

Balancing The Sexes



The circumstances of its early history as a penal colony ensured that the white population of Australia was predominantly male; convicts and soldiers accounted for most of the population. Not that all the convicts were male. Indeed, of Ireland's contribution of nearly 40,000 to the convict population, almost 9,000 were women. The female element was very small at first, but it grew steadily until, in the 1840s, 36% of Irish convicts being sent out were women. Still, in the pre-1830s we may safely think in terms of a population where females were heavily outnumbered, and where there was a serious imbalance in the relative number of males to females.

As it became increasingly evident that Australia was going to develop into more than a penal colony, the government took various steps to rectify this imbalance and to regulate the inflow of civilian emigrants in a way which would balance the sexes.

One government measure, for instance, was to provide a free passage to Australia for the wife and children of any convict who had served his term. An example of how the inflow was regulated is the way the system of assisted passages to Australia worked.

by Chris O'Mahony

Assisted Passages

From 1830, the government actively encouraged the settlement of Australia. Individual colonies set aside money from the sale of land to free settlers to subsidise immigration from Britain and Ireland. That was how they built up their labour force. It has been calculated that some 30,000 Irish people used this method of going to Australia as free settlers in the 1830-1850 period. We do not know how many of those were from Limerick, of course; though, given the strides which are being made in the study of these things, it is likely we will know one day. Richard Reid, for instance, has shown (work as yet unpublished) that of the 45,000 who availed of assisted passages to New South Wales in the 1848-1870 period, 3,103 were from Limerick. And ongoing studies of the Shanagolden-Foynes area of West Limerick show that even from that small corner of the country over 600 people went in the 1838-1870 period. Some of these were assisted emigrants in the strict sense; others availed of the extension to the government scheme whereby Irish people in Australia could

sponsor relatives by depositing part of the passage fare with the colonial government. They are dealt with elsewhere in this issue.

The point we are considering here, however, is not the numbers that went but the conditions attached to the provision of assisted passages. It was specifically laid down that men could go only if accompanied by an equal number of females. Female cousins were in great demand by young men looking for an assisted passage. One young man in West Limerick was so desperate to go that in his petition to Lord Monteagle he declared that he would marry if necessary. He must have been short of female cousins! That condition did not apply to females, of course; what hit them sometimes was the age limit set. Those who study family history are quite used to the number of women aged 40-45 on passenger lists who later (when death certificates are produced) turn out to be much older than claimed. Irish people were so ready to be the age required by any scheme, in fact, that I have even seen a petition wherein the petitioner asked if it was possible to have one's age changed officially!

Emigration from the Workhouses

The poor law system which operated in



The way out. Dinner below decks on an emigrant ship, 1844.



Ireland from 1838 aimed at the provision of institutional help for the destitute. They were supported from local rates. The law allowed the Poor Law Guardians of each union to use emigration as a means of lightening the burden on the rates, however, provided such emigration was voluntary. As a result, quite an amount of emigration took place directly from the workhouses.

Naturally, most of this emigration was directed towards Canada and America. The Australian content was relatively small, but it was mainly female and very much connected with redressing the imbalance of the sexes in Australia. This emigration took place in the 1848-1860 period; it can be considered under three headings.

1. Orphan girls

When the Colonial Land and Emigration Office (CLEO) decided to offer a free passage to 14,000 female orphans in the 14-18 age group, they were responding to the need to redress the imbalance of the sexes in Australian society. Britain was to contribute 10,000 and Ireland 4,000. Investigation revealed that the Irish quota could be easily and quickly recruited from the Irish workhouses; the Famine had seen to that. The scheme was a blessing for the overcrowded workhouses, trying to cope with numbers of people far larger than any they were built to house. The cost to the ratepayer was only that of 'fitting out' the girls for their journey and paying their fare across to Plymouth, where all the boats left from. Conditions aboard ship were excellent for the time, and provision was also made for the employment and supervision of the girls on arrival.

