Bettering their condition: Female emigration to Australia before the Great Famine

by Liz Rushen

In an era when we have come to celebrate the Irish Diaspora, it is fitting to look at a group of women and girls who emigrated to Australia in the decade before the Great Famine. Sarah Jane Lyttleton, an 18-year-old housemaid from Limerick, was one of nearly 300 women and girls who emigrated from Cork on the James Pattison in October 1855. They were among the first of thousands of Irish women who made the great voyage to the Southern Hemisphere in the nineteenth century, contributing to the development of the colonies as a free and enterprising community.

The women were taking part in the first scheme for single women to migrate to Australia in response to the urgent need for more women in the colonies. Commencing with the sailing of the Red Rover from Cork in 1832, in the next four years several ships, chartered specifically for female emigration, departed Cork for Sydney. Single women and widows were encouraged to take up this opportunity for a new life by promotional literature which represented the colonies as places of enhanced employment possibilities and viable marriage opportunities [Fig. 1]. The emigration of the women from Limerick was overseen by the Limerick Friends' Emigrant Society (LEFS), working in conjunction with Emigration Agent Richard Lynch RN. The society was founded in January 1833 by several enlightened landowners and concerned Freemen of the City of Limerick principally to assist emigrants to North America and Canada [Fig. 2]. These advocates of state-assisted emigration saw the removal of Ireland's 'excess of population' as a partial and vital remedy for Irish poverty. They had witnessed many intending emigrants arrive at the port of Limerick without sufficient information, where many met with unscrupulous agents, taking overcrowded and poorly resourced ships across the Atlantic, often robbed before they left the port and returning home disappointed. Behind the formation of the Society were several inter-connected and wealthy families whose names are synonymous with paternal benevolence: De Vere, Mannsell, O'Brien, Gabhent, Spring Rice, among others. The inaugural Chairmen of the

LEFS were Henry Mannsell and Samuel Dickson; the Secretaries were William Smith O'Brien and Rev. M. Keating and the Treasurer D.E.G. Mahony.

The involvement of Smith O'Brien was critical to the establishment of the Society [Fig. 3]. Better known as the leader of the 1848 Rebellion at Ballyharry and consequent exile to Van Diemen's Land, Smith O'Brien encouraged Irish to emigrate when economic conditions were difficult, including tenants on his own and his father's estates and became a model for his daughter, Charlotte, who received recognition later in the century for her assistance to Irish women emigrants to America. As Smith O'Brien said in a speech to the British Parliament in 1840, it is expedient that a free passage to those colonies which offer the greatest rewards to industry should be provided by the State for such of the labouring classes as are disposed to emigrate.

Emigration Agent Richard Lynch RN was instrumental in ensuring a safe passage for intending emigrants from the Port of Limerick [Fig. 4]. With emigration from Irish ports on the increase, the authorities realised that they needed to employ emigration officers to superintend proceedings on the ground and ensure that ship-owners were complying with the regulations. On 1 April 1834, Emigration Agents (all Royal Navy officers on half pay) were appointed at the ports of Limerick, Dublin, Belfast and Cork to inspect emigrant ships and supervise the proceedings for emigration as well as providing information and assistance to intending emigrants. As Smith O'Brien wrote to the Colonial Office, 'It is of the greatest importance to our society to know to whom we can safely recommend emigrants, so as to protect them from the fraudulent claims which are practised to obtain money.'

When the Mayor of Cork was advised that Lieutenant Charles Friend had been appointed the Agent for Emigration at Cork, he immediately provided an office of two furnished rooms for his use. However, when the Mayor of Limerick was advised that Lieutenant Richard Lynch had been appointed the Agent at that port, he jeered at providing suitable office accommodation. He was subsequently informed that the appointment was made 'at the urgent request of several influential gentlemen of the town of Limerick' and soon suitable premises were found at 38 William Street.

