

Irish Emigration



In the past 350 years, more than ten million Irish left their homeland, a figure almost three times the present-day population of Eire. In the 17th century the figures are vague, but as many as 50,000 indentured servants were sent out as virtual slaves to the Barbados and Jamaica, or to Virginia, Maryland and the Carolinas. We know of one Kinsella who emigrated during this time:

Cornelius Kincheloe (1693) as related by his descendant John Kincheloe III

The earliest record of Cornelius Kincheloe appears in 1693, in Richmond County, Virginia. Oral history passed down through the family speaks of Cornelius as coming from Scotland, and while this may be true, he or his ancestors originated from Hy Kinsella as Kincheloe is a variation of the name Kinsella (during the period he arrived in America there were many spelling variations on the name Kinsella). By 1695 Cornelius had received a 100-acre parcel of land on which he raised his family. Cornelius' son John ended up selling this land in 1724 and moved the family.

In 1996, after years of painstaking research, John Kincheloe III had identified where the 100 acres of Cornelius Kincheloe, his 8th-generation grandfather, was located. That very year a parcel of the land was auctioned off so John drove from his North Carolina home and managed to buy 3.5 acres of the original tract.

In the 18th century almost 80% of emigrants from Ireland were Protestants, mostly disaffected Scots Presbyterians from

Clan Kinsella's History of Ireland

Ulster. The Protestant Ascendancy, who were Anglican, trusted them only slightly more than Catholics, persecuting them almost to the same extent. During times of rising land rents and depressions they left, not feeling the same tie to the land that the Irish Catholics did. The majority of these Scots Presbyterians emigrated to North America where they were fundamental in establishing the United States of America.

America had been a convenient place for England, whose prisons were overcrowded, to transport convicts, but after 1776, this option was closed. They turned to Australia where Captain Arthur Phillip arrived in 1788 with almost 1,000 convicts. Transportation of convicts to Australia continued for the next eighty years, though on a much reduced scale after 1840. While many of the original convicts were hardened criminals, the vast majority were victims of difficult times, often being forced to poach a trout or rabbit from the landlord, to steal a sheep to feed the family, or perhaps take a piece of linen to sell for the same purpose. Many of these people were granted pardons in Australia after serving a period of good behavior, with a large number going on to become respectable citizens. Here are the stories of two Kinsellas sent to Australia:

Martin Kinsella (1824) as related by his descendant Shirley Duckworth

My Great Great Grandfather, Martin Kinsella, was born about 1792. He committed the crime of stealing a pot of glue for which he was tried in Dublin on February 9, 1824 and sentenced to seven years in the Australian penal colony. His age at the time was listed as 32. In 1825 he was transported to Australia on the ship "Anna & Amelia." In 1833 his wife and daughter joined him while his son remained behind in Ireland.

Irish Emigration

Timothy Kinsella (1836) as related by his descendant Noelene Hoysted

Timothy Kinsella was born in County Kildare around 1810, the son of Terence Kinsella of Castledermot, whose family is shown in official records to have lived in this area “from generation to generation.” By the mid-1830s, Timothy, Terence and his family were living at Nicholastown, near Athy, in County Kildare and were said to be “of excellent character, honest, industrious and well conducted.”

In many ways Timothy was a victim of these difficult times, which led him to become a political activist with one of the proscribed secret societies formed during this period. In July 1836 he was arrested whilst “searching for arms” in a local house, was charged, tried at Athy, and given the mandatory sentence for political offences – death by hanging.

Since he had no previous convictions and violence wasn't involved in the crime, the sentence was commuted to transportation to Australia for life. His 70-year old father Terence had a moving petition circulated in the hope that Timothy's sentence could be shortened to seven years banishment allowing him to return to his family “a wiser and better man.” Despite the signatures and excellent character references from many respected local identities, the petition failed. After spending one month on the old rotting hulk *Essex*, Timothy was placed aboard the ship *Earl Grey* in Cork Harbour and sailed for Australia on 27th August 1836, never again to see his native land or his family.

