

Ireland in the Nineteenth Century

“Nil duine ar bith sách laidir ag an ocras ach aon la ambian, Scaipeann se na cnamhai agus leagham se an fheoil”.

(“Nobody is strong enough to withstand hunger for more than a day; it slackens the bones and dissolves the flesh”).¹

- Brother James L. Coogan, FSC

Conditions in Ireland Preceding the Departure of Quinn Family Members

For the modern American, it is virtually impossible to envision the conditions that forced our ancestors to leave their native countries, where they had lived for centuries, to emigrate to the United States. The fact that they did so was hardly for adventure or even a “better life” but more likely necessitated for survival.

While there is no written record and hardly even verbal living histories attesting to their motivation, the Quinn’s did leave Limerick probably in 1884² doubtlessly after having considered many possible alternatives.

It is on record that the first Quinn to leave Ireland was Arthur³, most likely an uncle of William (affectionately known as Papa) around whom much of the family history was written. The National Archives, Washington, D.C. holds the enlistment papers of Arthur Quinn who fought on the side of the North during the Civil War⁴. The official Limerick record of family departures noted that they were “preceded to America by Arthur Quinn who fought in the Civil War”. Further research might locate his date of entry and place of residence. The Archives does not have a pension record, as he did not serve long enough to merit one. Hence, there is no information on his whereabouts following discharge. Nor is there evidence to support his contact with other family members once they came to America. Gertrude Coogan was surprised to learn of him, as she never recalled anyone mentioning his name.



Typical Cottage with Potato Storage

John Quinn (b.1839, d.1903) and his wife Mary (Cagney) Quinn (b.1841, d. 1907) made a second departure to these shores in 1884. Their youngest child, Elizabeth (Lizzie) held a

¹ In Cormac O’Grada. *Black ’47 and Beyond*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ. 1999. page 219

² Jeremiah J. Quinn, Death Certificate, Registry of Wills, City of Pittsburgh

³ See, Record, National Archives, family Scrapbook

⁴ See Scrapbook, William Quinn

baptismal record from the home parish of Ballingary⁵ and offers the most certain verification of the place from which the family came, Ballingary, Co. Limerick. The specific record of the immigration was apparently lost when government records at their Baltimore port of entry were destroyed (possibly in the Great Fire of 1904).

It is not unlikely that the family was sponsored by William Cagney, brother of Mary, who was by now living with his family in Pittsburgh either in the Lawrenceville or in South Side section of the city.

Irish Life: Mid-1840s

Although the total area of Ireland is only 32,000 square miles, (about the same size as North Carolina) it had a population of 8.5 million people⁶. It is often spoken of as defined by the ancient provinces of:

- Leinster (south)
- Munster (central and west, incorporating Limerick County)
- Ulster (north, Northern Ireland)
- Connacht (west)

Before the famine and by 1845 some 351,000 persons had already left Ireland for North America largely due to deindustrialization and the collapse of cottage industries because of increased industrialization in England and Ulster plus landholding laws. However, "Of the total of 2.1 million who left between 1845 and 1855, 1.2 million fled before 1851 but as many as 900,000 departed over the next five years".⁷ It has been estimated that approximately one quarter, or 2.3 million of the existing population in 1845 was considered to be poverty-struck as a result of conditions and over-population.⁸ Many laborers moved about the country seasonally in search of work while others migrated to England and nearby Scotland.

Illiteracy prevailed among this large element of the populace and estimated to stand at about 60% although parts of Munster and the midlands fared considerably better. Conditions in the homes were abysmal. Built of either stone or mud they were small, heated with turf fires and were thatch roofed. Land ownership was limited and unless 20 acres or more were secured, a family could not be supported there with cattle or produce. Consequently, many families were granted "Conacre" by the larger landowners in return for their labor and on this that they grew their potatoes.



Ruined Village of Moveen

It is commonly agreed that the famine was catastrophic in its proportions. Even compared to those that swept Europe and Asia at various times in their histories, that which took place in Ireland, was significantly greater. The potato, aided by a favorable climate, was easy to grow; when eaten together with dairy products and fish it supplied virtually all nutritional needs. It was estimated that the ordinary laborer consumed on the average between 10 and 14 pounds

⁵ Cf. "Michael Quinn" **Coogan-Quinn Scrapbook (CQFS)**, p. 4

⁶ James S. Donnelly, Jr. *The Great Irish Potato Famine*. Sutton Publishing Co. Gt. Britain. 2001. page 1.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 178.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 3

of potatoes per day.⁹ It also served as an excellent feed for pigs as it could be grown easily and thus afforded many a cash income from pork that was much in demand in England at the time.

The crisis began to manifest itself in 1845 when a fungal disease *phytophthora infestans*, genus *botrytis* (commonly called “the blight”) began to appear in Europe as it had in eastern parts of the United States. At first, it was not thought to be serious and that it could be restricted to certain parts of the country. However, by 1846 and 1847 it had spread to virtually every part of Ireland thereby decimating the essential food supply for the greater number of the population. Their virtual dependence on this staple and crippled by the absence of alternatives the problem was exacerbated beyond imagination. The pestilence



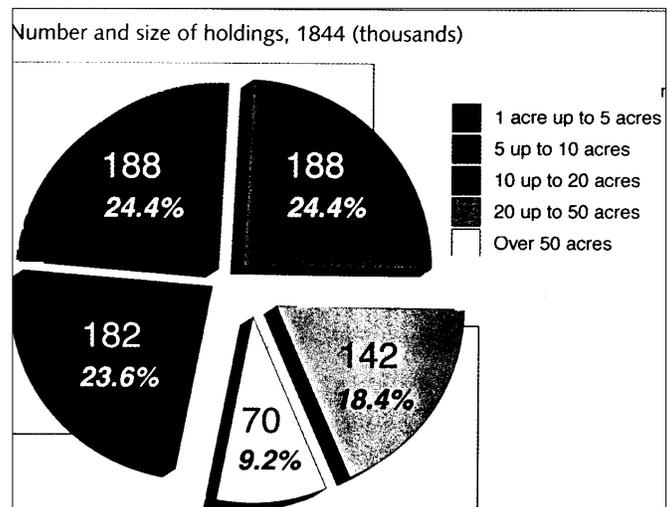
Inspecting Harvested Potatoes

moved quickly fomenting the spread of other diseases mainly cholera, typhus and tuberculosis. Cholera was particularly rampant since it was only later discovered how it passed on easily in the crowded living conditions of home and workhouse.

