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Escape from Hunger: The Trials and Tribulations of the Irish State-Aided Emigrants in North America in the 1880s

GERARD MORAN

The poverty and distress associated with the Land League period is often overlooked because of the political agitation and successes of the movement. It is often forgotten that the famine conditions of 1879-1882 played a major role in the emergence of the agrarian agitation in the west of Ireland. The potato crop failure, the decline in seasonal migration remittances and the demise of the kelp industry all combined to produce a situation potentially as catastrophic as that of the Great Famine. By 1880 there were nearly one million people totally destitute out of a total population of 2.5 million along the western seaboard. The situation was most critical in those poor law unions where the land was poorest: those in Mayo, west Galway and west Donegal.¹ Most of the population in these poor law unions lived on unviable holdings and even if the farms were given rent free the tenants would have been unable to survive on them. The findings of both the Bessborough and the Richmond Commissions, which inquired into the social and agricultural conditions in Ireland in the early 1880s, concluded that holdings under 15 acres could not provide their occupants with a subsistence existence. This was at a time when 70 per cent of the holdings in Clifden, 72 per cent in Belmullet, 68 per cent in Newport and 60 per cent in Dunfanaghy fell into this category.² (See table, p. 100.)

The poverty of 1879-82 never reached the horrific proportions of the Great Famine. There were a number of reasons for this, not least of which was the speed with which destitution was alleviated by four private relief organisations, the Mansion House Relief Committee, the Duchess of Marlborough Relief Committee, the New York Herald Fund and the Land League. Had it not been for these organisations, a catastrophe on the level of 1845-50 might have occurred.

¹ For an account of the distress in Ireland in this period see Gerard Moran, 'Famine and the Land War: Relief and Distress in Mayo, 1879-1882, pt. 1' in *Cathair na Mart*, VI (1985) 54-66; Idem, Pt. 2, *Cathair na Mart*, VI (1986) 111-27; James Hack Tuke, *A Visit to Donegal and Connaught in the Spring of 1880* (London 1880); N. D. Palmer, *The Irish Land League Crisis* (New York 1978), chpts v and vi.

² For the recommendations of the Bessborough Commission see *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Working of the Landlord and Tenant (Ireland) Act, 1870, and the Amending Acts, with the Evidence, Appendices and Index*, H.C. 1881 [c 2779], XVIII, 52. For size of holdings see *The Agricultural Statistics of Ireland for 1881*, H.C. 1882, LXXIV, [c 3332] 19-20.

SIZE OF HOLDINGS IN POOR LAW UNIONS IN THE WEST OF IRELAND,
1881

Poor Law Union	Under 5 Acres	5-15 Acres	15-30 Acres	Over 30 Acres	Total
Belmullet	838	994	315	397	2,554
Castlereagh	1,318	3,430	1,517	697	6,962
Clifden	848	1,784	601	520	3,753
Dunfanaghy	381	1,348	621	491	2,841
Galway	1,196	1,586	1,180	1,098	5,060
Glenties	781	2,313	1,768	1,922	6,784
Inishowen	909	1,991	1,339	752	4,991
Newport	1,134	807	465	455	2,861
Oughterard	491	1,092	754	748	3,085
Swinford	916	4,558	2,316	475	8,265

Source: *The Agricultural Statistics of Ireland for 1881*, H.C 1882, LXXIV, [c 3332] 19-20

They secured and distributed funds to hundreds of parish committees throughout the country. Much of this money was subscribed from the United States, from Irish emigrants who had left in the post-1850 period and who had experienced first-hand the famine and destitution in Ireland. By September 1880 over \$1 million had been donated in America, \$33,000 alone coming from the Philadelphia Relief Fund.³ It was generally agreed that the distress of 1879-82 had not developed into a full scale famine because of the intervention of American aid.⁴ The United States government was aware of the famine conditions because of the constant reports it received from its consuls in Ireland, and in May 1880 a relief ship, the frigate *Constellation* under Captain Potter, was dispatched to Cork to distribute aid which had been collected by the *New York Herald* Relief Fund. On its return it brought 44 destitute Irish-Americans back to the United States from the Cork region.

While the distribution of relief succeeded in averting a recurrence of the scenes witnessed during the Great Famine, it brought about a

³ The Philadelphia Relief Fund was one of a number of local relief organisations set up in the United States, *Irish Times*, 27 Feb. 1880.