The required quota of volunteers was filled in two stages in the 1848 to 1850 period. The total contribution of the four Limerick unions to the scheme was 220 girls, as follows:

- Limerick, 74 and none, a total of 74.
- Rathkeale, none and 60, total of 60.
- Newcastle West, 18 and 38, a total of 56.
- Kilmallock, none and 30, a total of 30.

It would be valuable if we could produce lists naming these people, or even detailed information about the arrangements for their journeys. Unfortunately no list of names has survived from any union. Indeed, only in the records of the Newcastle West Union does one find any information concerning them. The relevant records of the other unions have not survived.

Towards the end of 1848 the Newcastle Guardians began to give the scheme their serious attention. A Mr. Henry was sent down by the Poor Law Commissioners in the first week of December to choose suitable candi-



Deck scene on an emigrant ship, with a horse in its stall. Many other animals were carried in stalls on deck.

dates. He chose 18. The minutes of 3rd January, 1849, make it clear that these girls were destined for South Australia. After a few false starts, they were dispatched by horse-drawn cars to Limerick and thence to Dublin by train on February 7th; the steamer to Plymouth was due to sail at 8 pm. They were accompanied by the porter, who was given funds for their rail fare and steamer passage. One may take it that these were the normal travel arrangements in other parts of the county as well, the railway link with Dublin having been established in 1848.

We have no details about the 38 girls who constituted the second batch, as the minute books for the period November, 1849 to February, 1852 have been lost.

Again, the initiative came from the CLEO in London. They were looking for girls in the 17-25 age group and were offering a free passage from Plymouth to Western Australia. In July, 1852, the Guardians selected 50, of whom the Commissioners' inspector approved 30. They sailed from Plymouth on the *Travancore* at the end of September.

No doubt, all of these girls can be identified from Australian sources; Irish sources have preserved the identity of only one of them: Mary O'Brien of Limerick Electoral Division (ED) was sent in place of a girl who dropped out at the last minute. Mrs. Charlotte O'Sullivan, matron of the workhouse, volunteered to take charge of the girls on the voyage in return for a free passage. Her offer was accepted.

2. Western Australia

In 1852 the Limerick Union was responsible for one further group scheme.

3. Individuals

The normal means of assistance for individuals or family groups wishing to emi-



On board an emigrant ship. 'Land, ho!' In the first half of the nineteenth century it was the practice for vessels bound for Australia to hug the African coast closely, and to call at one or more ports on the voyage to take in fresh provisions. As a result, the passengers sighted land more frequently than in this century.

grate was to respond positively when all or part of an inmate's passage had been received from relatives abroad. As we have said, this type of response was concerned mainly with emigration to America. The Australian element was miniscule by comparison, and a study of the records shows that, in most cases, it was connected with the scheme to help wives to join their ex-convict husbands. Though few, these cases are worth looking at, if only because the record enables us to identify many of them.

Let us look at them union by union; returns are available for the 1849-1859 period.

Limerick Union

In 1852 Catherine McNamara and her son Patrick of Cloontra ED were allowed to avail of a free passage to join Catherine's husband in New South Wales.

In 1853 three women – Eliza Singleton and Matilda Taylor from Limerick, and Bridget Bradley from Cloontra – availed of free passages to join their ex-convict husbands in New South Wales.

In 1854 Bridget and Margaret McNamara from Killeely ED had spent 'several years' in the workhouse before getting the opportunity to sail for Melbourne in May, 1854. Unfortunately, the record does not tell us what the opportunity was. How reliable, or otherwise, were the ages given can be seen clearly in this case. The girls were referred to twice; the first time they were supposed to be aged 17 and 20 respectively; the second time it was 16 and 17!

In 1855 Anne Marshall (who had spent ten years in the workhouse) had

her passage paid by an uncle in Australia. She left about October, but the record does not tell us what part of Australia she was bound for.

