

## **RECONSTRUCTED MEMORY: IRISH EMIGRANT LETTERS FROM THE AMERICAS**

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Roy Foster has pointed out that when Irish historians in the last generation began to examine the received truths of conventional historiography, some of the most agonised responses came from émigrés: "With emigrant communities everywhere the memory of homeland has to be kept in aspic. The perspective over one's shoulder must remain identical to that recorded by the parting glance – even if that happened two (or more) generations back, and even if the remembered impression is spectacularly contradicted by the mother country itself as experienced on return visits" (xiii).

In a similar way, ownership of received historical memory is fiercely guarded. Kerby Miller, a leading American specialist on Irish emigrant letters, has identified a culture of exile among the Irish abroad. The rationalisation of migration sought refuge in a retrospective oppression history in which migrants are depicted as unwilling victims of English rule. The open declaration of the motive of individual advancement was unacceptable in a traditional, rural environment where community and family loyalties were dominant. The culture of exile was a cloak to disguise individual aspirations. In reality, Miller has argued that Irish emigration was surrounded by conflicting pressures, and emigrants themselves possessed highly ambivalent attitudes. Many farmers and tradesmen believed emigration was essential for the process of modernisation, a process synonymous with increasing bourgeois dominance and made possible only by a clearing out of the poor cottiers and landless labourers from Ireland. Emigration reduced the fear of potential agrarian violence in resistance to consolidation of holdings among the large farmers. For parents on small holdings, it also eased the way for the painful disinheriting of children without the prospect of unbearable family conflict. Miller has suggested that the theme of emigration as exile, manifest in speeches, newspapers, and most especially the emigrant songs of the period, provided a way of reconciling tensions and anxieties. The idea of enforced exile became incorporated into the mindset of many Irish emigrants, serving as a rational explanation for their departure and continued absence, even long after they had prospered and had no realistic intention of returning to Ireland (125-6).

Michael Kenneally, a Canadian literary scholar, has identified a need to employ the techniques of textual criticism to emigrant letters, not merely to extract historical detail. Letters can be examined as linguistic and rhetorical forms of self-expression. In the search for identity and nationhood, it can be revealing to focus on the tone and tenor of language, the stock phrases, the omissions and silences. His own trawl through unpublished Canadian sources reveals shifting notions of home, a nostalgic remembrance of interior space, and the importance of familiar things recalled. A

more limited life in Canada meant that heaven became the real home, a place where the family would be re-united. Over time there was a discernible evolution of self revealed in letters to Ireland.

This last insight has quite a modern ring and ties up with the work of Mary Corcoran, a sociologist, who has interviewed returning Irish migrants after spending time working abroad during the 1990s, returning to a more prosperous Ireland enjoying the benefits of the Celtic Tiger and forming part of an increased return migration process, a reversal of population loss over many decades. She writes of Irish migrants reconstructing their identity as a result of the migrant experience and being often critical of Irish ways that now seem old-fashioned in a slower pace of life.

These four ideas – the memory of Ireland kept in aspic, the culture of exile, a discernible evolution of self, and an invented or reconstructed Irishness – form the context of an examination of a selection of nineteenth-century Irish emigrant letters, drawn from Canada in the north, through the United States to Mexican Texas in the south.

First, however, it is important to recognise that the emigrant experience extended to several million people. A small and unrepresentative sample left the trace of a written record in the form of letters and journals. They wrote as individuals and their stories represent a wide spectrum of experience. The journey of migration and settlement involved great hopes, much privation, heartache, many setbacks, and it should be acknowledged, the prospect of a better life in the New World, if not for the individuals themselves then most likely for their children. Emigration was commonly a family strategy, mostly self-funded and often involving several stages of movement for different family members. So, we should be wary of an all-encompassing meta-narrative that tells the story of the Irish in Canada, or the Irish in America. Irish emigrants were not a homogeneous group and their experiences were diverse rather than uniform. It really did matter *where* you came from in Ireland, *when* you left the country, *what* you took with you in the form of skills and capital, and *where* you settled. Opportunities could be immense for pioneer settlers in territory that was opening up in parts of Canada, Australia, in Argentina or Mexican Texas, and very few for those who arrived in settled communities in the east-coast cities of the United States, with little but physical labour to offer the job market.

