

# Emigration from the Workhouses of the Mid-West, 1848-1859: An Overview



When the British Government enacted the Poor Law in 1838 and opted to build a whole series of workhouses for the relief of Ireland's destitute poor, they ended a long controversy about the best way to handle Ireland's 'redundant population'. Those who had advocated emigration as a better solution were slightly mollified by the retention of emigration as an option within the new framework. There was a clause in the Poor Law (Ireland) Act which gave the commissioners (i.e. the central authority of the Poor Law) 'power to raise a fund for the purposes of emigration, in districts where there is an actual excess of population'.<sup>(1)</sup> The proof that such an excess existed in a given locality would be the inability of the workhouse to cope - 'the workhouse being full and unequal to relieve the pressure of destitution'. Such emigration was a local decision, dependent on a special meeting of the ratepayers (since it was they who would have to foot the bill). It was restricted to British colonies, and only people who had been more than three months in the workhouse were eligible. Until the Great Famine came along, however, workhouses were never overcrowded; so no one thought of emigrating any of the inmates. Even during the famine, most of those responsible for administration at local level - the Poor Law guardians - thought that as it receded the workhouse population would automatically stabilise, but that is not what happened. Workhouse populations generally continued to grow right up to and including 1851.<sup>(2)</sup>

## Emigration - Legal Provisions

Meanwhile, the government was forced to turn its thoughts to emigration once more, and, while many good ideas foundered on the rock of who should pay for them, legislative provision for emigration developed a bit as a consequence. In 1849, the provision which allowed the guardians to incur expenditure for emigration from the workhouse to a British colony was extended to include the USA. One finds the three month provision sometimes extended to a year, to prevent the more desperate from regarding that as a fair price to pay for the privilege of emigrating. At a time when emigrants had turned into refugees, those in authority were afraid the workhouses would become little more than emigration depots unless regulations

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were tightened up. The same year, William Monsell, M.P. for Limerick and future Lord Emly, succeeded in obtaining acceptance for his proposal that unions could borrow for emigration purposes. That and the removal of the ban on emigration to the U.S.A. brought about an immediate increase in the use of emigration to relieve pressure on the workhouses.

Within the system, therefore, there were two vehicles for emigrating workhouse inmates: borrowing the required funds and charging emigration on the rates. In practice, unions would appear to have used the former method for large scale clearances, the latter for helping individuals who had secured their passage from another source.

## Emigration of Female Orphans to Australia

What really gave workhouse emigration the impetus it needed, however, was the influence of schemes under which people obtained free passage to Australia. The Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners in London had been running such schemes since 1832 for various categories of people they regarded as desirable for the development of Australia. Most such schemes had no connection with the workhouse, but one in particular served as an important introduction to the subject for most unions. This was their scheme to send some 4,000 Irish girls to Australia in the 1848-50 period.

This scheme sought primarily to redress the imbalance of the sexes in Australia. The commissioners found that the preponderance of males among those availing of assisted emigration in the past (as well as among the numerous convicts transported thither) had caused an imbalance among the sexes - a shortage of women - in Australia. Their proposal was to emigrate 14,000 female orphans, aged 14-18, from Britain and Ireland, 10,000 and 4,000 respectively, in the years 1848-50. The connection with the workhouses was accidental; the famine had insured that Ireland's workhouses suffered from the opposite imbalance to Australia; so, it was the easiest way to recruit the required quota of girls. Thus it was that Poor Law guardians around the country were made aware of the possibilities offered by

emigration to relieve the pressure on the ratepayers. That it afforded relief to thousands of girls was a byproduct, or side effect. As the reader can see from the attached table, the mid-west counties contributed 810 of the national total of 4,175.<sup>(3)</sup>

Those responsible for this scheme were sensitive to the special features of the undertaking and proceeded with great propriety. They wanted healthy, well-behaved, literate and industrious candidates, and took steps to ensure these standards were observed in selection and maintained later. Thus, an officer was chosen to approve the suitability of candidates proposed by the local boards of guardians. Each applicant was medically examined and vaccinated. Standards were set in food and clothing for the 100 day voyage. Each ship was to have a doctor, a matron and a teacher on board. 'Moral religious superintendence' was stressed, to such an extent that ships chartered to carry the orphans were not allowed to take male passengers.

Food and clothing were issued as follows:

Clothing: Six shifts, two flannel petticoats, six pairs of stockings, two pairs of shoes, two gowns, one of which was to be of some warm material. The weekly food ration was: 4lbs of biscuit, 1 lb. of beef, 1½ lbs. of pork, 1 lb. of preserved meat, 2 lbs. of flour, 6 lbs. of suet, 1 lb. of peas, ½ lb. of preserved potatoes, 1 oz. of tea, 1½ oz. of coffee, ¾ lb. of sugar, 6 oz. of butter, ½ pint of vinegar, ½ oz. of mustard, 2 oz. of salt. The daily ration of water was six pints.