Johanna Kennedy of Limerick left for Sydney about the end of October, 1856. Her uncle had deposited the passage money at Sydney, but, according to the record, her ultimate destination was Tasmania, or Van Diemen's Land, as it was then known. She sailed from Birkenhead in the care of a lady called Honora Burke, who was not in the workhouse.



Between Ireland and Australia: emigrants play and dance a jig, 1850.

Ann Bradley from Cloontra would appear to have sailed for Australia about October, 1857.

The emigration of the three Sweeney children – William, Joseph and Margaret – from Limerick gives a glimpse of what some families had to go through before being reunited abroad. The father had gone out alone (or was sent?) some years previously, leaving a wife and three children. Unable to support the family, the wife, Mary, had placed her children in the Limerick Workhouse until such time as they could all join him. In 1857 her husband sent most of the passage money; the Poor Law Guardians made up the deficit, and all four set off for Melbourne about March, 1858.

A free passage for the three Kennedy children – Jeremiah, Mary and Andrew – was obtained by their father, a former convict. They were dispatched via Waterford in May, 1858.

Kilmallock Union

In May, 1852, approval was given to Ellen Beckham, aged 24, from Darragh ED, to join her father who had been transported. He had arranged her passage to Morton Bay.

In December the departure of Bess Crawford of Kilmallock ED was approved, but no specific destination in Australia was given.

Four 1853 emigrants can be identified, all of them bound for South Australia. They were: Edmund Maume, Bridget McLoughlin, and Bridget Clifton, all from Charleville, and Catherine Clifford, whose place of origin we do not know. Charleville, though just over



Masters assessing servants: the hiring room at the Female Immigration Depot.

the Cork border, was in the Kilmallock Union.

In September, 1854, Mary and Johanna Clifford went to join a sister in Melbourne; very likely the sister referred to was Catherine of 1853.

Johanna Stewart of Griston, aged 40, left for Melbourne about the middle of August, 1857.

Newcastle West Union

Only twice in the 1850s did the Newcastle West Guardians have occasion to send anyone to Australia.

In 1854, William Daly of Sydney lodged £25 with the CLEO to bring out his mother, Elizabeth Daly, his widowed sister, Mary Kennedy, and her four children, all from the Feenagh area. As it happened, the Kennedys had already been selected by Henry Robinson for emigration to Canada that year, so the Guardians saw no point in spending ratepayers' money fitting these people out for a journey to Australia when they had already been provided for. Mary Kennedy was not going to be fobbed off as easily as that; she arranged for some other needy young women from Feenagh to take her family's place on the Robinson trip, and appealed to the Guardians to help her go to Australia in order not to split up the family. This time she was successful. The Guardians contributed the required £15 in May, and we may presume she was on her way shortly afterwards. There was no further mention of William Daly's mother, but that was probably because she was not in the workhouse.

On 29 May, 1857, the Guardians also voted £3 to help young John Dillane of

Rooskagh (returns show he was under fifteen) on his way to Hobart, Tasmania.

Rathkeale Union

All of the records of this Union were burned in 1922. The statistical returns show that this loss hardly affects the present subject, as only one person left Rathkeale Workhouse to go to Australia in the 1850s – a child who went to Hobart Town in 1854.

After 1850 a further two unions were established in Co. Limerick, at Croom and Glin. There was no emigration to Australia from Glin Workhouse, which is a little ironic, perhaps, in view of the fact that more people went to Australia

from that part of the county than from any other! A mother and three children went from Croom in 1854.

Though it was not always stated, the impression one gets from the above records of individual emigrants is that most of them were the dependents of ex-convicts.

All of the above forms of emigration are but a glimpse of the Limerick link with Australia, a glimpse of the different ways people who could not afford to go went (or were sent). Much remains to be done before the full story and extent of the Limerick contribution to Australia (which was at the same time Australia's contribution to Limerick) is fully known and understood.



Hobart Town, Tasmania.