⁴ See E. P. Brooks to John Hay, 3 Mar. 1888. *Despatches from U.S. Consul in Cork to Washington*, N.L.I., Ms 7123.

realisation that such short-term expediencies would not bring long-term solutions to the people of the congested districts. Subsistence crises and destitution would remain a perennial problem unless a more fundamental approach was adopted towards overpopulation. Both the Bessborough and Richmond Commissions suggested assisted emigration as the panacea. Between 1836 and 1886, 90,000 emigrants were assisted by the British government and the New South Wales authorities to settle in New South Wales. Throughout the 1850s and 1860s this colony was one of the few remaining destinations for Irish emigrants that still offered state aid.⁵ Daniel O'Connell first advocated assisted emigration in the 1840s and Bishop John Ireland of St Paul pursued such a course in the 1870s. An offshoot of the Bishop Ireland proposal was the scheme initiated by Fr James Nugent of Liverpool which resulted in 32 families (309 people) from Carna and Carraroe being assisted to Graceville, Minnesota during the summer of 1880. This was a disaster and the new settlers had to be rescued from starvation by their episcopal sponsor within twelve months of their arrival in the mid-west.⁶

The Carna episode did not deter the advocates of assisted emigration, the most important of them being the English philanthropist and Quaker, James Hack Tuke, who had been involved in the distribution of relief in Ireland during 1845-50 and 1879-80. Tuke and another Quaker, Howard Hodgkin, had been involved in a scheme in the 1850s and 1860s which brought Irish emigrants to Australia, ensuring that they settled well into their new homes.⁷ This contrasted with the Quakers' attitude immediately after the Great Famine when they argued that poverty could only be ameliorated through changes in the land laws. Tuke first indicated his support for emigration as an alternative to the large scale destitution that he encountered during his trip to the west of Ireland in March 1880. He was probably influ-

⁵ In 1843 O'Connell created the Catholic Emigration Society of Ireland to pursue colonisation for impoverished servants to Wisconsin and Illinois. See Leonard P. Riforgiato, 'Bishop John Timons, Archbishop John Hughes and Irish Colonisation: A Clash of Episcopal Views of the Future of the Irish and Catholic Church in America' in William Dancek, Selma Berrol & Randall Miller, *Immigration to New York* (New York 1991) 41. For the situation in New South Wales see Richard Reid, 'Green Threats of Kinship: Aspects of Irish Chain Migration to New South Wales' in *Familia*, 2, no. 3 (1983) 47-8.

⁶ For the Nugent scheme to Graceville see, James J. Shannon, 'The Connemara Experiment' in *Minnesota History*, 35, no. 5 (March 1957) 205-213. Gerard Moran, 'In Search of the Promised Land: The Connemara Colonisation Scheme to Minnesota, 1880' in *Eire-Ireland* (Spring 1997).

⁷ Helen E. Hatton, *The Largest Amount of Good: Quaker Relief in Ireland, 1654-1921* (Kingston and Montreal 1993) 238; for an account of Quaker relief during the Great Famine see *idem*, chpts vii, viii.

enced by Fr Nugent's scheme which was then being implemented. Tuke was convinced that many of the tenants in the west of Ireland would never be helped by parliamentary legislation. 'To the dwellers of Camus or Carraroe,' he declared, 'with the twenty-and-five miles of alternative huts and boulders, neither peasant proprietorship nor "fixity of tenure" can be expected to provide remedial measures ...'⁸ In February, Tuke's advocacy of assisted emigration appeared in the *Nineteenth Century* and brought together a group of influential English politicians and businessmen, headed by the duke of Bedford and including W. E. Forster and W. H. Smith. They formed the Tuke Committee to which £8,000 was privately subscribed to initiate a programme of assisted emigration.⁹ Tuke began his operations in Clifden in April 1882 and 1,300 people were aided during that year. Families were assisted, but only if most of their members were over twelve years of age, as a sufficient number of breadwinners was required in each family. Only those who were most likely to succeed and engaged in agriculture were assisted, and at least one family member had to be able to speak English. Workhouse inmates were excluded and the Tuke Committee agreed to pay all the costs, although a contribution was sought from those emigrants who could afford to give one.

The desire to leave can be seen in the comments of Tuke's contemporary, Vere Foster:

There is at present a desire, amounting almost to a mania, among the juvenile portion in the West of Ireland to emigrate to America, but they are without the means of gratifying their desires, while the demand for female domestic servants and for labourers and mechanics in America is practically illimitable ...¹⁰

The committee undertook to look after the emigrants from the time of their departure from Connemara to their arrival in North America. They were given new clothes for the journey and transport was provided to bring them from their homes to Galway, where overnight accommodation was also arranged. On landing in North America the

⁸ Tuke, *Irish Distress and Its Remedies: A Visit to Donegal and Connaught*, 92, 109-10.

⁹ W. P. O'Brien, *The Great Irish Famine in Ireland and a Retrospect of the Fifty Years, 1845-95* (London 1896) 178; Gerard Moran, 'James Hack Tuke and Assisted Emigration from Galway and Mayo in the 1880s' in Mary Clancy (ed.), *The Emigrant Experience* (Galway 1991) 73-4; J. H. Tuke, 'Irish Emigration' in *Nineteenth Century* (Feb 1889).

