

EMIGRATION IN IRELAND THEN AND NOW

Last week I received a lovely letter from an 84-year-old first cousin of mine who lives in Canada. She told me that she is hale and hearty and is currently on no medication. She is very proud that she has survived thus far in life, having had breast cancer some years ago, but she is now all clear. She had planned a three-month sojourn in Ireland this year but had to cancel due to Covid 19. Her last major sojourn was a month's safari in Africa. She spoke about the great Irish Diaspora and the number of members of our own families who had as she said "taken the boat" to far flung fields in search of a better way of life. She sent me on some photos of myself and herself when we were children and also commented that this generation of people have no idea of the poverty of our past.

When I got that letter and photos from `Canada I was prompted to write the following dealing with both sides of my family's travels abroad. I deviate off that train for a few moments when I am diverted to Rathkeale for another emigration story.

I recalled that my grandfather, Daniel, on my father's side of the family emigrated to Waterbury, Connecticut in 1902 but luckily for us he came back to Ardfert in 1906. Our grandmother Nell O Connell was born on September 3rd, 1888. She married Daniel in 1907. They had 14 children and 3 of them died in their first year of life. Eight of them 'took the boat'. One uncle joined the British army and fought on the beaches of France during D-Day. He survived and returned to set up a furniture store in Manchester. He never returned to Ireland because he feared what people back home might say or do to him because he had joined the British Army. The others are scattered throughout England and the USA.

I now take a step back in time to my great-great grandparents. Nell's parents were born circa 1850. They had 12 children, 6 of whom emigrated and went to live in the USA. The first girl, Kate, went out in 1897 and married a John O Halloran. Then she brought out her brother Michael and so the process continued until six of them had emigrated.

They worked hard, firstly in Chicago, and Detroit but then as more members of the family were brought over, they moved to Toledo, Ohio. Now the present generation is involved in medicine, teaching, some are attorneys while some others are in business. One of them set up the Irish import shop in Toledo. Another married a farmer who farmed 1500 acres on the outskirts of Toledo. Here they had a big store where they sold the many products of their orchards like apples, peaches, berries as well as cheeses and meats.

I was really fascinated by this information that a small family from Barrow, Ardfert, County Kerry could emigrate to the USA and through hard work be so successful in a short period of time. The present local Parish Priest in the area is in the direct O Connell line. He is Fr. Joseph Steinbauer.

They are all very proud that they were able to track their O Connell lineage back to our great Liberator from Derrynane, Daniel O Connell. I believe them. Another section of the family managed to track the O Callaghan line back to Noah, but I won't row out the boat on that line.

On my mothers' side, my grandmother Curran, born in Lisardboula, Tralee emigrated to New York in 1898 on board *Brooklyn Bridge*, The White Star Line. She spent six years there before returning to Ireland and married my grandfather Mike Curran in 1906. They lived on a 52-acre farm in Ballindouganig, Ballyseedy and Mike also had a butcher's shop in Boherbee, Tralee. They had 6 children, my mother being one of them the second eldest and born in 1908. Three of the family emigrated.

The farm was worked by my uncle Paddy and family. This was hard going at pre EU and farm subsidy time. When he died his wife was left with a young family and unable to cope. They sold up everything and emigrated to America . They were very much a part of our lives growing up together, visiting granny every Sunday, hay making . It was all so traditional with the menfolk out in the fields and the women folk ferrying out the food. It was a sad night before they left for the USA. We had a big all night American wake when all the relatives and neighbours came to pay their respects to the departing family. It was as if someone in the house had died.

Tragedy struck them in their first year out there when one son was killed in a car accident. The other family members went to college in America and were very successful in life. They were following on the tradition of huge numbers of Irish. They were also lucky that a relative had gone out before them and made the transition to Long Island a little easier.

The Irish were the first ethnic group who arrived in huge numbers in the USA . When we look at migrants coming into Europe today from war torn countries, they are dwarfed by the number of Irish people who were forced to leave Ireland during and since famine times. Between the years 1820 to 1920 a total of 4250000 people emigrated from Ireland. 1288207 people left our shores between 1846 and 1855. This was when Ireland was ravished by the great famine.

The Irish had one great advantage in that their literacy levels were very good and far better than native Americans and the other British groups who had reached those areas before them. This helped greatly to progress them in work ,politics and commercial life. Another striking figure was the fact that most Irish people were staunchly Catholic and were all Democrats, politically. They stuck together as an ethnic group. They also controlled the Catholic church and schools in the areas they lived in

I had absorbed all the information on my own family's dispersal over the years when I got a lovely what's app message from a friend of mine in Limerick. He was telling me about the Palatine Museum in Rathkeale dealing with the arrival of The Palatines in Ireland. I read the piece and then I noticed that some of these Palatines came to Gorey and other parts of Wexford as well and so my research started. I never realised that we were welcoming refugees into Ireland since 1720.

I found that shortly after they arrived a list of the families living in Gorey was put together. These names listed in 1720 included Altimus, Ashbagh, Berner, Crouse, Green, Hofeman, Poole, Rapell, Real, Rynhart , Sheafer, Swartz. Wise, Wolf and Young. You can still find many of these family names living here today.

It is interesting that about 8000 Palatines came to England and Ireland in 1709 from the Swabian Rhine. They were mainly Calvinists and Lutherans who were economic refugees fleeing the war and famine in southwest Germany. The group that came to Gorey, were initially settled on the Ram Estate in Gorey and were given patches of land. They were noted for their innovation in farming and industry. They developed many of their own farming practices in their adopted county and helped Wexford achieve the title of Model County which it still retains to this day. The book entitled "The German Palatine Settlement in County Wexford and Beyond in 1709" by Bernard Browne tells the story of the remarkable story of the Palatines contribution to County Wexford.

Today, over three hundred years later we see thousands of refugees fleeing the trouble spots of the Middle East, the famine and deprivation in Africa and from some European Countries where living standards are not as high as ours. Vast numbers are flocking to Ireland seeking a better way of life.

It is great to be able to welcome them to our towns and villages around the country. Sadly, some of them are suffering racist abuse. We should remember our own past history and keep the memory of those offensive racist signs "No Irish Need Apply" before our eyes. It behoves all of us to welcome the strangers to our shores with open arms.

They too must be treated with the dignity and respect that our forebears expected and received on foreign shores.

As the bible says in the good book of Exodus 22.21" you shall not oppress a stranger nor torment him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt"

Leviticus 19.30 says in similar vein "When a foreigner resides with you in your land ,you must not oppress him".

What an ideal world we would have if all leaders, and people of good faith and none, lived by the bible. We live in hope.

Mick O Callaghan 26/05/2021