Conditions on the ship were cramped, steamy, and appalling, and many men had come aboard directly from the hulks in poor health and quickly succumbed to illness and scurvy. Fortunately the surgeon insisted that a stop be made for fresh supplies at the Cape of Good Hope and from this point on-

Clan Kinsella's History of Ireland

wards cases of illness dropped dramatically. From a complement of 384 passengers, only three men died during the voyage of over four months, a relatively small number for this period.

Timothy survived the voyage, arriving in Sydney Cove on 31st December 1836. His character references stood him in good stead, and rather than being placed on one of the dreaded "chain gangs," he was employed privately by a widow who was the owner of a large flour mill. Timothy went on to become a respected and valued member of Colonial society, gaining a Pardon from Queen Victoria in 1850.



A ship of emigrants about to embark

There are usually a large number of spectators at the dock-gates to witness the final departure of the noble ship, with its large freight of human beings . . . As the ship is towed out, hats are raised, handkerchiefs are waved, and a loud and long-continued shout of farewell is raised from the shore, and cordially responded to from the ship. It is then, if at any time, that the

Irish Emigration

eyes of the emigrants begin to moisten with regret at the thought that they are looking for the last time at the old country – that country which, although, in all probability, associated principally with the remembrance of sorrow and suffering, of semi-starvation, and a constant battle for the merest crust necessary to support existence is, nevertheless, the country of their fathers, the country of their childhood, and consecrated to their hearts by many a token.¹

Irish emigration steadily increased throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, mainly to North America, but it was only in 1815, after the Napoleonic Wars, that the major emigration began, culminating in a flood tide during the Great Famine of 1845-50. Throughout the 19th century the mechanisms of emigration became more efficient: brokers, entrepreneurs, and subagents made their appearance, manipulating increasingly professionalized propaganda to lure the Irish from Ireland. Even when emigration had become established as an almost automatic part of rural life, it conflicted sharply with the high value that Irish country people put on communalism, kinship and a sense of place. Estimates reveal that as many as eight million left Ireland between 1801 and 1921. No other country lost so large a proportion of its people during the 19th century.

For ship owners and their captains, the emigrant trade began as a grudging afterthought, a means of making profit on the westward run to North America before they loaded timber bound for England. Emigrants, however inconvenient, were more profitable than ballast of sand or bricks.

Few emigrant ships had been built to carry passengers. Most were aging cargo vessels, three-masted barks and two-masted brigs, the workhorses of the North Atlantic, vessels of 350 tons or less with holds so shallow and wide that unless

¹ *Illustrated London News*, July 6, 1850.

Clan Kinsella's History of Ireland

they were well loaded with ballast they rolled in the slightest breeze. No matter how leaky and decrepit these coffin ships, a cargo of timber, it was hoped, would keep them afloat long enough to get home.

Once a ship discharged its timber, loose boards were laid over the bilges as temporary flooring and rows of rough berths little bigger than dog kennels were fitted in place and covered with straw for bedding. A couple of rickety wooden privies nailed to the foredeck completed the transformation from timber scow to emigrant ship, where hundreds of women, men, and children were fated to live for a least a month and a half, and sometimes as long as three months if contrary winds blew a ship off course. Even in fine weather with the hatches off there was little light or ventilation, but in rough weather with hatches battened the steerage was like a dungeon lit with smoky kerosene lamps and filled with a fog of sweat, spilled chamber pots, rotting scraps of food, and the vomit of seasick humanity. All around lay luggage, bags, sacks and boxes.

To the emigrant, the evils began before a ship left port. Speculators chartered steerage space at the cheapest price they could and sent commission agents into the countryside to recruit as many emigrants as possible to fill the space. These men, paid by the number of emigrants they could produce, spun fanciful yarns of shipboard facilities . . . glibly assuring the potential passengers that the voyage would be short, three weeks at most, and a kindly captain would look after their needs like a father. Passage could be purchased with or without provisions. If an emigrant's small stock of food – potatoes, oatmeal and perhaps some bacon or salt herrings – ran out on the voyage, as it usually did, there was nothing to do but buy whatever the captain had to offer at exorbitant prices. Unlike slavers, who had a vested interest in getting their human cargoes from Africa to American plantations in working condi-

Irish Emigration

tion, Irish emigrants were left to fend for themselves once their fares were collected.