## Letters

The first letter is taken from the first Peter Robinson state-assisted emigration scheme from Cork and Kerry to Upper Canada in 1823. It was written by Catherine O'Brian from Ramsay Township to her brother on February 20, 1824. It contains the familiar presence of formulaic phrases in the opening paragraph: "I embrace the opportunity of writing to you these few lines to let you know that I and my family is [sic] well, thank God for his kind mercies & hope that this will find you in the same." The unusual reference to "a most agreeable passage" and to being "amazingly well

treated" may owe something to a loyalty to the organiser of the scheme, Mr. Robinson, who was "kind and attentive" in administering "to our comfort and convenience" and a genuine gratitude that "we are now most agreeably situated on a good lot of land with good neighbours all around in a flourishing settlement." The letter also contained the obligatory detail on wage levels, as an encouragement for other family members to join them:

Thos. has got and has the prospect to get plenty of employment at one dollar per day of wages and found in board and lodging, but he is more inclined to work on his land, and notwithstanding working out considerable [sic] he has got about four acres chopped down and hopes to have an acre or two more again spring [sic] and we have every prospect of doing well and of having plenty ...

The wages for labouring men is from ten to twelve dollars per month and found or by the day from two shillings & sixpence to three shillings. (Robinson Papers)

The letter continues in a generally buoyant tone: "This is a most delightful country I believe none in the world more healthy no sickness of any kind affects us, nor any of the settlers here, no want of bread, for all have plenty and to spare, and no man living willing to work but may live happy."

The purpose of the letter was to encourage her brother, Robert, to come out to Canada on the next Peter Robinson scheme in 1825: "embrace the opportunity for you may never have the like again." Practical advice was then given on what to bring: "plenty of clothes both for bed and body for that is our greatest want in this country" and also "all the pots and pans earthenware & other cooking utensils that you have."

However, the most telling section of the letter refers to brother John who was not encouraged "to come to this country if he would not resolve to work better than he did at home," and "if he would keep from the drink he might do well, but the rum is cheap four shillings and sixpence per Gallon and a great many of our settlers likes it too well which may prove their ruin, for a drunkard will not do well here." This last passage reveals a significant attitude to the new home in Canada. What accompanied the act of migration and settlement into a new land was the belief in a new start, not merely the opportunity to make a more plentiful and prosperous life, but the leaving behind of what some migrants saw as the curse of old Ireland, the inveterate fondness for alcoholic drink.

Catherine O'Brian does not reveal any lingering nostalgia for the land of her birth, but there is plenty of evidence that this was a common feature of emigrant letters, suggestive of the pain of separation from family, friends, and familiar surroundings in Ireland, but also a means of keeping the connection with the old country. In the following account, a passionate desire to remember and return to Ireland is most keenly felt by the next generation, what the Rev. M.B. Buckley described in Montreal as "a transmitted passion":

I met several people from Cork, and they were overjoyed to meet me, who could tell them the history of the beautiful citie for the last generation. To some I spoke the Irish language and their delight was inconceivable. I may here remark that wherever I go I

find the love of Ireland amongst the Irish to be the most intense feeling of their souls – an all-absorbing passion, running like a silver thread through all their thoughts and emotions. They think forever of the old land, and sigh to behold it once more before they die. One man who drove us one day for an hour refused to take any payment. He was from Ireland and we were two Irish priests, and that was enough for him! "What part of Ireland do you come from?" I asked. "From Wicklow, sir; I am 32 years in the country." "And do you ever think of the old country?" "Think," he exclaimed, "Oh! yes sir, I do think of the old country, not so much by day as by night. In my dreams at night I see as distinctly as ever the lanes and alleys where I played when a boy. I fancy I am at home once more, but I awake and find I am in Montreal, and am like never to see my native land again." This dreaming of Ireland I found quite common, many people would give all they have in the world to get back again and live in Ireland steeped in poverty, rather than flourish wealthy in this strange land. And what is stranger still is, that amongst the young people, those love Ireland most who are born here of Irish parents. Their love is far more intense than the love of those who were born in Ireland. Philosophers must account for this; it appears to me to be a transmitted passion; they hear their parents constantly speak in terms of affection of the land of their birth. (Buckley 50-51)<sup>1</sup>