While the government attempted to alleviate the disaster, efforts were slow and cumbersome. The plight was looked upon with prejudice by Parliament reflecting a general sentiment among the population. Goodly portions of the

treasury’s resources were diverted for the purchase of Indian (corn) meal that when mixed with oatmeal and cooked proved to be of good sustenance. However, the product was foreign to most people and they were slow to adopt its use. Still, large sums were made available and much of this was to fund public works so that people could purchase food – yet this proved to be grossly insufficient to meet the need.¹⁰

Out of a sense of panic, many small landowners sold off holdings either to buy food or to emigrate. It is known that not a few of the larger owners, in order to acquire land, paid the passage of tenants. On the other hand, they took advantage of the Poor Laws whereby they could claim land as rents went unpaid. When this occurred, the homes were raised so that renters could not return to them. Thus, since exposed to the elements - most pe



⁹ Ibid, p. 2.

¹⁰ Cormac O’Grada. Black ’47 and Beyond. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ. 1999. page 78

Commenting on the land question Lee says:

“Most of the famine dead were laborers and cottiers in the west and south of the country. The number of laborers and cottiers fell from more than one million in 1845 to less than 600,000 in 1851. The number of farmers over fifteen acres actually rose somewhat, from about 277,000 to 290,000. The balance of population and power changed significantly in rural Ireland in those few years.”

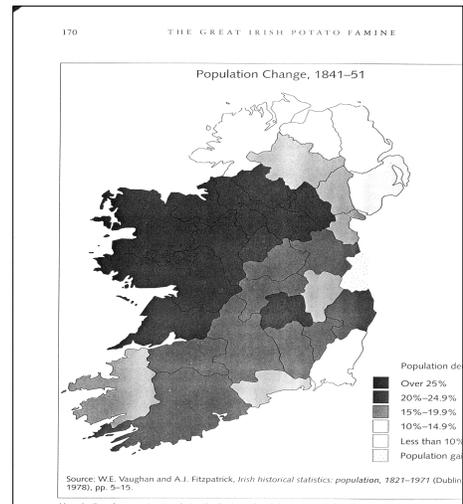
Conacreage was useless to laborers when the potato failed. Conacre and cottier plots had to be thrown up, and were almost wiped out in a few years. Stronger farmers pounced on the chance to snatch back at least half a million acres, probably more nearly a million, over which they had effective control. Another million and a half came on the market through death or emigration or eviction of the cottiers and small farmers.”¹¹

The overall excess mortality rate rose to 1,082,000. The rate for Munster alone is estimated to have been 383,000 or 13.9% of its inhabitants.¹² Thus, Ireland’s population declined from 8.2 million, as recorded in the census of 1841, to 6.6 million by 1851.¹³

Consequences of 1847 Famine

As controls over “the blight” and public assistance became more common the country stabilized to a significant degree. However, many felt it was foolhardy to remain prompting continued emigration to other countries including Scotland, Canada and Australia where there was work to be had.

However, in the late 1870s blight struck again coupled with generally poor economic conditions. The Quinn’s, who had lived their early childhood under the previous situation, might possibly have felt that it was time for them and their young family of eight children to leave their Ballingary, County Limerick – their homeland. Land holdings as recorded by the Devon commission in 1845 in Ireland suggests that more than 58 percent of the population held 10 acres or less and half of these had less than five acres. The Quinn’s of their area are not recorded as landowners.¹⁴ Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that they were very small landowners or, at best, renters or farm laborers. Pop Quinn referred to the fact that his people had a farm in Pittsburgh on Washington Blvd but lived in East Liberty, a neighborhood located on an upper level above the boulevard.¹⁵



¹¹ Joseph Lee in *Milestones in Irish History*. Liam De Paor, editor, Mercier Press, Dublin. 1998. page 108

¹² O’Grada, page 110.

¹³ Donnelly, page 170, 171.

¹⁴ Cf. Devon’s record

¹⁵ Cf. “William Quinn” William Q. Coogan, biographical sketch p.1.

The Quinn's Leave for America

Given these circumstances, how could this family of eight children (John, Jr. William, Patrick, Mary Agnes, Jeremiah, Michael, Timothy and Elizabeth) with parents find passage money? One might speculate these options or a combination thereof:

- a) land sale if they possessed any;
- b) buyout by landlord; some of these gave passage money in return for land;
- c) sale of livestock, had they possessed any
- d) funds from abroad (Cagney's were already living in Pittsburgh)

The cost of transatlantic crossing was £20 (approximately \$70) for a family of five. Individual rates were probably about \$50 per person. At this point it can only be speculated how the money was garnered but the necessity to leave was clear. This is supported by a fragment of oral history: Aunt May at one time suggested to her father Poppa (William) that he might go back to Ireland to visit. His response was emphatic “Go back? We were lucky to get out with our lives, why would I ever want to go back?” In another conversation with daughter, Anna Gertrude, she recalled he commented that her father told her at one time that he did not live with his parents while in Ireland observing, “They were too poor to keep me so I went to live with my grandparents”.

