

# Emigration from the Limerick workhouse

**P**ut the two words "emigration" and "famine" together, and Irish folk memory develops nightmares. Images return of desperate people stampeding to the nearest port at the rate of 200,000 a year - refugees rather than emigrants - and scrambling for a place aboard those ill-famed coffin ships which offered hope of better prospects in an unknown land, provided they reached it.

This is not the kind of emigration we are concerned with: those people had the wherewithal to leave the country; the people we are dealing with in this article did not. These emigrants survived the Famine. Their relatives were dead or gone abroad, and they waited in the workhouse for better times, when work or a cheque from relatives overseas or some merciful scheme of aided emigration would set them free from the grim grey walls of their limbo existence.

The 'workhouse' emigrants were also much fewer in number. Between 1848 and 1860 freedom to start life anew in another land came to some 750 of the inmates of Limerick Workhouse.

Opportunities for such emigration

## 1848-1860

by Chris  
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came in various ways. In 1848 orphan girls were needed to correct an imbalance in the population of Australia. The following year, the government allowed the Poor Law Guardians to borrow money for specific schemes, and it was also permissible to supplement from the rates any aid received from relatives abroad for emigration purposes. This call on the rates was acceptable, because it was ultimately cheaper to help inmates to emigrate than to continue supporting them in the workhouse. That was the sentiment which letters applying for such aid always appealed to: they generally ended with some such phrase as "and thus rid the Union of my further support" or "otherwise I must continue to be a burden on the Union".

In line with these three sources of op-

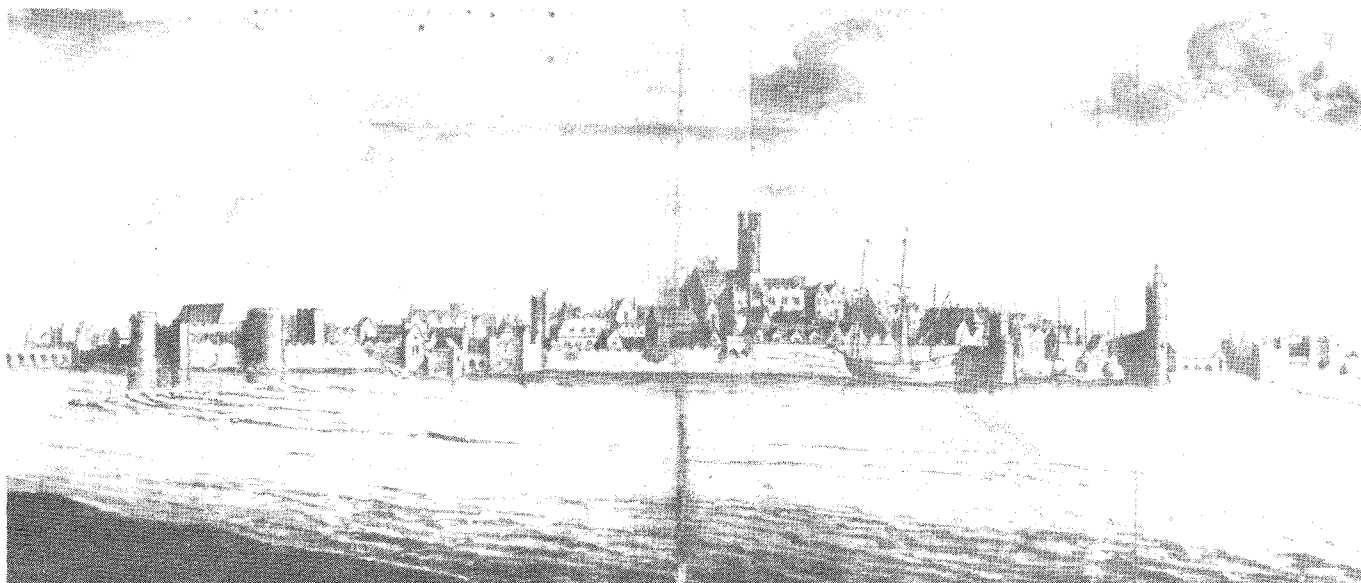
portunity, emigration from the Limerick workhouse may be considered under three headings:

1. Limerick's participation in the scheme to send orphan girls to Australia.
2. Schemes of group emigration organised by the local guardians.
3. Aid granted to individuals or family groups on request.