¹⁰ Mr Vere Foster's Second Irish Female Fund, 1880-3, N.L.I., Ms 13,552, William O'Brien papers, 2-3.

emigrants were looked after by agents who ensured they got safely to their destinations.¹¹ Tuke was attempting to instil a pattern into the structure of Irish emigration similar to that found of German emigration to America. He wanted to ensure that the emigrants knew where they would settle before they departed and what type of employment opportunities were available in the host country. The general practice was for Irish emigrants to leave for North America without knowing where they would finally settle. They also did not know what trade skills were in demand. Sometimes the emigrants had information that was well out of date. Sometimes they found when they arrived at the homes of people in America that circumstances had changed and they were unable to give them any help.

The success of the Tuke scheme in 1882 convinced the British government that this might be a solution to the perennial problems of distress in the west of Ireland. Consequently, the government gave £100,000 for assisted emigration under the 1882 Arrears of Rent Act. The Tuke Committee administered the scheme in Clifden, Oughterard, Newport and Belmullet unions, while the poor law unions and the Local Government Board took charge in the other areas. Under this scheme, 17,188 people emigrated in 1883. Of these, 5,409 were assisted by the Tuke Committee. The 1883 scheme was so successful that a further £50,000 was provided under the 1883 Tramways and Public Companies Act and 28 poor law unions were scheduled. The Tuke Committee took on the additional areas of Swinford, parts of Galway union and the Aran Islands off Donegal. Of the 6,348 people who emigrated in 1884 from these unions, 2,782 were sent out by Tuke. Most of the people in the west of Ireland felt that this was their opportunity to leave the famine and destitution which they encountered. They were prepared to leave regardless of what they were told by their religious or political leaders. To many it was an opportunity that might not present itself again. Both the emigrants and their families in Ireland viewed emigration positively: the former saw an opportunity to embark on a new life which would release them from hunger and squalor, whereas the latter hoped that remittances from America would make life in Ireland more comfortable. Once established in the New World, the emigrants would send home money and the letters would encourage even more privately-funded departures. These letters provided potential emigrants with a practical knowledge of circumstances in North America from people whom they could rely on. They were given advice about job prospects, wages and accommodation. As one recent study has

¹¹ See Moran, 'Tuke and Assisted Emigration from Galway and Mayo', 75-7.

noted: 'The emigrants were links in a social chain that bound certain regions and even parishes in Ireland with specific districts in the New World.'¹² However, while the assisted emigrants sent glowing accounts back to Ireland of their wages, these tended to talk about the maximum amount that could be earned and never mentioned the minimum or average amounts. While the reports stated that wages of up to \$2.50 a day could be secured for railway labourers, they never mentioned that these rates were only available for six or seven months of the year.

While the schemes generated much excitement and enthusiasm the emigrants encountered many difficulties in North America. From the outset Tuke and the other proponents of assisted emigration believed it would be better if the emigrants settled in North America rather than Britain or Australia. In the past, Irish emigrants had tended to congregate in urban centres and it was hoped this would be avoided. Most agreed that the new emigrants should not locate in the industrial cities along the east coast where the Irish were impoverished, alienated and despised. As D'Arcy McGee, the Canadian politician and former member of the Young Ireland movement, said in 1866:

Never in the world's history were so purely an agricultural population so suddenly and unpreparedly converted into mere town labourers. ... Tens of thousands ... were peasants in Ireland in the spring and town labourers in America the same summer.¹³

In cities such as Boston and New York the Irish were the most destitute ethnic group and they committed more crimes than any other group. The further west the Irish settled the greater were their chances of escaping poverty. In the early 1870s there were calls that the Irish should be encouraged to settle in rural America. It was suggested that this could be facilitated if an emigration society was established, similar to those set up by the Germans, which would meet the emigrants on their arrival in America and send them on to the midwest. It was also argued that the Irish were an

¹² C. J. Houston and W. J. Smyth, 'The Geography of Irish Emigration to Canada', in *Familia*, 2, IV (1988) 14. See also idem, 'The Irish Diaspora: Emigration to the New World, 1720-1920' in B. J. Graham and L. J. Proudfoot (eds), *An Historical Geography of Ireland* (London 1993) 52; Kerby Miller and Bruce D. Boling, 'Golden Streets, Bitter Tears: The Irish Image of America during the Era of Mass Migration' in *Journal of American Ethnic History*, X, 1 & 2 (Fall 1990 & Winter 1991) 19.

¹³ Quoted in Houston and Smyth, 'The Irish Diaspora', 357.

agrarian people and would be better off in rural America where they could secure employment and better themselves. The advocates of rural settlement failed to realise that most of the post-Famine emigrants were labourers who knew little about extensive agricultural practices in the prairie states. There was also the problem that the Irish had lived in large population clusters in Ireland. In Carra, for example, 1,000 families lived on a mere 1,700 acres of land. The crowded clathan village, and the social interdependence which characterised its inhabitants, contrasted sharply with the condition on the American frontier, where farms were widely dispersed and population densities of 50 persons per square mile were common, and where the relatively few Irish homesteaders (as in Graceville, Minnesota) often had great difficulty adjusting to their relative isolation. Moreover, although some argued that rural settlement would both promote Irish assimilation and curtail anti-Irish prejudices in America, the immigrants themselves believed that the eastern cities offered greater economic opportunities.¹⁴ Even though they were starting out on the bottom rung of the ladder, replicating the same social position they had held in Ireland, they were not deterred by this because America offered a better chance for advancement.

