pride among the Irish, making the statement that Catholics had "arrived" in America. Catholic parishes became the center of family life, providing free education, hospitals, sports and numerous social activities, recreating to some degree the close-knit villages the Irish had loved back home while at the same time protecting them from unfriendly Americans.

Catholics in Ireland had endured centuries of discrimination at the hands of a dominant culture ruled by English and Anglo-Irish Protestants. They arrived in America only to find they were once again facing religious discrimination by the dominant culture; this time American Protestants. Eventually the Irish discovered the path to changing things in their new home lay in the local ballot box.

The large numbers of Irishmen now eligible to vote in cities such as New York and Boston meant they could no longer be politically ignored. The sons and grandsons of Famine immigrants joined the Democratic Party in droves, organized themselves by every ward and precinct into political "machines" then became candidates for office, first getting elected to city councils, later to the mayor's office itself.

In Boston, newly elected Mayor James Michael Curley boldly announced in 1914: "The day of the Puritan has passed; the Anglo-Saxon is a joke; a new and better America is here." Curley dominated Boston politics for nearly forty years. He freely used patronage as a way to reward loyalty and get Irish votes, filling various city departments with his supporters. The Irish delighted in taking civil service jobs with their steady paychecks and long-term security. In cities with big Irish populations, police and fire departments often became staffed by Famine descendants.

In New York, the political machine was known as Tammany Hall, a powerful but corrupt organization that traded favors and jobs for votes and money. Out of Manhattan's fourth ward emerged Al Smith, the grandson of Irish immigrants, who rose from the tenements of the Lower East Side to seek the American presidency. As governor of New York in the 1920s, Smith originated ground-breaking social reform programs that later became the model for Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. But as the Democratic candidate for president in 1928, Smith was relentlessly bashed by anti-Catholic activists and was resoundingly defeated, losing to incumbent President Herbert Hoover.

The most extraordinary Famine descendant was John Fitzgerald Kennedy, great-grandson of Patrick Kennedy, a farmer from County Wexford who had left Ireland in 1849. Although other Presidents, including Andrew Jackson and Woodrow Wilson had Irish roots, John Kennedy

became the first Roman Catholic. To millions of Irish Catholic Americans, Kennedy's election in 1960 as the 35th President of the United States signaled an end to the century-long struggle for full acceptance in the U.S.

A key factor that affected the vote for and against John F. Kennedy in his 1960 campaign for the presidency of the United States was his Catholic religion. Legs, who had mostly voted or Republican Dwight Eisenhower, now gave Kennedy from 75 to 80 percent of their vote. Some Protestants, such as Norman Vincent Peale, still feared the Pope would be giving orders to a Kennedy White House. To allay such fears, Kennedy kept his distance from church officials and in a highly publicized confrontation told the Protestant ministers of the Greater Houston Ministerial Association on September 12, 1960, "I am not the Catholic candidate for President. I am the Democratic Party's candidate for President who also happens to be a Catholic. I do not speak for my Church on public matters –and the Church does not speak for me." He promised to respect the separation of church and state and not to allow Church officials to dictate public policy to him. Kennedy counterattacked by suggesting that it was bigotry to relegate one-quarter of all Americans to second-class citizenship just because they were Catholic. In the final count, the additions and subtractions to Kennedy's vote because of religion probably canceled out. He won a close election; *The New York Times* reported a "narrow consensus" among the experts that Kennedy had won more than he lost as a result of his Catholicism, as Catholics flocked to Kennedy to demonstrate their group solidarity in demanding political equality.

By the time of Kennedy's victory, descendants of the Famine immigrants were steadily leaving the old Irish working-class neighborhoods of Boston, New York and other cities and settling into the new suburbs sprouting across America. Irish Americans, three or four generations removed from their Famine forebears, now preferred a more generic middle-class American lifestyle complete with manicured lawns and backyard barbecues. Some of them even converted to Republicanism and wound up voting for another "Irishman" named Ronald Reagan for president.

The Irish, the first big group of poor refugees ever to come to the United States, had born the brunt of American resentment and prevailed. They could now count on the fact that their children might be educated at Harvard University or perhaps rise to a top position in any corporation or business, based on their talent and ability. And they had paved the way for the waves of immigrants from Europe and other places that followed in their footsteps.

Hard work and sheer determination had allowed the Irish in America to overcome countless obstacles and find success and happiness. But their country of origin remained a very sad place in the decades following the Famine.