By the 1830s, the number of unemployed and destitute women in Ireland was of particular concern to the authorities and philanthropic citizens. The major issue in encouraging emigration to the Australian colonies was where female labour was so short, was the cost of the voyage. For most emigrants, even the minimum payment for a passage to Australia was out of reach. Intending emigrants approached their local parishes for support and the lower cost of passages to North America meant parishes preferred to encourage migration to this closer destination. In the five months between 1 January and 25 May 1831, over 3,100 emigrants left from Cork bound for America.

A way needed to be devised to enable women to undertake the longer voyage to the antipodes so the government determined to charter ships specifically for female emigration. This was an innovation and a gamble. Shiploads of convicts had been sent to the colonies since the 1760s and small groups of individuals and families had taken up the opportunity to migrate, but no ships of free women, 'bride ships' as they came to be known, had been tried before.

The plan to charter ships for female emigration was complex and the processes were trialled by the embarkation of the Red Rover from Cork to Sydney in 1832. This was so successful that another four ships followed in subsequent years, resulting in 1,200 Irishwomen leaving their native shores for new homes in the Australian colonies.

The members of the Limerick Emigrants' Friends' Society were actively engaged in assisting these women to migrate. Their secretaries communicated regularly with Sir William Goschen in Dublin and the Colonial Office in London regarding emigration. The Colonial Office received a request from the citizens of Limerick requesting the embarkation of a
Female Emigration to New South Wales.

Committee:

William Crawford, Esq., Chairman,

Very Rev. Thomas Mathew,

Rev. T. Henry,

Rev. conj. Quaile.

Liev. Charles Friend, R.N., His Majesty's Agent for Emigration.

The Committee for the Promotion of Emigration of Single Women.

From Ireland to Australia, under the Authority of His Majesty's Secretary of State for the Colonies.

A Superior First Class Ship of 500 Tons, carrying an experienced Surgeon and Matron of their respective Religious Opinions, to ensure the Conduct and Protection of the Young Women during the Voyage, will sail from Cork, on Thursday, the 26th of May next,

Beyond which day she will no longer be accounted for.

Sydney.

His Majesty's Government, in order to encourage the Emigration of Single Women and Widows of Good Character to the Australian Colonies, have prepared the following:

A FREE PASSAGE

To each SINGLE FEMALE, between 15 and 30 years of age, who, on the Committee may consider likely to conduct themselves creditably and satisfactorily in the Colonies.

All arrangements received by the Committee from NEW SOUTH WALES, respecting the Female whom they shall name in the ships, wanting on that account, are most satisfactory and encouraging—

a well-bred young woman who can converse in a language and who will be prepared, ready to be received by the officers and passengers of the ship, and to conduct herself in a manner calculated to promote the highest interests of the Colony.

To each such FEMALE, a passage in the First Class of the ship, and a free allowance of provisions during the voyage.

Married Agricultural Labourers, Ploughmen, Carpenters, Millers, and Farmers, and also household servants, particularly those who are capable of being employed in the cultivation of the soil, may be admitted on the same terms, and the same allowance of provisions during the voyage, as for Single Women.

To each such FEMALE, a passage in the First Class of the ship, and a free allowance of provisions during the voyage.

A By Authority:

By Order of the Committee for the Promotion of Emigration of Single Women to the Australian Colonies, in the Person of His Majesty's Agent for Emigration, at Cork.

J. DENHAM PINNOCK, Esq., His Majesty's Agent-General for Emigration.

Under Cover to the SECRETARY OF STATE, Colonial Department.

Fig. 1 – Emigrant poster

female emigrant ship directly from their port, but, following the loss of the ships Astra and James, and the difficulties of navigating the dangerous, as well as tedious, navigation of the Shannon, they were advised that the women would have to travel to Cork to embark the female emigration ships.

Nevertheless, the authorities at Limerick were eager to encourage local women to participate in this opportunity to emigrate under the government bounty of a free passage. But the cost for each woman was still high as some additional capital was required to get to the port of embarkation and to provide an outfit for the voyage. These concerns were alleviated when the Agent-General for Emigration from Ireland James D. Pinnock advised the LEPS that he had the authority to offer each approved woman £1 towards her outfit.