Tuke advocated Canada or the mid-western region of the United States as the most suitable destinations because they were underpopulated and had rich agricultural lands. During 1883 all of the Tuke emigrants were sent to Canada unless they showed evidence that their friends or relations in the United States would support them. Of the 5,409 people assisted by Tuke in 1883, 1,850 went to Canada and they came from regions where there had been little previous emigration to Canada. Tuke favoured Canada because the Canadian authorities were prepared to look after those emigrants who were sent to their jurisdiction and they placed less restrictions on the type of emigrant that they would accept. The Canadian government was providing additional incentives in encouraging immigration to Canada as it was facing competition for emigrants from the United States, Australia, New Zealand and

¹⁴ See *Anglo Celt*, 4 Feb. 1871; Riforgiato, 'Bishop John Timmons, Archbishop John Hughes', 38. The recent work by Donald H. Akenson has indicated those Irish who settled in Canada settled in rural areas and they fared out much better than those Irish who settled in urban United States. See Donald Harman Akenson, *The Irish Diaspora: A Primer* (Toronto and Belfast 1993) 217-70; idem, *The Irish in Rural Ontario: A Study in Rural History* (Kingston and Montreal 1983).

Canada.¹⁵ Companies like the Canadian Pacific Railway companies were looking for emigrant labour to help build a rail link between the east and the west of Canada. Free land was also available in Manitoba and a steady supply of agricultural labourers was required at high wages. The supporters of the schemes also favoured Canada because it was the closest British colony to Ireland: hence, passage costs were relatively cheap, whereas transportation to Australia was prohibitively expensive. Thus, one of Tuke's main allies was A. T. Galt, Canadian High Commissioner in London.

Most of the new emigrants were happy with their new lives in North America for they were now far away from the unceasing poverty and destitution that they had experienced in Ireland. Their positive attitude can be gleaned from the letter of an emigrant in Minnesota to his brother in Clifden urging him to leave, '... I think you will do well in this country. St Paul is the best place in the country for an emigrant to come to. There is more to be done this summer than has been for the last 15 years ...' Similar sentiments were expressed by a Belmullet emigrant living in Toronto, 'If you gave me a present of a house or farm in Tipp I would not go back to it ... I could not describe it to you its more like a Paradise, the very smell of the trees growing all along the footpaths here would do you good.'¹⁶ Such letters encouraged friends and relations back in Ireland to seek assistance, as is evident from the numbers who left in 1883 and 1884.

Most found good employment upon their arrival in Canada and the United States at wages which they never would have secured in Ireland. There was a constant demand for female domestic servants at rates ranging from \$5 to \$10 a month in Quebec and Montreal to \$12 to \$18 in St Paul. Farm labourers who settled in Manitoba and the North West Territories received \$2.50 a day.¹⁷ The further west

¹⁵ See Norman McDonald, *Canada: Immigration and Colonization, 1841-1903* (Aberdeen 1968) 124-30. The level of help can be seen in the information provided by the Canadian authorities. It said: 'Our agents are instructed to be kind and considerate to them, and we place men upon the trains to travel with them, and see that they are not imposed upon, and every attention that is possible is paid to them, and I repeat again that no immigrant that is able to work can want for employment in this country during the summer months, and there is not the slightest fear of their families wanting for shelter or food, if they are industrious and economical.' See Vere Foster's Second Irish Female Fund, 1880-3, p.3.

¹⁶ It was not surprising that the emigrant was not prepared to return to Tipp as the townland was one of the most congested along the west coast, having 134 families, 761 people, eking out a subsistence existence on small uneconomical farms. It was estimated that the cost of underemployment in the congested districts of County Mayo was £.5m. See *Nation*, 3 Nov. 1883.

¹⁷ Mr Vere Foster's Second Irish Female Fund, 1880-3, p.3.

the emigrants settled, the higher were their wages. Those who did not want agricultural employment were able to get good jobs with the railway companies.

While the emigrants were happy with their new lives in North America, many of them encountered problems, especially those who settled in Manitoba and the mid-western states. Because of climatic conditions those employed on the railways had to survive on seven months' wages over a twelve-month period. There was also the difficulty that the Irish had never experienced the severe weather conditions that prevailed in Manitoba and Minnesota. Labourers were also expected to travel up to 100 miles in search of work. There was the added question of how native Americans and Canadians would respond to a large influx of Irish which, many feared, would create a surplus of labour and reductions in local wages. Consequently, a period of planning and education was required to ensure that there would be no hostility between native and newcomer. Officials on both sides of the Atlantic strove with some success to overcome such prejudice by prepared itineraries for the newcomers which aimed to ensure that the Irish would be assimilated easily into rural society, not ghettoised in the eastern cities as had happened to many of their countrymen earlier. Tuke and the Canadians were so happy with this aspect of the scheme that in 1883 the Canadian Pacific Railway Company drew up plans to settle 50,000 Irish people in Canada.