Speaking to a visitor from Ireland was similar to a letter written home and for transmitted passion, we can identify a reconstructed memory, a longing for identity that was fabricated and a generation old, to the extent it was mediated through what parents could remember of the Ireland they left behind.

Appropriately, the next letter is taken from Kerby Miller's huge collection and fully exemplifies the nostalgic element in the sense of loss in the "culture of exile." Mary Ann Rowe (c.1860-c.1899) in the 1880s was a domestic servant living in the suburban community of Dedham, Massachusetts (Miller & Wagner 76). Her letter is in two sections – one strongly nostalgic for home, looking back remembering good times – and the other reassuring those back home that life was good, and looking forward to a better future.

Instead of the ritual, formulaic opening, Mary Ann begins awkwardly and apologetically in writing to her friend: "It is not through any lack of friendship that I stayed so long without writing to you. I do feel so bad when I go to write to home. I don't be the better of it for a long time" (29 Oct 1888). This suggests the possible pain of leaving Ireland but also, having left, there is a difficulty in trying to re-connect with home.

Part of this may be the feeling of homesickness evident in the next section of the letter:

I would never have left poor Dunnamaggan if only I thought I would be so homesick. I cannot banish the thought of home out of my mind. There is not a night but I do be dreaming about you or someone from home. I dreamed last night that little John was dying. I fancied I was looking at him and had the pleasure of kissing him before he died. I hope and trust nothing is the matter with any of them.

The letter continues with the pleasure of remembering former days, Sunday afternoons playing with little children in Ireland. However, the tone of the letter changes abruptly with a description of Mary Ann's happy situation in America:

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1 Buckley's *Diary* was edited by his sister. I am indebted to Professor Michael Kenneally for this source.

Yet I am living with a very nice family here in Dedham, Massachusetts. They are very nice people. I would not be allowed to go outside to put out the clothes even when the dew was on the grass without rubber boots on me, my mistress is so very careful of me. And I am within two or three minutes walk from the church. There is a splendid church here in Dedham and three priests. I can go to mass every Sunday and to confession whenever I want to. Dedham is a very nice place and it a country looking place – when you look around, there is nothing but trees.

What is revealed here is an acceptance of her new situation, representative of so many young Irish women who began to dominate domestic service in the United States and replace native black domestics in the process. The conditions female domestics enjoyed were invariably superior to conditions back home in Ireland and also allowed Irish servants to save enough money to pay for remittances, often in the form of pre-paid tickets for passage to America, and also to save for the proverbial "bottom drawer," an investment in marriage prospects that were superior to those in rural areas of post-famine Ireland (Diner 89-92).

Irish female migrants, while representing half the migrant stream out of Ireland during the nineteenth century, did have different experiences from Irish men, even from the same family. This is because separate spheres operated in the world of work, and working conditions remained very different for domestic servants, the archetypal woman at work, primarily living in middle-class households, and Irishmen who worked predominantly, and more visibly, in outdoor labouring employment. Often such labouring work involved continued migration in search of further employment or better prospects. This was especially prevalent in the field of hard-rock mining in the United States. It is well documented that from the 1880s Irish copper miners from Bearhaven in West Cork took a well-trodden path in a process of skill migration to mining centres in Michigan, Utah, California, and to Butte, Montana, the biggest copper mine in the world run by an Irishman, Marcus Daly (Emmons 13-34).

