

## Exodus to America

From 1820 to 1950 more than 4,600,000 Irish crossed the Atlantic to find new homes. The famine accounted for more than a million of these. The peak year for migration was 1851.

There were many motives other than the famine for leaving. In general, emigration was prompted by a desire to escape from Ireland. Some were convinced the country held nothing for the future. There was widespread unemployment; wages were reduced while rentals were often raised; political and religious dissension occurred frequently; friction because of absentee landlordism was constant.

In 1849 emigration was

going on but of those people only whom one would wish to keep — farmers with 1 or £200 in their pockets. They cut the corn on the Sunday, sell it on Monday morning, and are off to America in the evening, leaving the waste lands behind them and the landlords without rent.

In County Cavan that same year

you could scarcely travel a mile on any of our leading roads but you would meet two or three cart-loads of people all eager to escape from the land of their birth, to push their fortunes in Transatlantic climes. If emigration proceeds at this rate, we shall not have hands enough to till



the ground. Those who are going are our able-bodied and moneyed labourers.

Others told the same story. One correspondent wrote the United States Minister in London in 1851,

I had an opportunity not only to view the Country, but to see and converse with all classes: and I can say with truth, that all the humbler, or working people, and many in comfortable circumstances, desire to go to the United States. Large numbers . . . were leaving the land of their birth without a pang. . . . They entertain the idea that the United States is a land of promise, where they may be prosperous and happy. Their most sanguine expectations rarely fail to be realized there. . . . The migration of persons from their native soil in such numbers is something new in modern history; and the effect it may produce upon the United Kingdom, should it continue, is yet to be solved.

A short time later the *Clare Journal* elaborated on the great migration of Irish to America.

All parties among us are seemingly turning their faces to the far West — the home beyond the deep. Old, middle-aged, and young are on the move, leaving the old country, where there seems to be no hope for the young. . . . The streets are daily crowded by families on the move. . . . The old remembered faces that disappeared a few months since are waiting, with the blush of hope, to assist them to leap ashore on the land of their adoption, and to sleep once more under the same roof with son or daughter that they never hoped to see on this side of the grave.

Most of these emigrants were peasants and labourers of the most destitute class. Many were



doubtless persons of small means who had lived in squalor and rags for years to amass sufficient money. In addition there was a great amount of money sent from the United States to pay for passages.

The human stream flowed principally through London and Liverpool. There the majority took steerage passage. The Atlantic voyage was not an easy trip in those famine years. Some of the vessels were described as "mere tubs." In 1849 the average time from Liverpool to New York was thirty-five days although some voyages lasted as long as 160 days. The ships were equipped with wooden bunks and straw-stuffed sacks for mattresses.

The Irish were advised to bring their own food — oatmeal, rice, flour, bacon, ham, fish, butter, milk and eggs. The ham and butter spoiled quickly. Heat was not always available so food was eaten raw. Steerage passengers lived chiefly on oatmeal porridge, sweetened with molasses. The principal meal of the day was usually herring and potatoes. The supply of fresh water was used up before the end of long voyages so there was no water for washing.

Dysentery and "ship fever," a kind of typhus, were common. Toilet facilities were shocking. Lice and itch were universal afflictions. Medical help was unavailable, and there was no privacy. One traveler found



the friendless emigrants, stowed away like bales of cotton, and packed like slaves in a slave ship; confined in a place that, during storm time, must be closed against both light and air, who can do no cooking, nor warm so much as a cup of water. . . . Nor is this all . . . passengers are cut off from the most indispensable conveniences of a civilized dwelling. . . . We had not been at sea one week, when to hold your head down the fore-hatchway was like holding it down a suddenly opened cess pool.

The journey was not always so dismal. Many evenings were spent listening to fiddlers whose music was "better than medicine." Although space was limited

on the first landing, . . . lads and lassies danced, not more than three at a time for lack of space, in jigs and reels and hornpipes. . . . The dancing was but feebly carried on. The space was almost impracticably small . . . and such the sleepy indifference of the performer, that the tune would as often as not be changed and the hornpipe expire into a ballad before the dancers had cut half a dozen shuffles.

Some emigrants played games and cards and sometimes gambled away money they could ill afford to lose. The women spent many hours knitting and sewing.

Emigration did not stop after the famine. During the American Civil War, William West, American Consul in Galway, reported that there "are many thousands of strong young men & women who sigh for good employment in the U.S." Everywhere people "were overwhelmed with dis-



tress, and in the agony of despair look wistfully to America for relief." In 1863 it was estimated that at least 100,000 of "the young and hale" were ready to leave Ireland if they had passage money.

Priests, the press and landlords were "generally opposed to the emigration of the bone and sinew of the country." In spite of this, emigration continued for several decades with few signs of slackening. Tens of thousands landed "like tired migratory birds on the eastern shores of the shelter continent" — America.