The first category comprises 74 girls; the second, some 480 people; the third, close on 200.

### I. Orphans to Australia.

The initiative for this scheme came from those who were responsible for the colonies. Australia had no difficulty attracting young men anxious to better themselves in a land which was being actively developed by the Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners. Lack of women did become a real problem, however, and it was decided to seek 14,000 volunteers in Great Britain and Ireland (10,000 and 4,000 respectively). Investigation revealed that the number of female orphans aged 14-18 in Irish workhouses rendered further recruitment unnecessary where the quota from



A view of King's Island from the northern bank of the Shannon.

Ireland was concerned.

It would lead us too far away to go into this scheme in any detail in the present context. Suffice it to say that the colonial authorities provided free passage from Plymouth, good care during the 100 day voyage, and work on arrival. All the local guardians had to pay for was the outfit and conveyance to Plymouth. Between May 1848 and April 1850, 4,085 Irish girls went to Australia under this scheme. The first year, 2,170 went; the second year 1,915 were recruited. Limerick contributed 74 to the first batch, but, owing to complaints which they received and for which they failed to obtain any satisfaction, they refused to participate the second year.

## II. Group Schemes

Under this heading there are three groups to be considered: one each to New York, Van Diemen's Land and Quebec.

### New York

In 1849 the Poor Law was extended to enable boards of guardians to contract loans for emigration purposes. By this time the Limerick Guardians had four workhouses in operation and were trying to cope with an average of 3,400 inmates at any given time. They lost no time, therefore, in drawing up lists of able-bodied men and women under 30 for selection as emigrants, and securing a loan of £500 with which to send as many as possible to New York.

According to the minutes of the Limerick Board of Guardians, they sent 103 paupers in four batches: 12 on 11 December, 30 on 25 December, 35 on 10 January 1850, and 26 on 30 January.

The Abstract of emigration returns from the various Unions for April 1849 - March 1850 (which I shall refer to from here on as "the abstract") throws light on the composition of this group: there were 10 male adults, 75 female adults, and 18 children. An adult, by the way, was anyone aged 15 or over; hence my reluctance to refer to them as men and women.

Francis Spaight had the contract for all four batches. The fare was £4.12.6 per adult and £4.5.0 for children under the age of 13. Each emigrant received 15/- "landing money" on arrival.

### Van Diemen's Land

The initiative for the next group came from the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission. They were looking for girls in the 17-25 age group and offered free passage from Plymouth. The guardians accordingly selected 50 girls in July 1852, 30 of whom were approved by the Commission's inspector in the following month. In September they were dispatched to Plymouth, and at the

end of that month they sailed for Western Australia aboard the 'Travancore'.

The name of one of these thirty girls has been preserved. Shortly before they were due to leave, one of them, Anne O'Brien, changed her mind, and her place was taken by Mary O'Brien of the Limerick E.D. (This abbreviation is used throughout for "electoral division", of which there were 34 in the Limerick Union).

We also know the name of the person who accompanied this group as matron: Mrs Charlotte O'Sullivan, who was matron of the workhouse at the time, volunteered to take charge of the emigrants in return for a free passage, and was accepted.

### Quebec

Towards the end of 1853 the Emigration Commissioners again offered to transport girls under 25 to Australia. Initially, the guardians accepted and 100 girls were approved. This happened in December, but a strange four month silence followed. We don't know what happened in the interim, but when the subject was raised again, there were 112 girls and their destination had been changed to Quebec. Nor were the Emigration Commissioners footing the bill; the money was coming from the Poor Law Commissioners in Dublin, who had agreed to draw on their "rate-in-aid fund" for the £746.13.4 required. This was a fund set aside to help poorer Unions in times of distress and was sometimes used to aid emigration. Its use in the present context, however, would seem to indicate some form of compromise following on a quarrel with the Emigration Commissioners.