Three letters taken from the Hurley Collection in Cork Archives reflect changing conditions in the far west of America in the 1880s and 1890s, not least from the perspective of an itinerant miner. Michael Hurley, writing to his sister Kate in Ireland from Shasta County in California, on December 5, 1886, excuses his failure to write home as he was not permanent in any one place. He promises to compensate with the price of a new dress. He then compares the problems of Ireland with the prospects in America, becoming quite lyrical in describing the Californian climate:

I am sorry that times are so bad in Ireland now, next year might be good if a couple of weeks of California Climate was in Ireland last harvest it would be very much need there never is any rain here in summer time and sometimes very little in winter cant see a cloud the sun shines here not as in northern climes obscurely bright but one unclouded blaze of living light.

With sun as a metaphor for good times in California, the tone of the letter is largely negative towards life in Ireland, viewed from 6,000 miles away. He dismissed the advice his sister gave him to return home on economic and political grounds: "You were advising me to come home a few years ago if I did I might be like Patrick and Tim

Hurley now living in misery trying to raise the rent to pay the tyrant Lords I hope the time will come when they can't collect no more rents." Even his smug dismissal of Irish relatives in San Francisco carries with it a rejection of the old curse of the Irish – itself a rejection of the habits of home: "The Hurleys of Castelview have come down in the world. John in San Francisco is not doing well either, he likes his beer too well."

On January 13, 1891, Michael Hurley wrote to his mother in Ireland from Spokane Falls, Washington. Writing from long distance gave him the courage to admonish his mother for buying a farm: "I was astonished to see that you gave (£) 750 for that place. I think you must have been out of your mind no wonder times would be hard in Ireland when people are that foolish to pay so much for such a little place and such rent after." Then the contrast with life in north-west America that carries a certain smugness despite his own roller-coaster experience: "I have got that much money after all I have lost but I don't want to give it all for that place and then going into debt for stocking it. I can do better here."

News from Ireland, even for an itinerant miner, was freely available, but it only confirmed his sense of fatalism and negativity about Ireland's future: "Things look purty [sic] badly messed up back there now Parnell & Mrs. O'Shea have caused some trouble I am afraid it will delay home rule for a while Ireland never was on the point of gaining anything but something happened to prevent it." By contrast, America was booming and was obviously the place to be: "The wilds of America are becoming Civilized rapidly a few years ago there was nobody but Indians where this town stands and now there is about 30,000 people in it 6 and 7 stories [sic] high."

Michael concluded his letter with a message to his younger brother: "Tim you are better pin up the collar of your shirt and get married and run that place yourself I don't want it hoping this will find you all in health and happiness I will conclude for the present." Michael, while continuing to take an interest in Ireland and his family's welfare, sees his future in America. It is a reminder that emigration for many was not merely about individual advancement but was part of a family strategy.

By March 12, 1894, when brother Dennis Hurley wrote to his mother from Carson City, Nevada, the boom times were over in the silver mines:

Very bad times in United States, everything low with a great scarcity of money and work. Nevada and other silver producing states, who owing to the low price of silver which in place of selling at 129 cents per oz. is now selling at 59 or less than half of the par value. Archbishop Walsh of Dublin has written a book on this subject which is highly praised by friends of silver the world over. I am still at work but retaining it very insecure now.

Like his brother Michael, who had not written to him lately, Dennis was not averse to giving advice to his younger brother in Ireland:

Tim, my dear brother, you should look more to other requisites in a wedded partner than L.S.D. It is not like going to the bakers after a loaf of bread, all much the same. Some girls are better for a man to marry, even without a shilling than others with a good fortune. Look to qualities of head and heart, thrift, intelligence, cleanliness and

cheerfulness, no lazy untidy old mope. Do not postpone what you intend to do as you are not getting young.

The letter also contains other family news that links up with Michael's earlier letter: "John Hurley, Castleview, died in San Francisco Dec. 19 leaving 8 children to mourn his loss. Wife and self are well thank God, and hope this will find you all well."