The James Pattison, which sailed from Cork on 31 October 1835, contained the largest contingent of women from Limerick of all these female emigrant ships from Cork. The selection criteria demanded that the women should be healthy, skilled and willing to migrate. The sixty approved women from Limerick were selected by
LIMERICK
EMIGRANTS' FRIEND SOCIETY.

AT a GENERAL MEETING of the LIMERICK EMIGRANTS' FRIEND SOCIETY, held pursuant to Public Notice, at the Board Room of the Commissioners of the Limerick Bridge, on WEDNESDAY, the 16th JANUARY, 1833—

The Honorable J. P. VEREKER, Mayor, in the Chair,
The following Resolutions were unanimously adopted:

1.—Resolved—that a Society be formed to be called "The Limerick Emigrants' Friend Society."  
Proposed by W. S. O'Brien, Esq. seconded by Henry Mainsell, Esq.

2.—Resolved—that the objects of the Society be to disseminate through this District of Ireland, correct information upon the actual state of the Colonies, for the benefit of such persons as are desirous to emigrate, by the sale of cheap works upon emigration. To collect, by correspondence, with the Colonies, the Colonial Office, and the great Colonial Companies, the most recent intelligence as to the condition, resources, and demand for Labour of each particular Settlement; and to publish in a cheap form the results of such correspondence. To procure for Emigrants from the Port of Limerick the advantages of whatever assistance the Government may, from time to time, be disposed to afford; and in general, to use every means to obviate the misery and disappointment which is frequently experienced by persons emigrating in total ignorance of the countries to which they direct their enterprise.

Proposed by Sir Aubrey De Vere, Bart. seconded by Captain Hare.

3.—Resolved—that every person subscribing not less than Ten Shillings annually, shall be considered a Member of the Society.

Proposed by Massey Byrne, Esq. seconded by Arthur Evans, Esq.

4.—Resolved—that an Annual Meeting of the Society be held in the month of January every Year, when a Statement of the Receipts and Expenditure, and a Report of the Proceedings during the Year, shall be laid before the Members.

Originally of Palatine extraction, the sisters were from Bellingrane, Co. Limerick. Jane Ruckle (Ruttle) aged 17 and 14 years old Frances were the daughters of Philip Ruckle and Mary (nee Delmage). Also on board was Ellen Delmage, their cousin. The girls were from a devout Methodist family centred in Rathkeale, County Limerick, where many graves to Ruttles and Delmages can be found in the grounds of the Heck Memorial Methodist Church. Eight years earlier, when their mother died, the sisters were admitted to the incorporated Society on the recommendation of Christian Adamson. Stated to be farm servants, on arrival at Sydney, they were both employed as general servants, Jane by Mrs Joseph Toole of Darlinghurst and Frances by Mrs Elizabeth Inch at her boarding house at 12 Pitt Street Sydney. In February 1839 Frances married William Newland, who was also working in the Inch household. He had been transported in 1830 for seven years, for selling goods stolen, but was granted his freedom in 1833. He left the colony and arrived for the second time as a free man in January 1839, just before he married Frances at St James'
Church of England, before witnesses. Frances' sister Jane and her future husband, Edward Dowling. Edward had also arrived in New South Wales as a convict, in 1832. William Newland was a stonemason and later publican, who became one of the first Councillors of the Sydney suburb of Waverley. Frances gave birth to ten children, seven of whom reached adulthood and she died in comfortable circumstances in 1866.

Jane's marriage in 1841 to Edward Dowling, a house painter, was less successful as in 1841 his ticket of leave was cancelled when he deserted Jane and left her without means of supporting their four young children. His ticket was re-instated in 1856 and he died suddenly two years later. Of their eventual eight children, one achieved prominence as Secretary of the Australian Natives Association as well as the Board of Technical Education. Jane died a year before Frances at the home of her son. Jane and Frances had family in Ohio and New York and the girls corresponded with their American relatives throughout their lives.