Amongst the greatest difficulties which Tuke and the emigrants had to overcome was the negative attitude to the schemes of Irish-Americans and the American authorities. From the outset, the American authorities were more selective. They only accepted people who had friends and relations in the United States and who were prepared to look after them; they did not want the poorer emigrants. Some American states were worried about the influx of poor European emigrants. In June 1881, the New York superintendents of the poor called for the introduction of legislation which would reform the system which permitted European paupers to come freely into America.¹⁸ In the summer of 1881 a Dublin newspaper reported that the Dublin guardians were contemplating sending 25 workhouse inmates to New York. The American authorities were outraged and their Dublin consul secured a commitment from the Local Government Board in Dublin that this would not happen.¹⁹

¹⁸ *Boston Pilot*, 25 Jun. 1881, p.5.

¹⁹ Mr J. Shaw to Robert R. Hill (Washington), no. 82, 1 July 1881. *Despatches from the United States Consuls in Dublin, 1750-1900*, IX, 1881-90. The board replied on 5 July stating that the Dublin guardians had no intention of sending paupers to the United States; see also B. Banks to John Shaw (U.S. Consul, Dublin) no. 54, 5 July 1881.

In July 1883 American authorities inquiries to the Local Government Board demonstrated their fears that assisted Irish emigration amounted to the involuntary expulsion of helpless paupers who would become financial burdens on the government and private charities in the United States.²⁰ They feared that they would be left with large numbers of people who would become a burden on the American system if involuntary emigration occurred. Cases like that of the Carney family, a family of nine who were sent to the United States, heightened these fears. From their arrival, the Carneys were unable to fend for themselves, and the Emigration Commissioners in Castle Garden decided to send them back to Ireland, despite representations from the British Ambassador and the shipping company that they be let stay.²¹ Reports from Ireland that people were being evicted and told by their landlords to emigrate heightened these concerns. This led the federal government to describe the state aided emigration schemes as the 'exportation of people scheme'.²² Inevitably opposition was greatest in centres like Boston where a majority of the paupers were Irish and where the influx of new Irish appeared to sustain the view that the Irish were coming in droves to that city.²³ Governor Benjamin F. Butler of Massachusetts wrote in April 1883 that if he had the power to stop the landing of assisted emigrants in Boston he would do so, even though he had great sympathy with the people. Butler's anger was based on his refusal to 'recognise the right of the government of Great Britain to deport all its paupers to our shores, as if we were, though not a penal, a pauper colony of the empire'. Finally, Butler demanded that the federal government make diplomatic representations to the British authorities which would prevent these emigrants being 'dumped' in the United States.²⁴ Thus, American opposition to the schemes was similar to that which greeted the female workhouse emigrants in Australia in the late 1840s.²⁵

Why were those emigrants who had been evicted a short while before the implementation of the schemes classified as paupers? In

²⁰ Ibid., W. B. Woodsworth (Local Government Board) to John Piatt, no.49, 21 July 1883. *Despatches from Cork, 1800-1906*, IX.

²¹ *United Ireland*, 16 Aug. 1884.

²² John J. Piatt to John Davis (Washington), no. 48, 12 July 1883. *Despatches from the United States Consuls in Dublin 1750-1900*.

²³ On the problem of Irish paupers in the Boston area see *Boston Pilot*, 2 Jan. 1883.

²⁴ See *United Ireland*, 26 May 1883.

²⁵ See Judy Collingwood, 'Irish Workhouse Children in Australia' in John O'Brien and Pauric Travers (eds), *The Irish Emigrant Experience in Australia* (Dublin 1991) 56.

many cases they were brought into the workhouses prior to their departure to be given new clothes. The mention of the term 'work-house' was enough to create panic amongst the American authorities. In June 1883 it was reported that the Carrick-on-Shannon union had sent large numbers of paupers to the United States on the *SS Pennsylvania* via Larne. While acknowledging that 12-13 paupers had slipped through, the guardians refused to accept that a premeditated policy of forwarding its inmates had been pursued.²⁶ What this information fails to convey is that a number of women and their families were aided so that they could rejoin their husbands who were already settled in the United States.