The final set of letters form part of an emigration scheme to Mexican Texas in the years 1829 to 1834. The first group of Irish settlers were recruited in New York, Philadelphia, and New Orleans by two Irish *empresarios* or agents of the Mexican government, John McMullen and James McGloin, to move to San Patricio on the Nueces River, in the province of Coahuila y Texas. The main attraction was the promise of land grants of 4,428 acres per family, surely one of the best deals available to new settlers in the Americas in the nineteenth century (Davis 4). As part of the practice of boosterism in encouraging migration, letters home were included in the emigrant guides of the day. Jemima and Mary Toll, who came from New York to settle in San Patricio, were quoted to endorse settlement in the new colony:

I found this country equal to what was said in the hand bills and better again ... really I was astonished when I came amongst the colonists to see them all full of comfort, plenty of Corn, bread Mush Butter Milk and beef and what perhaps those who sent false reports never enjoyed before. As for pigs and fowls they are as numerous as flees ...

Do not be daunted the prospect here is good ... you'll have no work, your daughters can milk 50 cows for you, and make butter which is 25 cents a lb here, in Matamoros 50 cents. A cow has 2 calves in 10 months a sheep and a goat 3 yearlings in 15 months. The healthiest country in the world. The richest land will show like Gentlemens domains in the world. Fine wood and water as in any part of the world. As for fowl and fish of every kind no man can believe, but those that see. (Woodman 168-69)

Clearly there is some hyperbole in this account, not in the description of plenty or in the reproductive capacity of animals able to graze all year round in the pastures of the Texas Coastal Bend, but with regard to health which ignored the hazards of cholera, malaria, and yellow fever or the more obvious dangers to homesteads from hostile Indians and Mexican bandits in a frontier zone. Yet, the key sentence revealed the aspiration to own sufficient land to become like gentlemen in Ireland. It could not be more clearly expressed that emigration, or in this case, a further migration from the United States to Mexico, was seen in terms of social and economic advancement. In a number of cases the dream was fulfilled as 4,428 acres was to become the basis for building up large estates.

The second group of Irish settlers were recruited directly from Ireland by *empresarios* James Power and James Hewetson for the colony Refugio, located on the Mission River, a few miles inland from the Texas coast. Power returned to his native county Wexford to encourage would-be settlers to go to Texas with him on the promise of abundant land and future prosperity. As proof of the great deal on offer, he took members of his own family, his married sister, Elizabeth, and nephews, Martin Power and Thomas O'Connor. Surviving letters between Martin Power, a young cripple, who

was duly assigned his land grant in the Power-Hewetson colony in 1835, and his father, Daniel Power, back in county Wexford reveal an emotional tug-of-war between father and son (Power papers). In Martin's first few years in Texas, he witnessed a cholera outbreak in New Orleans, en route to Texas, shipwreck off the Texas coast, the destruction of property and massacres of settlers in the Texas Revolution of 1835-6, and further depredations and killings by Comanche Indians. Daniel Power, on hearing of all the disasters that befell the colonists, urged his son to return to Ireland. Despite all that happened that might well have persuaded him, Martin resisted his father's pressure and, in a letter of 1839, revealed his true motives for going to Texas and staying there:

The only thing that ever caused me to leave was the dulness of the times and fearing not with standing all my brothers off duty and hard labors to add to little stores – that they would be at least tore to pieces by making two farms of one. I have thought deeply for the past two years I spent there you know were getting mity [sic] little better and we all doing everything in our power.

I have for my time at least 80 pound a year since I left Ballinhash to present date ... I know you would not at this time insist on me to go home ... and not only that but see the door open to make an independent fortune in a short time.

Martin's memory of home and family in Ireland is bound up with the pressure of subdividing the land among the sons that was being resisted in south-east Ireland to preserve the viability of tenant holdings. This produced its own pressure for younger sons to emigrate and look for a better life in the New World. The chances of tenant farmers owning their land in Ireland at that time were remote. The opportunity to own a sizeable amount of land in Texas was an attractive alternative, even when all the hazards had been encountered. Martin stayed and died in Texas without fulfilling his dream.