Be that as it may, the transport of 112 girls was deemed a sufficiently large operation to warrant a special committee being appointed to organise it. Tenders were invited and a list of conditions, provisions and outfits was drawn up. These are worth looking at, for they show the care that was taken in the preparation of such emigrants.

The conditions were that the girls would travel in a section of the ship which was partitioned off from the rest of the passengers, and that medical assistance would be available to them on board.

The provisions per adult passenger were to be:  $\frac{1}{2}$  lb of bread or biscuit per week of voyage and 10 lbs of bacon. Children were allowed half of those amounts. Passengers also had to bring their own bedding and cooking utensils.

The outfit to be bought for each girl was: 2 night caps, 1 pair of shoes, 1 gown, 2 combs, pins, needles and thread for sewing, needles and  $\frac{1}{2}$  lb cotton for knitting, 1 flannel petticoat, 2 aprons, 1 bonnet, 2 shifts, 1 wrapper, 1 shawl, 1 brush, 2 towels, 1 neck kerchief, 2 pairs of stockings, 2 lbs of soap, 1 prayer

book, 2 yds of calico, 1 scissors, 1 canvas bag.

At this stage (April 1854) the committee would seem to have got carried away with enthusiasm, for they now suggested contracting a loan of £2,000 in order to send a further 300 females who had been at least three years in the workhouse. This was duly approved and the exodus to Quebec began.

The record is not clear about the precise number which finally sailed out of the 412 selected. Eventually they all went; but if the shipping lists are ever found, a discrepancy between the official figures and the lists would not surprise me.

Four ships conveyed them to Quebec: the 'Theron' sailed on 6 June, the 'Triumph' and the 'William & Joseph' went in July, and the 'Anna Maria' followed shortly afterwards. The names of the officers who accompanied each group were: Miss Mary Flanagan, who resigned her nursing post to go along as matron on one ship, Mrs Mary Anne Shanahan, Anne O'Brien (very likely the same person who had earlier changed her mind about going to Australia), and Hanora McNamara.

In October all were reported to have arrived safely and found work immediately. This should not lead us to conclude that they all stayed in Quebec, however, for an earlier letter, reporting the safe arrival of the 'Theron' on 29 July, stated that all proceeded immediately to Montreal. Anyone for whom work could not be found there immediately would be sent to Upper Canada, where work was plentiful. One gathers that "immediately" is to be taken with a grain of salt, and that the emigrants became widely dispersed in the process of finding employment.

### It's a small world

Among the emigrants of the summer of 1854 was a girl called Anne Hannan. But in April 1857 Anne was back on the doorstep of the Limerick Board of Guardians with a very sad story to account for her destitute state. She had found employment, she said, with the Juby family in Quebec and had accompanied Miss Juby as maid to Belfast the previous month. Alas, Miss Juby died two days after they landed, owing Anne £14 in arrears of wages. To make matters worse, the captain of the vessel of which they had come to Ireland had sent all Miss Juby's luggage back to Canada and Anne's along with it. The Poor Law Guardians in Belfast had refused to help her; she would have to go back to Limerick, they said. A Mrs Savage with whom they had been staying gave her 12/6 for this purpose. Would the Guardians please help her return to Canada?

Being used to sob stories, the guardians remained dry-eyed; check the story, they ordered. When Anne saw that they were actually going to write to a

Bonner in Quebec, whom she had mentioned as a person who could vouch for her story, she decided to tell the truth - almost the truth. She had actually come over to Ireland with Mrs Savage, who discharged her on reaching Belfast. She had then tried to return to Limerick, but ran out of funds in Dublin. A railway porter called Flannery gave her lodging and lent her 10/- for the journey, but he had kept her luggage as a pledge.