As well as single women, several families emigrated on the James Pattison, including William Smith, his wife and daughter, Denis Lyons, his wife and six daughters, Spencer Wallace, his wife, son and four daughters and William Flaxter, with his wife and three daughters. Daniel Niel also emigrated on the James Pattison with his three bounty daughters, all governesses, Margaret 21, Dymphana 20 and Frances 16. From Limerick, Daniel applied to join his wife and five other children, who had migrated to Hobart the previous year. They were strongly recommended by Lord Lismore. Daniel arrived in Sydney. The ship was captained by Captain Captain during the voyage. Like other ships, they encountered rough weather and passengers suffered from seasickness. Daniel's son, William, aged 16, travelled with his family. The family requested the approval of the Colonial Office for the family to emigrate on the James Pattison, as no Irish ships travelled to Hobart.

When Dennis Lyons applied for his family of seven daughters to emigrate, only the five eldest girls were granted the bounty: Elizabeth 20, Ellen 18, Abigail 17 and Bridget and Mary, both stated to be 13 years. Although Pinnoch considered that the family would "prove a valuable addition to the colony", he did not allow the two younger daughters to receive the bounty. The family did make a valuable contribution to the colony. Ellen, for example, was initially employed as a housemaid by the Governor and just under one year later she successfully applied for the position of turnkey at the female prison. In 1842 she married John Mann, a pastry cook, and all their four daughters later married Chinese merchants or storekeepers. Abigail was employed by a Mrs Wilkinson at her country estate, "Harriettown Park", as a nursery governess. In 1844 she married Phillip Brun (Brun/Brunn) at St Mary's Catholic Church, Sydney. Their five children were born in Sydney, Victoria and Tasmania. Her last son, Robert, was born in Victoria in 1856, where Abigail died just two years later. When Robert died at Townsville, Queensland in 1938, he was acclaimed as one of Queensland's oldest practicing solicitors.

The Wallace family comprised Spencer Wallace, aged 41, who had been a Professor of Music and his second wife, Matilda (née Kelly) aged 28, bounty daughter; Elizabeth, aged 16, and three other children: Spencer Wellington (known as S.W.) aged 22, Elizabeth's full brother, and two children from her father's second marriage. They were also accompanied by Matilda's sisters, Charlotte and Isabel who like Elizabeth, were bounty females. The family emigrated from Waterford, although Elizabeth's father Spencer was initially from Kilmorey, Ballina, Co. Mayo. This extended family was migrating to join Elizabeth's older brother, William Vincent Wallace, Spencer's talented son, a noted violinist and composer, who had recently migrated to New South Wales with his wife Isabella (née Kelly) and their infant son. Composer of the opera Mariana, William's life was celebrated in 2012 in Australia, in a Bicentennial Concert marking the year of his birth. On the ship's list, Elizabeth is noted as an actress and musician, while Charlotte and Isabel were governesses.

Within a month of arrival, Charlotte married James Crampton, the captain of the James Pattison at Scots Presbyterian Church and shortly after this event, the Wallace family gave the first of their popular concerts to glowing reviews. The family held more than twenty concerts, Elizabeth organising a particularly successful one in September 1859 at the Theatre Royal, when she was assisted by M. and Madame Gautrot, Mr Deane and family, Mr S.W. Wallace, Mr H. Leggatt and all the Theatrical Band and Mr Bushelle. Elizabeth married the colourful and talented convict John Bushell (also known as James Bushelle in May 1839. Known as the 'Knave of Diamonds', Bushell was transported for fraud following his impersonation of a Prussian baron. At the time of his marriage he was assistant choirmaster at St Mary's Catholic Church. Of her concert on 26 March 1841, the Sydney Guardian reported that 'Mrs Bushelle was in fine voice ... Mr Bushelle was in all his glory'. In 1840 twin sons were born and in 1843, when she was five months pregnant with her third son, her husband died during a concert tour of Van Diemen's Land. Elizabeth is listed the following year in the Sydney Directory as a 'Professor of Music' living in Castlerag
Street. Following a series of farewell concerts in Sydney in the spring of 1847, in which she was accompanied by her brother Wellington, she left Australia to further her professional career. She had modest success performing both in the United States of America and England. The high point of her career was at Covent Garden in 1848 when she performed the title role in her brother's opera, Martin. Elizabeth returned to Sydney and settled down at Darlinghurst as a noted singing teacher. She died at her residence in William Street in August 1878, her contribution to the cultural life of New South Wales all but forgotten.