However, his cousin, Thomas O'Connor, mentored by his uncle James Power, was to become "the cattle king of County Refugio," building up a vast ranching empire of 500,000 acres and becoming one of the richest men in Texas before his death in 1887. His eldest son, Dennis O'Connor, himself a millionaire rancher with his brother Tom, wrote a draft letter to the *Galveston News* dated December 22, 1888 (O'Connor). In a long letter written in crayon he revealed the extraordinary journey made in terms of his allegiance and identity, as he looked back on his roots in Ireland and Texas. It is an exceptionally revealing example of the evolution of self:

I was born in this Refugio County in the Republic of Texas in 1839 of Irish parents of the colony of Power and Hewitson. Enlisted and served as a Confederate Soldier throughout the rebellion. When in military camp I read Gen. Grant's terms of surrender to Gen. Lee + army I expressed myself thus – I believe it not, for the history of man gives no record of such magnanimity but if it be true then I intend to become a loyal citizen of the great nation whose servants met such acts. We disbanded [disbanded] I went home and dispassionately watched the proceedings of my southern brethren. All my political schooling was democratic, had voted for S.A. Douglas. My father [Thomas O'Connor] was a slave owner. I registered as a voter, took the amnesty oath and had as I expressed it, a country again.

Yes, Sir, I decend [sic] from the Emerald Gem of the ocean and I am proud of that decent [sic] next in point of esteem to my citizenship of the United States, the Galveston News to the contrary notwithstanding. I can spread out the tail of my coat widely and most defiantly under these suns and your Queen's police dare not tread there lest they tramp upon Uncle Sam's Striped and starry handkerchief not so safe an undertaking as collecting rents in the land of the shamrock. It is scarcely worthwhile to say republicans are not dynamite advocates. But I must presume to suggest that you dealt in that commodity superfluously ... I will concur with you by answering you that if I were compelled to choose between the occupation of using dynamite on English landlords in Ireland or elsewhere by word or insinuation [sic] deride or slander a downtrodden people I would certainly prefer the former especially if it would terrify one of the oppressors of mankind but for one single moment.

In one life, Dennis O'Connor had moved from being a citizen of the Texas Republic to a citizen of the United States after annexation. He then fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War and once again became a proud citizen of the United States, thanks to the magnanimity of the surrender terms. In politics he became a Republican, even though his father, Thomas O'Connor, had been a slave owner. However, what is most striking is Dennis O'Connor's passionate identification with Ireland, another example of reconstructed memory, but most specifically with the poor oppressed Irish tenant farmers. Clearly, this sense of oppression history had been handed down from his father, whose family were tenant mill farmers in Kilmuckridge, County Wexford. At the time of writing the letter, Dennis O'Connor was a powerful millionaire rancher and landowner with many tenants of his own on his estate that extended into several Texas counties. In economic terms, he had far more in common with landlords in Ireland than with poor, "oppressed" tenants who, following Gladstone's Land Acts 1871 and 1881, were in a much better system than in 1834 when Thomas O'Connor left Ireland at the age of 17. The O'Connor farm in Kilmuckridge was eventually purchased under the provisions of Conservative government legislation which enabled tenants to acquire their own farms over time. The current owner of the hundred acre farm is Dennis O'Connor, a direct descendant of Thomas O'Connor's elder brother, Dennis.

## Conclusion

The letters discussed here, extending in time from the 1820s through to the 1890s, and drawing on the experience and perceptions of Irish emigrants in Canada, the United States, and Texas, as part of Mexico, as an independent republic and as part of the United States, illustrate the themes with which this essay began. The memory of Ireland could be frozen in aspic and fiercely defended in the New World. It could also be rationalised as part of a culture of exile, with the dream of one day returning to Ireland, or at least of being reunited in heaven with family members at home. Negative memories of Ireland could also justify fulfilling a dream of enjoying better times in the Americas, even to the extent of communicating an irritation with the ways of the old country and its prolonged destiny of enduring hard times. What is also ap-

parent is a reconstructed memory of Ireland that becomes incorporated into a journey of self-discovery: the old self in Ireland, oppressed and restricted, and the new self in a dynamic America, taking advantage of better opportunities to prosper. Finally, there is the phenomenon of a transmitted passion for Ireland, stronger among the generation that had never been there but had acquired a reconstructed memory from Irish parents.

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