Emigration from Ireland to the United States and Canada had been steadily increasing in the years before the Famine as cheap passages became available on the outward voyages of ships which carried timber from the New World. Emigration to Australia did not take place on as wide a scale as that to North America, but during the years of the Famine, some landlords assisted their tenants to go there. In addition, the government organised the settlement in Australia of orphaned children from Irish workhouses. Although the voyage to Australia was longer, and considerably more expensive, than that to North America, emigration there was better organised and, compared with conditions on board the infamous "coffin ships" which sailed across the Atlantic, conditions on board were reasonably good.

In 1844, approximately 68,000 people emigrated from Ireland, mainly to North America. The number of people who left in 1846 rose to 116,000 and in 1847 nearly a quarter of a million people emigrated. This level was sustained until well into the next decade and, altogether, approximately two million people emigrated between 1845 and 1855.

The letter reproduced below was sent to Lord Montague, one of the more enlightened Irish landlords, by a tenant whose passage to Australia he had paid. It tells how he and other tenants who had emigrated were faring in their new home. Lord Montague was a liberal peer who was Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1835 to 1839. As well as helping tenants from his own estate at Shanagolden to emigrate, he campaigned vigorously in favour of government-assisted emigration to the colonies as a remedy for Ireland's problems of poverty and overpopulation. This letter was printed in circular form as part of the effort to encourage emigration.

Melbourne, Port Phillip,
20th of March, 1848.

My Lord,

I, as in duty bound, feel called upon to inform your Lordship how the Emigrants who obtained a passage through your lordship's intercession are situated. All the Girls are employed in the Town of Melbourne, at the rate of Twenty-five to Twenty-six pounds per annum; they are all in respectable places. Thos. Sheahan is employed in the Town adjoining, attending Bricklayers at Four Shillings and Six pence per day. John Enraght on Perth Road, a Surveyor, has as much time. I except, my lord, to be able to remit some money to your lordship in recom pense for the expenses incurred on my and my sisters' account by your lordship, as well as some relief to me, my lord, the best of which is obtained at Three half-pence to Two-pence per lb.

I am, My Lord, with profound veneration,

Your Lordship's most devoted Servant,

P. Danaher,

P.S. My Sisters also, my lord, beg leave to return their most sincere thanks to your Lordship and Lady Montague.

John Planagan and Wife are both employed by a man of the name of Murphy, a Brewer, about twelve miles out in the Country, wages Fifty pounds per annum.

(From Correspondence MS 13400 (2))