Emigration from County Clare

CAOIMHín Ó DáNAChAIR

Ireland, as we know, differs from all other countries in Western Europe in the fact that while in the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth century the population of these has increased—in some of them, in the current term, exploded—the population of Ireland decreased steadily all during the century and more from the middle 1840s to the 1960s, over which period it fell to one-half of what it had been in 1845.

We know that, during this one hundred and twenty years, there were famines and near famines, insanitary conditions, contagious and epidemic diseases, wars and similar catastrophes, all leading to loss of life. These disasters, however, affected all the countries of Western Europe; where Ireland differed from them was in the abnormally high rate of emigration. In fact, only one area of this part of the world lost a higher proportion of its people by emigration than did Ireland. That is the Highlands of Scotland, that area with which we have so much in common and know so little. Here, however, our theme is emigration from Ireland, and more specifically emigration from County Clare—a county which has suffered greater loss than most.

Clare is, in some ways, an exceptional county. Of all the counties of Ireland it has been least affected by population elements from outside. The Normans never got a firm foothold in Clare, and whereas in the neighbouring counties—Galway, Tipperary, Limerick, Kerry—a large proportion of the population, as may be seen on any voters’ list, is of Anglo-Norman origin, this is not the case in Clare which remained relatively undisturbed by war or colonisation.

Another feature is that the old gentry of Clare, the O’Briens, MacNamaras, O'Loughlins, Mac Clanchys, had the useful knack of being on the right side, and thus escaped confiscation of their lands and expulsion of their people.

In the records of France, Spain and other countries of Catholic Europe, you will find clear evidence of a constant stream of Irish refugees from the wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Ireland. The downfall of the Kildares, the crushing of the Desmonds, the pacification of Connacht, the Flight of the Earls, sent thousands of people overseas, soldiers, merchants and priests in the first place, but many hundreds of ordinary families too. Few of these came from County Clare however, for even the Cromwellian devastation left Clare relatively unscathed, by contrast with other areas.

The picture of peace in Clare was rudely broken at the end of the seventeenth century when the gentry of County Clare, for the first time in history, put their shirts on the wrong horse. In the War of the Two Kings—Cogadh an Dá Rí, as we Munster people call it—they risked everything for King James, and supported his cause to the end.

The chief magnate of County Clare, Daniel O’Brien 3rd Viscount Clare, raised three regiments to fight for King James, that is to say, about two thousand six hundred men. These were:
Clare’s Yellow Dragoons, commanded by Lord Clare himself.

The First Clare Regiment of Foot, commanded by Colonel Daniel O’Brien, the Viscount’s elder son.

The Second Clare Regiment of Foot, under Colonel Charles O’Brien, the Viscount’s younger son.

Of course, the usual way of raising an army in those days was that the gentry called upon their neighbours, tenants and dependants to volunteer. The gentry were the officers. Better-off people who owned riding horses became cavalry or dragoons. Lesser people—the peasantry as they would then be called—filled the ranks of the infantry. In the spring of 1690, King Louis XIV sent some 6,000 French troops into Ireland and requested, in return, 5,000 Irish soldiers, who, although not fully trained were first class military material. Among those chosen to go was the 1st Clare Foot, Colonel Daniel O’Brien’s Regiment. This, in effect, was the first mass emigration from County Clare—a thousand strong men in the prime of life. After the Treaty of Limerick, perhaps as many Claremen again went overseas with Sarsfield, and during the next fifty years a trickle of recruits followed. Figures are hard to find, but it is probable that, in all, over five thousand Claremen went as “Wild Geese”. First they went to France. Then they passed on—some of them—under various treaties or private arrangements, into Spain, Austria, and other countries, where their names are still known and honoured. Indeed, at different times there were rival claimants of the title of Lord Thomond in France, Spain and Austria, while Claremen of lesser rank, with their army service done, settled down as professional men, merchants, farmers, craftsmen and so on. Very few ever came back to Clare. An exception is Aodh Buí mac Cruitín, who after service in Clare’s Regiment in Ireland and France became a schoolmaster, and later returned home to practise the same profession, dying in his native Kilmacrely in 1755.