The guardians checked this out by writing to Mr Flannery and Mrs Savage. A letter from the secretary of the Dublin and Drogheda Railway Co. revealed that they had no Mr Flannery in their employment. They did, however, have a porter who kept lodgers, a Mr Cullen, "a very proper man". Mr Cullen remembered the girl: she called herself Anne Wilson and stayed a week. When he saw she couldn't pay, he gave her 10/- to get to

Limerick, and yes, she had left her trunk, saying she would call back for it in a few weeks. But it was not a pledge; it contained only a frock and a few rags. Mrs Savage also knew her as Anne Wilson, and had discharged her. If the guardians needed further information, they should consult her son: he was an army officer and stationed in Limerick!

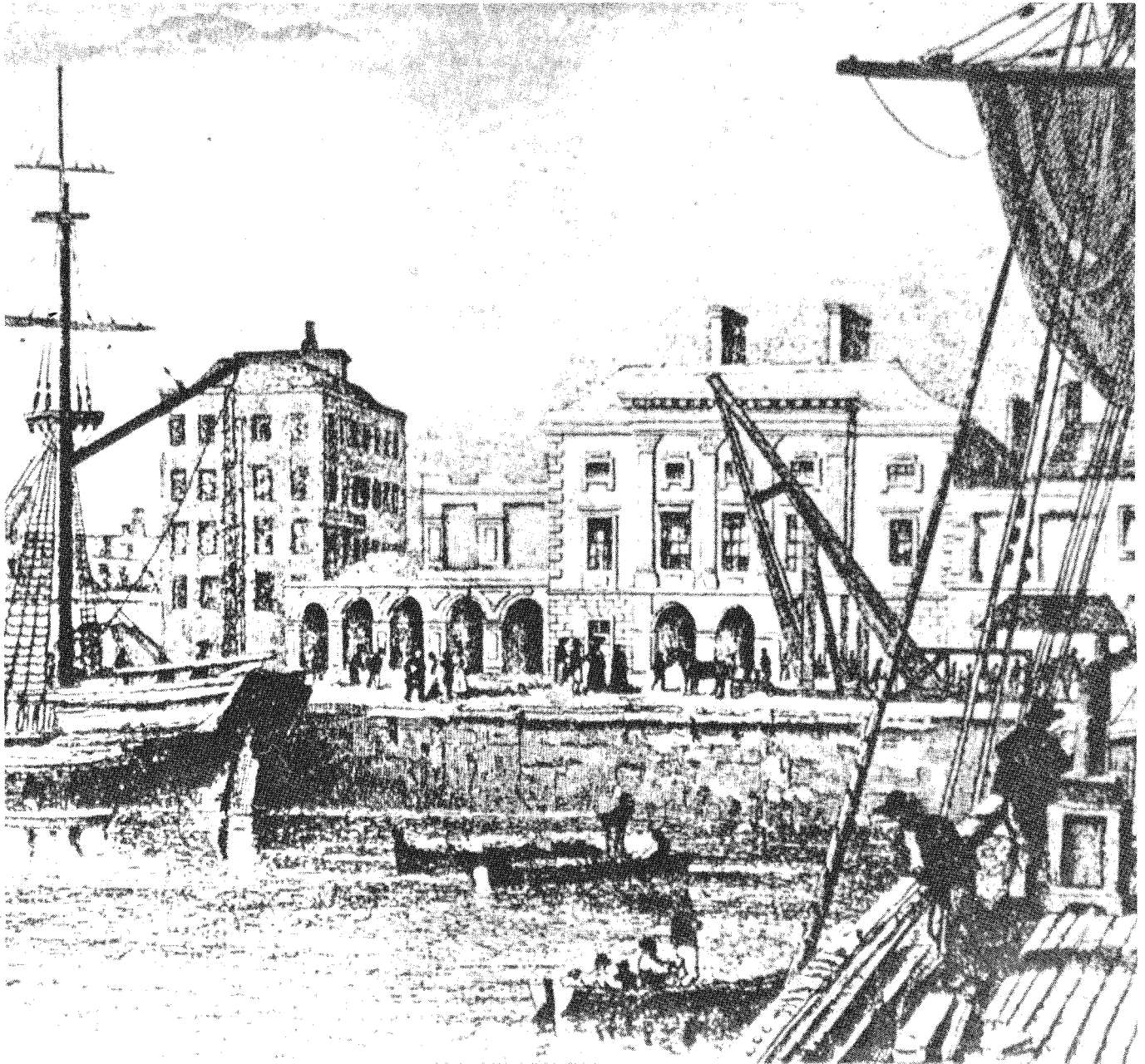
### III Aid to Individuals

According to the official returns on emigration, 175 people were helped to emigrate from the Limerick Union, besides those we have already considered. The record identifies all of these, and adds others who accompanied them, or who resigned from the service of the Union in order to emigrate, or who emigrated after official returns ceased

to be made, bringing the total of identifiable emigrants from this area to 210.

To list so many emigrants would be tedious. I shall confine myself, therefore, to a few generalities, illustrated where possible with examples.

The dribble of individual emigration was spread out over ten years, starting in 1851. Men, women and children went in the proportion of roughly 23%, 32%, and 45% respectively, some 90% of them destined for America and 10% for Australia. Because of the clerk's unfortunate habit of frequently using the word 'America', which could mean Canada or the U.S.A., it is not possible to give an accurate breakdown of the emigration to these two countries, but it is clear that the majority, maybe some 70% went to the U.S. Aiding emigration to Britain did not come within the competence of the



An early 19th century print of the Custom House.

Poor Law administration.

The procedure in these cases was simple and unvarying. Petitions were made to the Board of Guardians, passed on to the Commissioners in Dublin, who authorised payment after inspection. The clerk then made all arrangements regarding outfit and passage. Having read several hundred of these, I never cease to be amazed at the smooth, swift efficiency of both the postal service and the bureaucratic machinery in Dublin. The guardians met weekly and a decision requested from Dublin by one meeting always arrived in time for the next.