The scheme was very attractive to the guardians. They were responsible only for the girls' clothing and transport to Plymouth. The Colonial Office provided free passage from there to Australia, good care during the voyage, and work on arrival.

The same care which was exercised in selecting suitable emigrants was exercised in protecting them from exploitation on arrival. The governor was directed to find them suitable employers, to whom they were apprenticed at the going rate. Each colony was to have a committee, representing the Catholic and Anglican bishops as well as the State, to ensure fair treatment. The apprentices were not paid wages directly. A set amount was deducted for clothing and other expenses and the balance was set aside in a fund. At the end of their contract, or on marrying,

the fund was handed over, provided they had behaved themselves. If they absconded or misbehaved, they could forfeit the lot.

By and large, and allowing for human frailty on both sides of the equation, the scheme worked well and the Irish filled their quota without difficulty. Between May 1848 and April 1850, 11 ships took 2,253 orphans to Sydney, 6 ships took 1,255 to Port Philip (Melbourne), and 3 ships took 606 to South Australia. The scheme had contributed in no small measure to dispelling the bad image of coffin ship emigration created during the earlier mass exodus and the equally bad image abroad caused by previous experiments in the emigration of destitute children. Guardians in many unions found that it gave them both the precedent and practice they required to give more serious thought to emigration as a way out of their troubles.

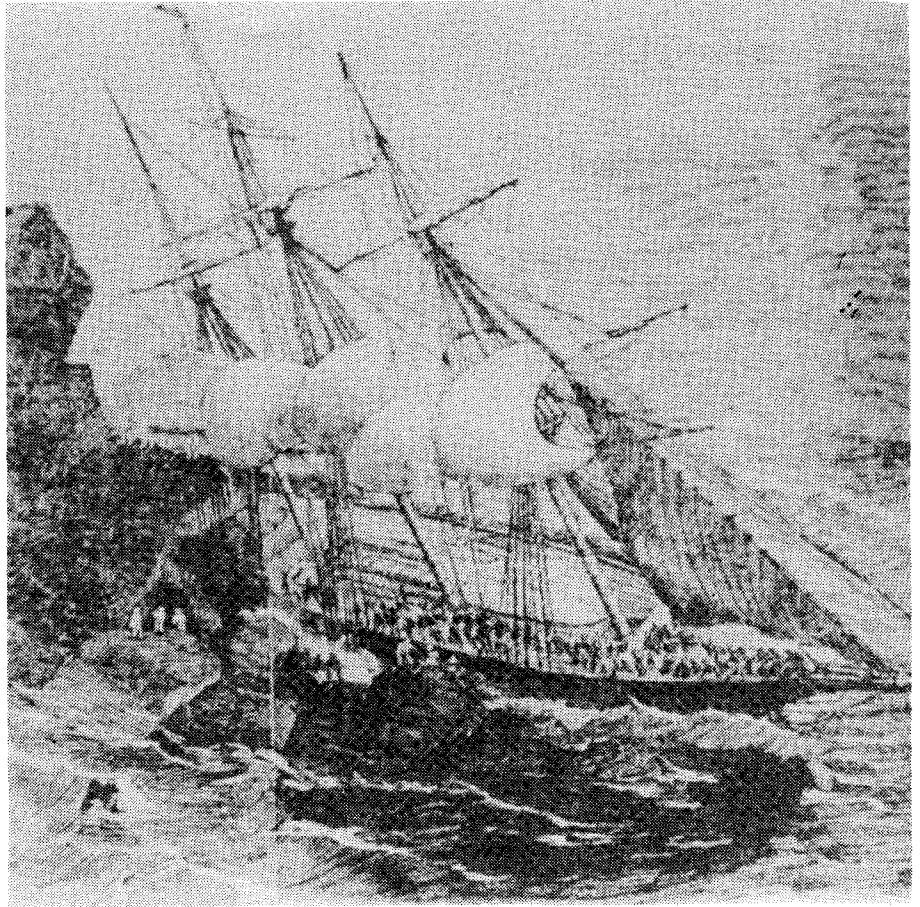
Once local consciousness of the possibilities of emigration had been aroused, the Poor Law Commissioners (PLC) in Dublin decided to monitor events. They published annual returns of the emigration which took place from each workhouse from 1849 to 1859, by which time life had returned to a more normal rhythm and emigration was not worth monitoring any more. The attached chart of annual emigration from the mid-western unions shows two clearly distinguishable types of emigration going on simultaneously, the 'clearances' and medium group emigration, on the one hand, and the annual trickle of those who asked to go, on the other. All told, the mid-west emigrated 6,875 people; three counties accounted for 25% of the national total. If we break this number down by destination, Canada tops the table with some 3,800, the U.S.A. received about 1,600 and Australia 1,381. A handful of individuals ended up in exotic destinations like India, Africa, New Zealand, and the Argentine.