From the hour of his departure to the hour of his settlement on his final resting-place, the emigrant is a prey to human vultures. At the great ports where emigrants embark in the Old World – Liverpool, Limerick, Glasgow, Belfast, Bremen, Amsterdam, Havre – a brood of hungry rascals earn a fat livelihood by cheating them. The business is most profitable at Liverpool – which is the largest emigrant depot of the Old World – and the chief dupes are the Irish.²

Patrick and Rose Kinsella (1854) as related by their descendant Rose Quaid Munsch

Patrick and his wife Rose emigrated from Dublin to New Orleans, a trip of three months, before continuing on to Pennsylvania with their 11 children. At that time free passage to America in freighting vessels could be arranged if the head of the family signed up for a certain number of years labor. The destination of families was often the factories and mines of Pennsylvania. One of Rose's granddaughters still has the roll-

² *Harper's Weekly*, June 26, 1858.

Clan Kinsella's History of Ireland

ing pin she used in the bottom of a sailing vessel to make the bread for her eleven children. One little daughter about five years old died shortly before the ship reached port. The family kept the death secret so that the child would not be buried at sea.

There was a vast difference between American and British ships. American ships were required by law to carry 100 pounds of breadstuffs, 100 pounds of salt meat and 60 gallons of water per passenger; there were heavy fines if a ship carried too many passengers. This drove up the cost of passage to the States and had the effect of forcing the poorest Irish, the majority, to the British colonies. Many Irish therefore sailed to Canada and then traveled south to the United States. In some years two thirds of all emigrants followed this route.

Immigrant ships entering the United States also had to be sanitary. A last minute scrub down before entering a U.S. port was never necessary on an American ship, where weekly and sometimes even daily scourings with the help and cooperation of the immigrants were standard procedure. Scrub downs were considered unnecessary on English ships carrying Irish people, because the emigrating Irish were looked upon as the dregs of an overpopulated country, a primitive people. Diseases that thrived on filthy English ships were curtailed on clean American ones, so the death toll was much higher on English than on American ships.³

The Irish, especially those emigrating during the famine, could not afford unsanitary conditions in their weakened states. Figures from the *New York Post* showed that the total number of emigrants who landed in New York in 1847 was 166,000. The numbers of German and Irish were almost equal at about 60,000 each. Of this number 6,932 were received into the hos-

³ Donald MacKay, *Flight from Famine* (Toronto, 1990).

Irish Emigration

pital of whom 6,376 were Irish, 330 Germans, 173 from all other countries.

Since emigration had the same effect on a family as death, the loss of a loved one forever, the custom of the American Wake sprang up in Ireland. It was often called American because this was the destination of the majority of the Irish.

I remember still with emotion the emigration of the young people of the neighborhood to America. In those days the farmer's children were raised for export. There were times of the year – in spring or fall – when there would be a sort of group emigration; that is, a dozen or so would start off together once or twice a week for a few weeks to take the train to the boat at Queens-town or Derry. Generally each group was bound for the same town in America where they had friends or relatives who had paid their passage money beforehand or sent them their tickets. The night before their departure there would be a farewell gathering called an American wake in one of the houses of the emigrating boys or girls. There would be singing and dancing interlarded with tears and lamentations until the early hours of the morning, when, without sleep, the young people started for the train, the mothers sometimes keening as at a funeral or a wake for the dead, for the parting would often be forever and the parents might never again see the boy or girl who was crossing the ocean. There was, I remember, a steep hill on the road near our house, and when the emigrating party reached the bottom of it, it was their habit to descend from the sidecars and carts to ease the horses, and they would climb the height on foot. As they reached the top from which they could see the whole countryside, they would turn and weepingly bid farewell to the green fields, the little white houses, the sea, and the rambling roads they knew so well. The hill was called the Hill of Weeping in Gaelic, because of all those who had wept their farewells from the top of it.⁴

⁴ Mary Colum, *Life and the Dream* (New York, 1947).

Clan Kinsella's History of Ireland

Peter and Elizabeth Kinsella (1850) as related by their descendant Janice Smith

It was unusual for the Irish to come as a family, often they came alone or as siblings, but the family of Peter and Elizabeth⁵ Kinsella arrived from County Carlow around 1850. They purchased a farm a few miles from Lockport, N.Y. in a German settlement. Peter pronounced Kinsella with the accent on the first syllable, KIN'sella (as it's pronounced in Ireland today), and the guttural German accent of those among whom they lived slurred it to Kinsler.