Even so, there were times when the urgency to catch a particular boat forced the guardians to anticipate authorization. They did not like that in Dublin; the civil servants went by the book and liked to establish entitlement; advance payments would make this an academic exercise and could lead to abuses. Only once, however, were the guardians caused any embarrassment as a result of this practice. Bridget McMahan of Roxboro' sailed at short notice in August 1854. The guardians assured a gentleman who kindly advanced £1.10.0 for her outfit that he would be re-imbursed. Unfortunately, there was some slight doubt about Bridget's entitlement. Dublin questioned, Limerick explained after a bout of dithering, and the gentleman waited nine months before he got his money back.

The simplicity of the procedure did not mean that anyone who spent a few weeks in the workhouse could emigrate on an "ask and you shall receive" basis. Only long-term inmates of proven good behaviour were given passage and outfit. Most of the emigrants, at least 65%, petitioned for help on the strength of having already received all or part of their fare from relatives abroad. Parents sent for children; brothers and sisters helped one another, husbands sent for their wives and children; even uncles and aunts chipped in.

There is plenty of evidence that the greatest care was taken to ensure the safety of children; the guardians always had to find adult companions before Dublin would give their approval. Thus, for instance, when the young McCormack girls from Kilmurry received a ticket from Liverpool to New York from their father, the guardians sent the workhouse porter, Mr Hayes, to Liverpool with them, and he entrusted them to a family called Enright from Templebreton who were going out on the same ship.

It wasn't always easy to locate the person for whom the money was sent. In the early 1850s Limerick still had three or four workhouses with a combined population well in excess of 4,000 inmates at times. Only once, however, do the guardians seem to have slipped up: when Michael J. Ryan of New York sent for his sister, Anne, he was not too

pleased when someone else's sister turned up on his doorstep! The real sister was later found at the Boherbuoy auxiliary workhouse and the error rectified.

