



Limerick and Australia

'All social problems of all countries can be got rid of by extirpating the inhabitants'. George Bernard Shaw.



ohn Pilger, in his book *Heroes*, has written that 'no nation was born under so cruel a star' as Australia. He went on to brutally describe how its colonisation was carried out. Here is what he wrote about the transportation of the convicts:

Six of them shared a berth of less than six feet square where they lay 'squeezed up against one another, wallowing in each other's filth, sea-sickness and vermin, for the entire length of the voyage. If one wished to turn over in the cramped space, he had to wake the others so that all could roll over in their chains at the same time'. They were fed like pigs, with potato peelings and crusts thrown at them, usually in darkness when the ship was rolling, and if they looked askance, let alone complained, the cruelties visited upon them included whipping with a knotted 'cat', gang-rape for the women and the denial of sustenance until the point of death for children already half-starved. And the final cruelty, which was the twist in those lives resilient enough to survive such a purgatory, was that worse awaited them in the 'weird and wrong' place.

Limerick was involved in the peopling of that 'weird and wrong' place almost from the start. On the morning of 26th February, 1791, the Dublin newspaper, the *Freeman's Journal*, carried the news that 'the jailer from Limerick set off for Cork with a number of prisoners, where a large transport is preparing to carry all the convicts in the Kingdom to Botany Bay'. When the prisoners assembled in Cork they were put on board the *Queen*, and a receipt dated 11th April, 1791, signed by the naval agent, was given to the mayor and sheriff of the city of Cork. The Indent list, giving details of the transportees, did not reach Sydney until eight years after the arrival of the convicts.

About a quarter of the convicts transported to Australia, nearly 30,000 men and 9,000 women, came directly from Ireland. Two notable Limerick men feature in the early records. Tom Langan, a local United Irishmen's leader from the parish of Glin, Co. Limerick, was given the death sentence. On the intervention of the Knight of Glin, this sentence was mitigated to seven years in Botany Bay. Langan returned to Glin in 1817, again because of the influence of the Knight.

A Limerick city merchant, Francis Arthur, a member of the distinguished family of doctors and merchants, was imprisoned and awaited transportation to Australia. He was also fined £5,000 for alleged involvement in the rising of the United Irishmen. He successfully petitioned Dublin Castle on the grounds that he had been convicted on the false evidence of a perjurer. Others, however, were not so fortunate. John Pilger has described how many of the convicts, including his great-great-grandfather, were trapped by the forces ranged against them:

To be guilty of objecting to enforced degradation and starvation in Ireland during the first half of the nineteenth century was to be a political criminal. Even before the potato famine, nowhere else in what the Victorians called 'the civilised world' did such uncivilised conditions exist. Absentee English landlords controlled the Irish peasantry; and those Irish people who could not afford a tenancy, or were evicted, were forced to live in holes in the bog: caves of mud without beds or chairs ... Food was dried potatoes, and death and disease were on a scale scarcely believable. If you were convicted, or if your crops failed, the Redcoats would arrive to drag away your animals, your last means of survival, and any recalcitrance would lead inevitably to a bloody arrest.

The free Irish emigrants in the period 1788 to 1888 outnumbered the transported convicts by nine to one. The counties of Tipperary, Clare and Limerick sent the most free emigrants to Australia.

Doonskerdeen, a townland on the road between Askeaton and Foynes, on the Shannon Estuary, was part of the estate of Lord Monteagle. Observing the devastation of the Famine at first hand, he asked the people of Doonskerdeen: 'What is to be done with this wretched multitude?' The answer was simple – emigrate. But many of Monteagle's tenants were too poor to pay even the regulation one pound government-assisted passage fare to Australia.

Monteagle advanced the money, and many took ship for Melbourne. Among the arrivals on the *Lady Peel* in 1848 was Patrick Danaher, who wrote back to Lord Monteagle that all the girls had found employment in 'respectable places' at twenty six pounds a year. Thomas Sheahan was bricklaying at four shillings and sixpence a day. Monteagle had this letter printed for general circulation to help convince other tenants that they would be better off out of his estate and out of the country.

But these are only a few scattered references to the many and varied links between Limerick and Australia. From people like Sir Richard Bourke and Sir Terence Aubrey Murray to the Widow Mulcahy and Trooper Thomas Downey, Limerick has made a major, if little known, contribution to the building of Australia over the past two centuries. This special Australian edition of the Old Limerick Journal is an attempt to explore that contribution.