Under such circumstances, the American authorities started examining the new arrivals with a rigidity that was not pursued towards other passengers. The United States Immigration Commission decided to detain all of the workhouse inmates who had been assisted by the British government and any of them deemed to be paupers were to be returned to Ireland. When the *Furnessia* arrived in New York in June 1883, the 300 assisted emigrants from Caherciveen were scrutinised in great detail and critics noted that there were many single women with families, implying the likelihood they would become a charge on New York's public revenue.²⁷ However, the critics failed to understand or report that many of these women were joining their husbands who had already settled in the United States. The practice of leaving family members in the workhouse and emigrating to North America was common in post-Famine Ireland. Most poor law unions realised that in time the fathers would send back part or all of the fares for the rest of the family. Women and children also took up temporary accommodation in the workhouses while their menfolk left for Britain as seasonal migrant workers for six months of the year. By entering the workhouse the women were ensuring that they and their children would be properly cared for until it was time for them to leave. This was done because they were unsure as to the location of their husbands and they had to fend for themselves as best they could until they were reunited with them.²⁸ Under these circumstances the poor law unions were not worried when they sent out women and children on

²⁶ Report of B. H. Barrows to First Assistant Secretary of State, 24 July 1883. *Despatches from United States Consuls in Dublin*, IX.

²⁷ *Boston Pilot*, 30 June 1883.

²⁸ See Dymphna McLoughlin, 'Workhouses and the Irish Female Paupers, 1840-80' in Maria Luddy and Cliona Murphy (eds), *Women Surviving: Studies in Irish Women's History in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Dublin 1990) 123-4, 134-5.

their own. However, the American authorities were unaware of these practices and the responsibility for this ignorance lay with the poor law guardians and the Emigration Committee.

Women also had to cope on their own in North America because of the absence of accommodation for families in rural areas. Often the husband had to leave his wife and family in cities like Toronto as he sought work on farms or on the railway.²⁹ While such a practice could be undertaken in Ireland, it was not viable in America. In Ireland, the wife and children could rely on friends and relations and, at the very worst, the workhouse to get the family through periods of poverty and harvest failures. But in urban America, it was feared, the same degree of community spirit and assistance could not be sustained among the impoverished immigrants. In most instances their neighbours were fellow emigrants who were encountering similar hardships.

The Americans responded by circularising their consuls in Cork and Dublin seeking clarification as to the type of people being assisted. The consuls replied that those who were being assisted came from the poorest sections of Irish society and were either receiving outdoor relief or were entirely dependent on the poor law.³⁰ This was yet another factor in changing the American attitude towards the schemes. Although the consuls supported the private initiatives of Tuke and Vere Foster they believed the poor law unions were dumping paupers in the United States. In an attempt to curtail the excesses of the unions, the consular agent in Sligo informed twelve of the unions along the western seaboard that if they sent paupers to the United States they would be returned at their expense.³¹

Consequently, a more rigid approach was adopted and a number of emigrants were returned to Ireland after arriving in New York. Nevertheless, the official records show that of the 17,000 assisted emigrants to North America in 1883 only 50 (merely 13 families, most from Kerry and Donegal) were returned by the American government.³² An examination of a number of cases shows that the local poor law guardians were at fault. Mary Brennan and Mary Clifford of the Caherciveen union were long term workhouse inmates with families who had no spouses to support them.³³ The guidelines had

²⁹ See *Nation*, 5 Jan. 1884.

³⁰ See John J. Piatt to John Davis, no. 49, 25 July 1883. *Despatches from United States Consuls in Cork to Washington, 1883-6*.

³¹ *Ibid.*, William J. Eccles to John Shaw, no. 114, enclosure 2, 18 July 1883. *Despatches from Dublin*.

³² *Annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland, being the ninth report*, H.C. 1884 [c 4051], xxxviii, p. 5; *Hansard* [27 Jul. 1883], cclxxxii, col. 780.

³³ John J. Piatt, no. 49, enclosure no. 2, 25 July 1883. *Despatches from the United States Consuls in Cork, 1800-1906*, IX.

been broken on two counts: the emigrants were not part of a family unit and in all probability would have become a burden on the American authorities. They were long-term paupers indicating that even during prosperous times they were unable to look after themselves. Neither had letters indicating support from friends and relations in the United States. Nevertheless, most of the 1,100 people assisted from Caherciveen met the criteria: they were cottiers, labourers and struggling farmers. Other cases highlight the guardians' failure to cater properly for their emigrants. Twenty assisted emigrants who arrived in New York were left to fend for themselves and had only \$3.50 each. They eventually travelled to South Manchester, Connecticut, where they were found destitute and had to be given charity by local philanthropists. Fifteen emigrants were sent to North Shields from Boston and none were able to speak English. They were found totally destitute and had to be supported by charity until they were able to fend for themselves. Seventy-four emigrants who arrived in Cleveland were found starving, with only \$2 between them.³⁴

Most unions found it impossible not to send their paupers to North America. While places like Carrick-on-Shannon were reluctant participants in the schemes, they became involved because of local demands. The desire to leave was so great it created an incentive for everyone to leave. Those who failed to meet the criteria still demanded that they be assisted. As with similar schemes to Australia during the Great Famine, most poor law union inmates were only too happy to leave.³⁵ It presented an opportunity for unions both to rid themselves of paupers who otherwise would have remained a permanent burden on their rates and to reduce the large debts they had incurred during the distress of 1879-82. There was little likelihood of these people ever being able to return to a life outside the workhouse, thus the guardians were availing of the opportunity of getting rid of long-term inmates without taking into account the difficulties which such people would endure in North America. One of these was John McCarthy who was one of a hundred people sent out by the Tralee guardians to North America. Having failed to get employment because of his poor health, he was eventually sent back to Ireland by the emigration authorities in New York.³⁶

³⁴ *Boston Pilot*, 7 July 1883; *United Ireland*, 9 June 1883, 28 July 1883.