And what of Sarah Jane Lyttleton? On arrival at Sydney, Sarah Jane was employed as a housemaid by Mrs Brindley of Darling Harbour, Sydney, for an average annual wage of ten guineas. Eighteen months later, she was given approval to marry Edward Homewood. Edward arrived in New South Wales in 1836 on a seven-year sentence for deserting the 32nd Regiment, which had served in Quebec. The marriage took place on 6 July 1837 at St James' Church of England. They settled in the Paterson district of New South Wales, on a small farm, where they raised their twelve children. Sarah Jane died on 3 January 1887, the grandmother of 64 children.

These women were adventurous and courageous and embraced the challenges of colonial life. For the vast majority, who made the voluntary decision to emigrate, their expatriation improved the quality of their lives and placed them in a position of comfort and security denied to their sisters who remained in Ireland.

REFERENCES
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5. TNA, CO 384/36, p. 419, W.S. O'Brien to Hay, 30 May 1834.
6. TNA, CO 385/16, pp. 143-144, Hay to Percy, 2 April 1834.
7. TNA, CO 385/16, pp. 155-157, Hay to J. Verelink, Mayor of Limerick, 22 April 1834; TNA, CO 384/36, p. 521, J. Verelink to Hay, 7 July 1834; TNA, CO 384/36, p. 325, Michael Keating to Rt Hon. Stanley, 19 March 1834.
8. TNA, CO 384/27, p. 146, Table of emigrants to the British Colonies in America, 1 January-25 May 1831; TNA, CO 384/27, p. 207, Return of The Lords Commissioners of His Majesty's Treasury, 1 January 1831.
10. TNA, CO 384/36, p. 341, N.M. Keating and W.S. O'Brien, to Secretary of State in the Colonial Department, 5 July 1834; TNA, CO 385/9, p. 158, J.D. Pincock to William Mansell, 5 December 1835; TNA, CO 384/36, R.W. Hay to Lt Low, 26 June 1834.
12. TNA, CO 385/9, p. 136, J.D. Pincock, William Mansell, 6 October 1835; Corh Evening Herald, 25 May 1836.
13. Limerick Chronicle, 17 October 1835; TNA CO 385/9, Pincock to William Mansell, 6 October 1835.
15. The involvement of Lord Montague in emigration from 1838 has been documented in Christopher O'Mahony & Valerie Thompson, Poverty to Promise: the Montague emigrants, 1838-58, Crossing Press, NSW, 1994; see also David Fitzpatrick, Thomas Spring Rice and the Peopling of Australia, Old Limerick Journal, No. 23, Spring 1998, pp. 39-49.
16. Their relative, Barbara Ruecle Hecker, is known as the 'mother of American Methodism'.
17. State Library of NSW, ML A1270, p. 326; Return of Free Persons who have arrived in NSW.
18. The Colonis, 16 February 1836 estimated that the first concert was attended by 3-400 people, including the governor; David Grant, William Vincent Wallace and Music in Australia 1835-9 in Laurence M. Geary & Andrew J. McCarthy (eds), Ireland, Australia and New Zealand, History, Politics and Culture, Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2008; Mr Deane was a Professor of Music, former member of the London Philharmonic Society. While he has an entry in the Australian Dictionary of Biography, there is no such recognition of Elizabeth Bushell (nee Wallace).