Kinsler was the name all the children of Peter and Elizabeth used until their son, Moses, had some difficulty over the deed to a piece of property and in tracing back the legal documents, found the real spelling of his family name was Kinsella. The other children were established as Kinsler by that time and Moses was the only one who changed back to Kinsella. The ancestors of these Kinsler's can be found in Indiana and Illinois.

The following recounts the fairly typical emigration of a number of American-Irish. They came alone or in small groups, enticed to a location by friends or family. They began humbly but often rose in their social rank over time. It also illustrates the truth rather than the myth; the typical Irish immigrant did not settle in the large cities but instead followed the flow of unskilled jobs that were most commonly found in the country, especially transportation projects such as canal building, railroads, or motorways.

⁵ It's uncertain if the wife's name was Elizabeth.

Irish Emigration

Martin Kinsella (1851) as related by his descendant Jack Kinsella

In the mid-19th century Auburn, N.Y., located along the Erie Canal, was a booming town with plenty of work but not enough workers. The need for labor was so great that the Auburn city fathers sent representatives to Ireland looking for recruits. These representatives painted a beautiful picture of life in Auburn and probably offered financial incentives to those interested. One of those from Kildare who listened was John McGarr. He had arrived in Auburn by 1837 when laborers earned 50 cents a day, incredible pay compared to what could be earned in Ireland. John wrote friends and relatives back in Ireland and probably sent money to pay for transportation. His signature is on numerous naturalization records of Irishmen from County Kildare. Terence Kinsella, who arrived in 1846, was one of those he encouraged to come over. The witness for Terence's U.S. citizenship papers, which he signed with an "X", was John McGarr. Terence Kinsella was not only surrounded by friends he had known back in Ireland, but a number of his first cousins had arrived also.

Five years later, after writing letters describing the benefits of Auburn where Terence worked as a railroad laborer, Terence's brother Martin, who was thirty-one and escaping the potato famine, arrived. By 1852 Martin, illiterate and without any skills, applied for citizenship. Two years later another of Terence's brothers, Michael, arrived. Martin Kinsella went on to marry Bridget McGarr (a relative of John McGarr) in the local Catholic church. By 1860 Martin and Bridget had moved to Manchester, about 40 miles away, where they were recorded in the census as the Kinslers. Martin was working for the railroad at the time while his brother Terence was a stationmaster and his other brother Michael was Auburn's chief of police. In

Clan Kinsella's History of Ireland

1872 Martin Kinsella bought five acres of land which he farmed with the help of his wife and nine children. By 1880 the census was back to recording them as Kinsellas.

Very few of the Famine Irish emigrants were destined to achieve prosperity and success themselves. The condition to which they had been reduced not only by the Great Famine but by the centuries that preceded it was too severe a handicap. These emigrants were destined to be regarded with aversion and contempt. Not until the second or third generation did the Irish intelligence and quickness of wit reassert themselves. Along with these attributes, the emigrants brought their culture. Irwin Cobb, the famous American author and humorist, told of Gaelic hospitality:

The son of an Irish refugee, Pat Cleburne of Arkansas, one of the most gallant leaders that the Civil War produced.⁶ Pat Cleburne died on one of the bloodiest battlefields of Christendom⁷ in his stocking feet because as he rode into battle that morning he saw one of his Irish boys from Little Rock tramping barefooted over the frozen furrows of a wintry cornfield and leaving tracts of blood behind him. So he drew off his boots and bade the soldier put them on, and fifteen minutes later he went to his God in his stocking feet. Raleigh laid down his coat before Good Queen Bess, and has been immortalized for his chivalry, but I think a more courtly deed was that of the gallant Irishman Pat Cleburne.

The Irish Diaspora has flooded the globe over the centuries. Some 70 million people in the world call themselves Irish today though Eire contains only 4 million of them. While the

⁶ Although he had no sympathy for slave owners, he fought for the community where he had made friends.

⁷ The battle of Franklin, Tennessee.