Let us now go beyond the annual reports and see what light the minute books of the weekly meetings of the boards of guardians throw on the statistics.

### Clearances

What I call 'clearances' were explicitly designed to enable the unions employing that method to return to normal. During the famine, they had stretched their resources to the limit, and sometimes beyond, renting additional premises as auxiliary workhouses to cope with the huge, incessant demand of the destitute. That meant additional staff as well. It all added up to increased overheads at a time when the rates which supported the system had become almost impossible to collect. Tired of waiting for the tide to recede in its own good time, some unions borrowed a large sum and got rid of their problem in one fell swoop.

In Co. Limerick, Newcastle Union set the pace with a staggering exodus of 567 in 1852, while Rathkeale needed to lose



The 'Tayleur' was wrecked off the rocks of Lambay Island, in January, 1854.

226 and Limerick itself sent 103 in 1850 and 444 in 1853. Kilmallock's clearance was less noticeable, being spread over three years.<sup>(4)</sup> Croom and Glin had no crisis, but then they did not come into existence as unions in their own right until 1850.

In Clare, the hard-hit Scariff Union<sup>(5)</sup> led the way with 496 in 1851, followed by Kilrush's 434 and Ennistymon's 286.<sup>(6)</sup> Ennis seems to have coped better, and one is surprised to see Killadysert having to get rid of 153, when (like Corofin and Tulla) it came into being only after the famine.

With the exception of Nenagh Union, whose normalising exercise exceeded 400 and whose emigration over the ten years in question almost equalled that of the rest of the county put together, Tipperary unions seem to have kept their heads.<sup>(7)</sup>

### Care of emigrants

The large numbers involved overall might give the impression that people were herded off like cattle in an uncaring way. While I cannot claim to be familiar with the details of every scheme, those I have seen would suggest that such an impression would be quite mistaken. In the first place, the large numbers just quoted were not sent as one group. Those who left Limerick in 1849 (for New York) and in 1854 (for Quebec) were divided up among four different ships each time. The second group was vetted by a subcommittee of the guardians, who took a leaf out of the earlier Australian scheme and organised

every aspect of so large an undertaking with exemplary care and the same attention to the detail of clothing and food requirements as found in the orphans to Australia scheme. Nenagh Union had heated arguments over the merits of what they were doing and went so far as to send the master of the workhouse and two guardians to inspect the first ship they had chartered. Both unions funded their undertakings by borrowing; Limerick supplemented this with a grant from the Rate-in-aid Fund.<sup>(8)</sup>

### Provision on landing

Nor was the fate of the emigrants once they reached the shores of Canada (the destination of most large groups) left to chance. The money expended on group emigration included 'landing money'. This was a headage payment sent to an agent in Quebec to cover the expense of travelling from port of arrival to the destination at which the agent had procured them employment. They were directed up the St. Lawrence River to Montreal or Upper Canada, depending on what employment the agent could find.

### Those who asked to go

Besides the larger groups, the table shows a steady stream of smaller numbers - from one to twenty something. Here, the record expands considerably on the statistical return. Each person or group of persons requesting aid to emigrate, usually justified their request by reference to a ticket

or money received from relations in America or Canada. If the guardians approved, the sanction of the Poor Law Commissioners in Dublin was sought. A physical examination and a quick check on the circumstances followed, and, within a week or two, a sealed order came down from the PLC authorising or denying the aid requested. Payment and departure followed soon afterwards.

Depending on how conscientious the clerk was in recording the detail of all these steps in the minutes, we can learn the names, ages, destination, and the electoral divisions to which each person belonged. Sometimes, even a good story emerges, where someone is trying to get away with hood-winking the guardians or the guardians themselves get their lines crossed. And, in both small group and large group emigration, there is always the chance of finding out the name of the ship they sailed on or of getting a date and port of departure which will give the researcher interested in a particular family a basis on which to proceed further.

While it is true that some of the individual or family size groups were sometimes people helped to emigrate by considerate locals or entitled to a free passage to Australia as dependents of ex-convicts, the vast majority of them were sent for by relations in America. One feels

present at the completion of a family emigration which started earlier, and sometimes the clerk is good enough to tell us the nature of the relationship between the benefactor and beneficiary. All too frequently, the former must have left as little more than famine refugees; so, one shares in their joy as, having made good, they now fulfil sacred promises to bring out loved ones left behind.