³⁵ For the disapproval which the assisted emigration schemes were received during the Great Famine see Joseph Robbins, 'The Emigration of Irish Workhouse Children to Australia in the Nineteenth Century', in O'Brien and Travers, (eds) *Irish Emigrant Experience in Australia*, 36, 41; see also G. J. Parr, 'The Welcome and the Wake: Attitudes in Canada West towards the Irish Famine Migration' in *Ontario History*, 66:2 (1974) 101-113.

³⁶ *Nation*, 21 July 1883.

Many of the emigrants thought they were going to the land of their dreams, but often their visions were shattered. Some came to regret their decision to leave Ireland, in particular those assisted by the poor law guardians. Often there was nobody present to meet them at the ports and no attempt was made to provide them with employment. Many arrived in Boston and New York at a time when there was a major downturn in economic activity, resulting in large scale unemployment and destitution. Many were unskilled labourers and found it difficult get jobs in these cities. Often the local Catholic clergy had to come to their aid. It was thus not surprising that Fr Riordan who worked with the newly arrived Irish emigrants in Castle Gardens, warned: 'For God's sake, tell them to stay at home!'³⁷

Many poor law unions sent their charges to America in autumn or even winter and their late arrival caused severe problems. Although the Tuke Committee ensured that their emigrants left Ireland between April and mid-June, as instructed by the Local Government Board, the guardians were not as conscientious. An early arrival in North America allowed the new settlers to prepare for the long winter. While the last group of 800 Tuke emigrants arrived in New York in mid-July 1883 the majority of emigrants from Gort, Tuam and Loughrea had still to leave. Fifty families arrived in Toronto in the autumn of 1883, but as there was no agricultural work available for them they had to be given private charity.³⁸

Attitudes in Canada were also changing. This was evident in a government report on the conditions of the newly arrived Irish in the Conway St district of Toronto in late 1883. The report was drawn up by Charles Darling for the Board of the House of Inquiry and covered the conditions of 36 families, 195 people, living in Conway, Claremont and Hope Streets. The extent of the problem can be seen from the three families (fifteen people) who lived at 24 Conway Street. The Nestors, Carrs and Donoghues were living in four rooms under the most wretched of conditions. All were shoeless, wore rags and were huddled round a stove which gave out little heat. The three families had few bed clothes and the only work they could get was of a casual nature with low pay. Two other well-publicised cases were those of Mrs McLaughlin and Mrs Adley in Conway Street. Both of their husbands had taken up employment with the Canadian

³⁷ See *United Ireland*, 7 Feb. 1885. For work of Fr Riordan in Castle Gardens see Cornelius Buckley, 'The Friendless Exiles of Erin: An Apostle in the Gap of Danger' in *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* (Oct. 1884) 636-47.

³⁸ *Nation*, 5 Jan. 1884.

Pacific Railway Company, but were now working in the North West Territories at Terrace Bay. Mike McLaughlin's letter to his wife in November 1883 indicated the difficulties that workers with the Canadian Pacific Railway Company encountered. Money was deducted out of their pay for board, medical expenses and clothing, leaving little to be sent back to the family in Toronto.³⁹ In many cases the husbands and older sons had left in search of work in places as far away as Pittsburgh and Thunder Bay. Many of the women had little or no contact with their men folk and were unable to survive. The Government of Ontario had to provide \$500 towards the alleviation of distress amongst those in the Conway Street district. By March 1884 the Conway Street immigrants remained in destitution, surviving on charity and without any decent clothes. All of the reports indicated their hopelessness, despondency, anger and resentment. Most of them were from County Galway and many were workhouse inmates.⁴⁰

The person responsible for the problems in Conway Street, was Major Gaskell, who acted as emigration agent in County Galway. Many of the families had been enticed, urged and threatened into going by Gaskell who promised them a free grant of land with a furnished house, a cow, a pig and provisions for six months. However, on arrival in Quebec they discovered that there was no land available and they had to go to Toronto where they were now destitute.⁴¹