About the year 1750 the recruitment for the Irish Regiments in France began to fall off. We should remember that these regiments, Clare’s, Dillon’s, Lally’s, and so on, were regiments of that part of the British Army which had remained loyal to King James and his heirs. Even if for the time being they were in the service of King Louis, like their fellow exiles, the Royal Scots, they still wore the red coat of the British Regulars. We know that when supplies were captured by the French from the British any red uniforms or red cloth amongst them were handed over to the Irish or Scots Jacobite regiments to replace their red coats.

When the Stuart cause died for ever in the ’45 rising in Scotland, there was no further drive for Jacobite recruits.

Another circumstance now began to be apparent. The laws which kept Irish Catholics out of the British army and navy began to relax and to be disregarded. British military authorities first connived at the entry of Irishmen and then obtained the right to recruit as widely as they wished among Irish Catholics. We must realise that the average man, in the later eighteenth century, saw nothing wrong in entering the British service once the religious disabilities had been removed. And even after the birth of “green” nationalism in the 1790s, as an offshoot of the French Revolution, to join the British Army was no worse, in the eyes of the public, than, say, to join the Free State Army in 1922, or the Blue Shirts in 1933. It was a matter of opinion, of choosing one course of action rather than another—there was nothing essentially wrong about it.

In 1793 the Clare Militia was established, and year by year numbers of men passed from it into the regular British regiments, mostly into the Connaught Rangers, but many into other regiments. Then there were British Naval stations at Limerick and
at Kilrush, as well as forts along the Shannon, and through these many men went into the British Navy. Here again, figures are not easy to find but an estimate of thirty-five thousand Claremen joining the British forces between 1793 and the First World War is probably conservative. Some of these came back to County Clare, but a majority did not. Very many were killed or died of disease in India and South Africa or wherever their Imperial masters sent them. Many settled down overseas. Many went to the wars in South America after discharge from the British Army of the Peninsula. Many army veterans were assisted by the Authorities to settle on land in Canada and Australia. Few of them came back to Clare.

The latter part of the eighteenth century saw the beginning of the flood of Irish emigration overseas. As far as America is concerned, including what we now call Canada, it is interesting to note that a greater part of Irish immigrants were Protestants, and mainly from Ulster. For instance, of some 25,000 Irish-born people in New York City in 1790, more than 16,000 were from Ulster. But, again, with the relaxation of religious disabilities in the Colonies in the later eighteenth century, Irish people began to cross the water in increasing numbers.

At first this was mainly assisted emigration, that is to say, with part of the expense of emigrating paid by some benevolent or interested party or organisation. There were several of these. The Report of the Select Committee on Emigration of the British Parliament in 1826-27 reported: (excerpts)

1. That in Ireland . . . a considerable part of the population is dependent for the means of support on the precarious source of charity, or is compelled to resort to spoliation for the actual means of subsistence.
2. That in the British Colonies of North America, the Cape of Good Hope, New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land there are tracts of unappropriated land of the most fertile quality.
3. That while the redundant population at home was a cause of loss and a menace to the peace, quite the reverse would be the case if these people were brought to the Colonies.
4. That as emigration should be voluntary, these people should be offered the means of going.

Some money was made available and people were encouraged to apply for assistance in emigrating to the Colonies, and considerable numbers were helped to emigrate by these means; for instance, between 1844 and 1847, 1,566 people were sent to Australia by the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission, and were helped to settle on farms. But the main stream was towards Canada, as we shall see.

What kind of people applied for this assistance? Here are some typical cases, as given in subsequent emigration reports:

**IRISH APPLICANTS**

— On behalf of 40 families who had prepared to go to Canada, but were not included in the number who went with Mr. Robinson. The proposed emigrants have been farmers, and have become insolvent; they object to labouring for others, though they will work land for themselves, and would, in his lordship's opinion, be very eligible persons to have grants of land assigned them and a free passage to Canada.