Workhouse emigration, both largescale and small, set standards which benefitted more than the people directly involved. Together with the beneficial influence of the Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners, and the substantive contribution made by Sir Stephen de Vere of Curragh Chase in the case of emigration to Canada, it played its part in an overall process which resulted in greatly improved minimum standards of comfort and safety in travel for those who could not afford more in the 1850s.

REFERENCES

1. Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners, 1840, p. 33.
2. Helen Burke, *The People and the Poor Law in 19th Century Ireland*, p. 128.
3. Please note that those unions with a zero contribution on the chart did not come into being until 1850.
4. For a detailed account of emigration from

the Limerick and Kilmallock workhouses, see my articles in *Irish Ancestor*, 1982, pp. 83-94, and in the *Lough Gur Historical Society Journal*, 1987, pp. 1-8.

5. See M. O'Gorman, *A Pride of Paper Tigers. A History of the Great Hunger in the Scariff Union from 1839 to 1853*, East Clare Heritage Centre, 1994.
6. Emigration from these two workhouses has been dealt with in articles by the present author in *The Other Clare*, 1983, pp. 38-41 and *Irish Ancestor*, 1981, pp. 79-82 respectively.
7. That much is clear from the chart. I have dealt in detail with the emigration from three of the Co. Tipperary workhouses as follows: Nenagh in *Irish Ancestor*, 1985, pp. 10-18; Thurles in *Tipperary Historical Journal*, 1993, pp. 82-87; Tipperary in *Tipperary Historical Journal*, 1994, pp. 105-109.
8. This little used mechanism was not designed primarily for emigration, but for emergency support to poorer unions. As the name suggests it was a central fund into which all Unions contributed out of rates for the help of poorer unions. Limerick's grant sounds like a compromise: they had been offered a grant towards assisted emigration to Australia and when that fell through they had to be compensated, sweetened, to induce them accept the change of destination to Quebec.

EMIGRATION FROM LIMERICK, CLARE AND TIPPERARY UNIONS  
1848-1859

Union	Orph.	49-50	50-51	51-52	52-53	53-54	54-55	55-56	56-57	57-58	58-59	Totals
Croom	0	0	0	5	220	33	19	10	15	2	2	306
Glin	0	0	0	0	0	0	18	5	0	2	0	25
Kilmallock	30	3	14	3	97	86	8	17	8	3	2	299
Limerick	74	103	0	4	38	40	444	16	22	34	17	792
Newcastle	56	0	0	0	567	26	63	10	17	9	5	753
Rathkeale	60	0	0	0	226	0	56	8	11	5	3	369
<b>Totals</b>	<b>220</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>1148</b>	<b>185</b>	<b>608</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>2544</b>
Corofin	0	0	0	20	0	0	3	0	3	0	0	26
Ennis	40	17	5	63	19	5	30	6	1	7	1	194
Ennistymon	23	0	0	426	15	23	50	5	12	4	5	563
Killadysart	0	0	4	32	153	21	43	27	30	6	8	324
Kilrush	30	10	0	434	41	33	56	31	15	15	3	668
Scariff	20	0	0	496	2	23	39	16	10	5	6	517
Tulla	0	0	0	35	42	23	12	2	5	4	1	124
<b>Totals</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>1506</b>	<b>272</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>233</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>2516</b>
B'kane	0	0	0	2	26	6	28	8	10	0	7	87
Carrick	23	0	0	5	2	5	24	0	0	2	2	63
Cashel	70	2	6	13	37	42	72	22	14	13	2	293
Clogheen	33	0	0	0	1	0	10	0	0	0	0	44
Clonmel	59	0	0	0	0	0	61	0	1	75	36	232
Nenagh	85	8	17	0	432	66	32	37	42	12	5	736
Roscrea	90	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	90
Thurles	30	0	0	0	14	5	33	8	2	7	4	103
Tipperary	87	3	7	5	16	24	13	5	1	3	3	167
<b>Totals</b>	<b>477</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>528</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>273</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>1815</b>
<b>Reg. totals</b>	<b>810</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>1571</b>	<b>1948</b>	<b>461</b>	<b>1114</b>	<b>233</b>	<b>219</b>	<b>208</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>6875</b>
<b>Nat. Totals</b>	<b>4175</b>	<b>871</b>	<b>4721</b>	<b>4386</b>	<b>3825</b>	<b>2601</b>	<b>3794</b>	<b>830</b>	<b>802</b>	<b>829</b>	<b>487</b>	<b>27321</b>