The attitude of the Canadians towards the emigration schemes was influenced by cases like that of Cornelius Leahy, his wife and five children. They were found at the Ottawa railway station with their few possessions. The family members were unsuitably clothed for the biting frost and were almost totally frozen. They had been inadequately cared for since their arrival in Canada and but for the generosity of some local people they would never have reached their destination.⁴² Such reports resurrected memories of the destitute, disease-stricken Irish who had arrived in Canada during the Great Famine and Canadians felt that their country was being used as a dumping ground for Ireland's problems. No distinction was made between those aided by Tuke and the poor law unions. While the Tuke Committee investigated these reports in Canada and concluded

³⁹ *Tuam News*, 11 Apr. 1884; *Nation* 5 Apr. 1884; *Nation*, 8 Dec. 1883; *United Ireland*, 19 Jan. 1884. For conditions on Irish emigrants in Toronto see Gerard Moran, 'State Aided Emigration from Ireland to Canada in the 1880s' in *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 20 (2) (Dec. 1994), pp 12-14.

⁴⁰ *Nation*, 5 Apr. 1884.

⁴¹ *United Ireland*, 8 Dec. 1883

⁴² *Nation*, 6 Jan. 1883.

that those families it had assisted were not in a poor state, Canadian opinion had been swayed against assisted emigration and little could be done to counteract this. The Canadians described the Irish who were being sent out as a 'lazy, dirty, thriftless lot' destined to live in idleness on Canadian charity and who contributed little to Canadian development.⁴³ Archbishop John Lynch of Toronto also pointed out the poor conditions which the emigrants had to endure in North America and added that it was not favourable to a people used to working outdoors. Negative public opinion, a downturn in economic activity and the opposition of the Catholic Church resulted in the Canadian government withdrawing from the schemes in March 1884.

The opposition was buttressed by the criticisms of Irish-American groups. From the outset newspapers such as the *Boston Pilot* were overt in their opposition to assisted emigration regardless of who encouraged it. Some critics attacked what they called 'Mr Tuke's Transatlantic Fool's Paradise', and opposed all the schemes because they were promoted by the British government and because they alleged those assisted were involuntary – not voluntary exiles.⁴⁴ Prominent Irish American leaders supported this approach. In June 1883 a delegation of 21 influential Irish Americans, led by Alexander Sullivan of the Irish American National League and Eugene Kelly, a New York banker, visited President Arthur and asked him to oppose the assisted emigration to the United States. While claiming they were not opposed to the emigrants coming to the United States, the delegates blamed the British government for policies which, they charged, forced the Irish to leave their homes, yet failed to provide adequate care once they arrived in the New World.⁴⁵ Many Irish Americans failed to realise that they had been forced to leave Ireland in the 1840s, 1850s and 1860s because of famine and poverty. They failed to comprehend that the emigrants themselves wanted to emigrate and would take any help that was offered. The only difference between the assisted emigrants and their Irish-American opponents was that the latter possessed the means to leave. The effect of this opposition was that Irish-American groups did not give the assisted emigrants any practical help, least of all to the workhouse inmates who needed it most. A number of organisa-

⁴³ McDonald, op. cit., pp 131-40; *Boston Pilot*, 22 Dec. 1883.

⁴⁴ See Vere Foster speech in Belfast, 22 Jan. 1882. N.L.I. MS 13,551, William O'Brien Papers. The *Boston Pilot* in the Autumn of 1881 stated that it would never encourage state-aided emigration, regardless of who sponsored it. See also *United Ireland*, 18 Aug. 1883.

⁴⁵ *Boston Pilot*, 30 June 1883, 1, 4.

tions such as the Hibernian Society helped impoverished Irish emigrants in the United States, but they did not come to the aid of the assisted emigrants. Irish Americans' principled objection to officially- (and even privately-) assisted emigration was greater than their sense of charity towards their distressed fellow countrymen. The emigrants were also unacceptable to some sections of Irish American society because of their less than presentable appearance, at a time when many Irish in the United States were striving for respectability and for acceptance in bourgeois America. This problem was not confined only to the assisted emigrants for in places like Rochester the local Irish population went so far as to ask newly-arrived Irish emigrants to move on to other centres.⁴⁶

The assisted emigration experiment is interesting from a number of perspectives. First, it shows that the British government was prepared to consider alternative structures to alleviate Irish distress. Instead of providing relief during periods of great destitution, it decided to take a more long term approach to the settlement of families from the more overpopulated regions of the country. Second, the approach to the scheme in North America indicated a more radical attitude. Instead of people emigrating to the urban centres of North America, they were encouraged to settle in under-populated mid-western regions where opportunities were more numerous and the anti-Irish prejudices were less prevalent. Finally, the scheme shows that a prejudice against poor Irish emigrants still prevailed which resembled the unfavourable welcome which the poor Irish encountered on their arrival in North America during the Great Famine.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ See Dennis Clark, *Erin's Heirs: Irish Bonds of Community* (Kentucky 1991) 37.

⁴⁷ I wish to thank Prof. Kerby Miller, Prof Gary Owens and the late Dr Dennis Clark for their assistance and opinions in the preparation of this article.