Generally speaking, the Commissioners were only too happy to facilitate the happy reunions made possible by the savings of hard-working relatives abroad; no matter how small the donation that came, they made up the difference without a murmur. One kind of separation, however, they had always frowned upon: they felt that the emigration of husbands who left their wives behind in the workhouse encouraged desertion. One would think that they would therefore be delighted to help a wife rejoin her husband abroad, but their reasoning would seem to have been that to do so would only encourage the practice and thereby increase the risk. In spite of that, most cases in which a wife sought to be reunited with her husband were approved without question. Only once, in fact, did they make things difficult on this score - in the case of Margaret Drew of Clarina. Comparing Margaret's request with those of other women in her situation, the only difference I can find is that she had not received prior help from abroad, but the reason given for the refusal was that of encouraging desertion! Happily, the matter did not end there. A year later Margaret solved the problem on both counts by applying on the strength of help received from a son in America, and was soon on her way to husband and family.

Opportunities for those who had nobody "on the other side" came in various ways; they did not always have to ask. Mr Sidley sometimes offered a free place aboard one of his ships; the parish priests of Broadford and O'Callaghan's Mills used their influence on behalf of a few parishioners; people outside who had saved up enough to go themselves were sometimes allowed to take relatives in the workhouse with them. Most of them, however, and these were people who had spent several years in the workhouse, simply asked.

One of the people who simply asked was Mary Ward. For some reason, perhaps the presence of friends or relatives who had gone out previously, Mary longed to go to Upper Canada. One senses that Mary needed a little something to boost her courage before she could bring herself to ask; Canadian immigration officials were known to take a jaundiced view of women encumbered by children, and the guardians had to bear that in mind. Then, one night, she found £12.14.7½ on the body of an old inmate who had just died. Deciding that honesty was the best policy, Mary paraded her halo before the guardians as she dutifully handed up the money, and while they were still impressed she timidly asked for £5 to help her go to Upper Canada. No problem. A week later she was back again: she had two

children in the workhouse, could she have another £5 to take them with her? Again, the guardians began to nod their assent. "In fact", came the inevitable suggestion, "why not just use the money she found?" "Why not!", echoed several of the commonsense types, but there were others who pointed out that it was against the rules. According to rule, each electoral division paid for its own inmates; the Union at large paid for those who had no residence in any of them. As it happened, the deceased was "Union" while Mary was "Limerick"; so, strictly speaking, the money found should be credited to the Union and Mary's aid debited to Limerick. Finally, the meeting compromised: they passed the buck to the Commissioners. The latter predictably went by the book. Even now, the Limerick guardians made one further effort to use the money found: change Mary's chargeability to the Union, they said. But the Commissioners stood firm and Limerick had to help Mary, Patrick and Michael Ward without being able to touch a penny of the money which had made them look so kindly on her request in the first place.

According to the rules, help to emigrate could only be given to inmates of the workhouse. But what do you do with someone who will become an inmate unless you help them? Two applicants were in this situation, though not in the same mood.

Young Tommy Holmes was an orphan who had been reared in the workhouse. In 1856 he finally found employment outside and saved every penny he could so that he might one day get to America. Alas, the job lasted only a year. By then Tommy had saved £3. He explained all this to the guardians and pointed out that it wouldn't be long before he was forced to return to the workhouse. Wouldn't it be better to add a few pounds to his and enable him to emigrate? He was on his way to New York in no time.

Mary Russell was more aggressive when she got £4 from a daughter in America. "Give me the balance or I'll blow the lot and come in" would sum up her approach. It was equally effective.

It goes without saying that the 10% who went to Australia were not in the "ask and you shall receive" category. All of them had relatives there, who either paid their passage or obtained a free passage for them. The latter privilege was part of a scheme introduced by the Colonial authorities to enable the families of convicts who had served their time to be brought out to them.

Such, then, was the emigration in which the Poor Law authorities were involved - a careful and caring contribution to colonial development, to the relief of distress and to those family reunions which provided a happy ending to many a story of sorrow and heart-break dating from the grim years of the Famine odyssey.