— Is a pump and engine maker; is desirous of proceeding to Upper Canada under the same encouragement that the settlers who went with Mr. Robinson received; has a knowledge of engineering, particularly the raising of water, which he conceives would be of great use to the other settlers.

— Applies in behalf of a vast number of families, chiefly tradesmen and small farmers in the neighbourhood of Balbriggan, who are most anxious to emigrate; the latter description of persons intend to sail for the United States in case no arrangement is made for sending
them to the British settlements.

—The petitioner is a carpenter in Ronashair, in the county of Wicklow, and wishes to go out as a settler to Upper Canada, with his family; he prays that he may receive a free passage in the first ship that sails with emigrants.

—The memorialist has occupied a farm for several years, but has been reduced to poverty by the fall of the markets, and the high rent he paid; he understands farming and clearing ground, and every branch of agriculture necessary to improve an infant colony; he begs to be allowed a free passage for himself and family, for the purpose of settling there.

—Has a large family dependent on him, and prays that a tract of 2,000 acres in the Island of Cape Breton may be granted, on which he may form a settlement for the benefit of the colony, and that of his family.

—Is a blacksmith by trade, and volunteers to go to any colony in N. America, where his services might prove useful.

—Has devoted the last 15 years to the education of youth, but having no good prospects in this country, he is very desirous of emigrating to Canada (where his talents, he hopes, may be turned to more account), during the course of this season, with his large family; his funds, however, are not sufficient to cover the expense of the voyage, and of providing an establishment in that country; he therefore requests to be allowed a free passage, and on his arrival, to be appointed to some situation in the colony where his abilities as a teacher of youth might prove serviceable.

Many of these were ex-soldiers.

All of these settlers were given land, or the chance to practise their trade. Most of them, it is remarked, including those from County Clare, brought a little capital—averaging perhaps fifteen pounds or so (a good sum in those days) to help them to settle down.

Another kind of assisted emigration was started by benevolent landlords, who encouraged redundant people, whose land holdings were too small to live on, to emigrate. For instance, a landlord who had large holdings in Clare, Colonel George Wyndham, issued this notice to the tenants of his lands (see *The Irish Ancestor*, VI, 1 (1974), 31-42, “Records of Irish emigrants to Canada” by Francis Leeson).

**EMIGRATION**

**TO**

**UPPER CANADA**

**OR**

**AUSTRALIA**

The Committee acting for Col. Wyndham

Are authorised to offer a Free Passage to CANADA to all Tenants, or Labourers (their Wives and Children), being occupiers of small portions of Land on the Irish Estates of Col. Wyndham

now out of Lease, or that are likely to become so within Five years from this date.

Persons under 30 years of age, and above 15, may, if they prefer it, be sent to AUSTRALIA instead of CANADA; and in either case COL. WYNDHAM will give some assistance in fitting out the Families for the Voyage, but that only when the Families are actually ready to embark in the Ship.

Should any Persons be disposed to avail themselves of this opportunity immediate application must be made to Mr. CROWE of Ennis.

Ennis, June 8, 1838

Printed at the Clare Journal Office, Jail-Street, Ennis.

As a result, some 1,500 left for Canada and Australia, and about half of these were from County Clare.
Not that everything went smoothly at all times; we hear, for instance, of one miscreant who turned up on the quayside and was paid his allowance for clothes and so on, and then slipped off—probably to the nearest pub—and never emigrated at all.

Then there was the case of the man who embarked with his wife and family at Limerick, but was so appalled at the hazards of the voyage down the Shannon that he left the boat at Kilrush—where it had called for more passengers—and, once having his foot on his native county again, refused to leave. So his wife and family sailed without him, and took up their land in Canada.

There are instances, too, of private enterprises assisting emigration to provide a labour force. For instance when the Mill Dam in Boston, an embankment connecting Boston peninsula with the mainland, was being built in 1818 a body of Irish labourers were brought by the contractors from Ireland to carry on the work, and in the gold rush days in Australia some of the mining companies paid the passage of workers from Ireland as well as from other countries.

