Emigration from the Limerick workhouse 1848-1860
by Chris O'Mahony

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.

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 the scheme. Of these, the first year 1,915 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 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 90 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. Then, however, came 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 happy about this: 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 set up to supervise 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: 1 lb of bread or biscuit per week, of which was to include 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, 1 lb of 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 "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 Anne Shannon, and Mary O'Sullivan (the same person who had earlier changed her mind about going to Australia), and Honora McNamara.

In October all were reported to have arrived safely and found work immediately. This should not lead us to conclude that they all were content, 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 Mrs 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 on which she had come to Ireland said 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. Mrs Anne Wagstaff, whom they had been staying gave her £12/6 for this purpose. Would the Girl's diary help her return to Canada?

Being used to sob stories, the guardians remained dry-eyed; check the story, they ordered. When Anne saw what they were actually going to write to
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; besides those we have already considered. 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 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.
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 authorized the payment in 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 civil service in Dublin. The guardians met weekly and a decision was 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. 

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 the guardians to help them 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, one night, she was given passage and outfit. Most of the emigrants, at least 65%, petitioned the guardians to help them 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.

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