The Irish Poor Relief Acts permitted the sending, as emigrants, of inmates of Workhouses, who, in the days of chronic unemployment among the able-bodied and near-famine conditions, often included numerous healthy people in the prime of life. Between 1847 and 1862, 21,476 people were so sent out, chiefly to the British Colonies. These consisted mainly of whole families—they included 12,365 women and 6,329 children.

A considerable proportion of them were single girls. There was a shortage of European women in the colonies and the authorities had several schemes to remedy this. There were schemes to encourage women to emigrate (Plate IV).

But especially there was an effort to persuade orphan girls from the Workhouses to go. We are told that up to 1849, 4,175 girls went from 118 Irish Unions to Australia, and that a special effort was made to send girls from Counties Kerry and Clare. There were then 8 Workhouses in Clare (at Ennis, Scariff, Kilrush, Ennistimon, Tulla, Killaloe, Corofin and Ballyvaughan) with about 12,000 people in very miserable conditions, so there was no shortage of recruits for a sea voyage and the promise of a job in a distant country.

The government emigration agent for Canada, in his report for 1851, remarks that the girls from Kilrush “were remarkable for their clean, healthy condition”. The same gentleman, in 1852, tells that the girls from Killaloe “are universally liked”. And the Lieutenant Governor of South Australia in his report of 1849, says “the Irish orphan girls are reported generally to be giving great satisfaction to their employers, and are constantly passing out of the class of hired servants by marriage”.

And, lastly, there was the greatest force of all driving the people away—poverty and destitution. As we know, there are various degrees of this—from the starving out of work labourer of the 1840s and 1850s to the farmer’s younger son who cannot get a job at home.

Labourers have always formed the bulk of Irish emigration. For instance between 1851 and 1855, from the whole of Ireland there were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Farmers&quot;</td>
<td>12,258</td>
<td>1,714</td>
<td>1,012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Farm Labourers&quot;</td>
<td>220,188</td>
<td>119,565</td>
<td>16,109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Non-Agricultural Labourers&quot;</td>
<td>15,834</td>
<td>2,749</td>
<td>525</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>236,022</td>
<td>122,314</td>
<td>16,624</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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This was especially true of the period of the Great Famine and immediately after, when the farmers, who possessed some little reserves, survived, while the labourers, who had nothing, perished or fled the country. This is borne out for Co. Clare by housing statistics. In the period 1841 to 1851, the Famine decade, the number of farmhouses (of two to four rooms) in Co. Clare actually increased in number, while the “one roomed cabins” or bothans went down from nearly 23,000 in 1841 to about 5,000 in 1851, a loss of over three-quarters of all such dwellings.

Where did they go and what did they do there? In the year 1852, a year of especially heavy emigration, Clare people sailed from these ports:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dublin</td>
<td>5,325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limerick/Kilrush</td>
<td>2,724</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cork</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galway</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belfast</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dundalk</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But the greatest number sailed from Liverpool, as many people who had rushed to Britain went on to the U.S.A.

In the earlier days, they brought their own food. An account of 1825 tells us that provisions for the Atlantic voyage usually taken by an emigrant consisted of 224 lb potatoes, 60 lb oatmeal and oatsbread, 20 lb bacon, 7 lb molasses, 7 lb butter, and 10 dozen eggs.

Water was supplied by the ship. Usually they took a little tea or coffee and whiskey as well. The fare then was £2 to £3 per person. Later the food was supplied by the ship, and the fare increased accordingly.

As we have seen, most of the assisted emigration was to the British Colonies, chiefly to Canada and Australia. The purpose of this was to settle a strong population on the land, and the emigrants were given or leased tracts of land to turn into farms. Hence, in the first place, farmers who knew their work were induced to go to those areas, and, in the second place, when they go there, they continued to be farmers. For this reason you can find today, in Canada and in Australia especially, whole tracts of countryside peopled by farmers of Irish blood, and recent studies have shown that many traditional skills and customs were taken by them from Ireland and can still be observed among their descendants (see, for example, J. Mannion, *Irish Settlements in Eastern Canada*, Toronto 1974).

Irish fishermen, too, went to Canada, and especially to Newfoundland in the early part of the nineteenth century; there still are Irish fishing villages in Newfoundland, while a small colony of Irish people set up a carraigín moss enterprise on the New England coast (see *Éire—Ireland*, 1 (1966), 7-17, “The Irish Mossers of Sciatute” by G. E. Ryan).

Many Irish emigrants went to the gold fields, most of these, however, had already arrived in America or Australia before the gold rushes began. Some few, as we saw, were recruited in Ireland by mining companies. Most of these came from areas like Wicklow, where many mines closed down in the nineteenth century, but in the list of diggers’ casualties at the battle between the gold workers and the government forces at Eureka, Victoria, on 3 December 1854, seven men out of thirty-four of all nationalities were from County Clare: these were John Hynes, John Diamond, Thaddeus Moore (killed) and Michael O’Neill, Thomas Callanan, Patrick Callanan and Dennis Dynan (wounded).
Surprise has been expressed from time to time at the fact that in the United States the Irish immigrants stayed in the cities and did not settle on the land as farmers. Actually there had been a good deal of Irish settlement upon the land in the eighteenth century, in the Carolinas, Ohio, West Virginia and Kentucky, but very little from the mass emigration of the middle nineteenth century.

The reason is simple—very few of these latter were farmers. Most of them were labourers who had no experience of holding land or of the security which a good farm gives to its owner. They had no other idea than to get work, and the work was in the towns, in industry, in building works, in public works such as roads, harbours and railways, or as dock labourers, firemen, policemen, railway workers and so on.

It is remarked that there was much less agricultural work. This was certainly the case in Canada, from which thousands of Irish labourers crossed into the United States to find employment and better wages.

In this way many Irish people became farmers in Canada and Australia, but comparatively few in the United States.

From all Ireland, in the year 1840 there went:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To Canada</td>
<td>23,935</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To U.S.A.</td>
<td>4,087</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Australia</td>
<td>538</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To the West Indies</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Famine and its panic exodus changed this entirely, and by 1850, the numbers were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To U.S.A.</td>
<td>180,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Canada</td>
<td>24,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Australia</td>
<td>4,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This tendency continued until the late 1920s, after which the main stream of emigration was to Great Britain.

Clare people followed this pattern, too. In 1894, for instance,

1,929 Clare people went to U.S.A.
39 to Australia
9 to New Zealand
5 to Canada.

And in 1898

1,017 to U.S.A.
50 to Australia
1 to New Zealand
8 to Canada.

These figures are taken from the census returns for the years in question. Unfortunately such accurate figures are not always available; they are lacking for the earlier decades of the nineteenth century, and are not broken down in detail for the post-1911 census reports. Accurate figures for the whole period are thus not to be had; nevertheless the general trend is discernable, and a close estimation reveals that over the past two hundred years between 360,000 and 400,000 people have left County Clare to live in exile. In 1841 the population of Clare was 286,394 persons. Now it is
less than 74,000, or only a quarter of what it was a hundred and thirty-five years ago. This loss is almost entirely due to emigration, and we can now say that people of Clare blood abroad outnumber those at home by at least three to one, and that the proud old family names of Clare—O’Brien, MacMahon and MacNamara, O’Davoren and O’Loughlin, O’Gorman, O’Hehir and Considine are now more numerous in London and Liverpool, New York and Chicago, Melbourne and Sydney, than in the county of their origin.
Female Emigration to New South Wales.

Committee:
William Crawford, Esq., Chairman.
John Hume, Esq.
James Macpherson, Esq.
James Millar, Esq.
Charles Friend, A.N., His Majesty's Agent for Emigration.

The Committee for promoting the Emigration of Single Women, His Majesty's Secretary of State for the Colonies.

A Superior First Class Ship of 500 Tons, Cork, on Thursday, the 26th of May next, to Sydney. A Free Passage.

Emigrant poster, advertising free passage from Cork to Sydney, Australia, for single females between 15 and 30 years of age; its date appears to be 1837. [Photo: Mitchell Library, Maquarie St., Sydney]