From Ireland to America: Emigration and the Great Famine 1845 – 1852

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Abstract

One of the changes that compose history is the migration of peoples. The human development of colossal numbers from one geographical area to another and their first contact with other social and economic backgrounds is a major source of change in the human state. For at least two centuries long before the great brook of the Hungry Forties, Irish immigrants had been making their way to the New World. Yet, the tragedy of the Great Famine is still seen as the greatest turning point of Irish history for the future of Ireland was forever changed. The paper tends to explore the conception of emigration and how it steadily became “a predominant way of life” in Ireland, so pervasive and integral to Irish life that it had affected the broad context of both Irish and American histories simultaneously. From the post-colonial perspective, my study presents emigration as one of the greatest emotional issues in Irish history, as it tends to have a very negative image especially in the post-Famine era. People are generally seen as involuntary “exiles”, compelled to leave Ireland by “British tyranny” and “landlord oppression” - an idealized Ireland where everyone was happy and gay and where roses grew around the door of the little white-washed cottage.

Keywords: Irish history, Irish diaspora, emigration, the Great Famine, America.
Introduction

The present paper explores how the Great Famine and its devastating damage influenced Irish nationhood. “The Great Hunger” is in some ways both the most visually affecting and intellectually debatable theme. As a national catastrophe, the Famine destroyed food source, starved Irish, brought about Irish diaspora and even reduced the marital rate. The persistence of a long-term ingrained potato blight mingled with colonialism resulted in the Great Famine and its devastating consequences. British colonial government took advantage of Irish economically and degraded them into an uncivilized race, which deprived the country of its national dignity. Harsh circumstances had compelled a third of Ireland's 1845 population of about nine million people into almost total dependence on the New World import, the potato, as a food staple, even as grain continued to be grown for export. Poor peasants suffered most immediately and lastingly from starvation and disease that became the twin killers between 1845 and 1851-52 when the famine reached its climax. Not only were unsuccessful measures taken but also an economic system that benefited landlords evolved which led to Irish mass-scale emigration. As Peter Quinn notes, however, the defining historical event that intertwined forever the fates of Ireland and the United States was the Great Famine, or more accurately An Gorta Mor, or “the Great Hunger.” Many tried to reassure their fears and resentments with the warm belief that the United States was a fabled “promised land”—with “gold and silver lying in the ditches, and nothing to do but to gather it up,” as one young immigrant dreamed. (Miller and Wagner 1997) Historians incontrovertibly tend to show that Irish immigration to America reached unprecedented rates shortly after the potato blight Phytopthora infestans ruined its first crop in the Irish fields in 1845. “It was an enormous and sudden stream of hungry and frightened Irish, most of them Roman Catholics, many of them farmers, a good proportion of them native speakers of Irish, and their children made America a more inviting place for the Irish to come to, and for others as well, but it was not easy.” (Coffey 1997)

The Irish Great Famine 1845:

Few topics of Irish history have attracted as much popular interest as the Great Famine of 1845-52. Many great tomes have been written on the topic, books as thick as doorsteps. Wherever the Irish diaspora reached, the Famine is never far beneath the surface, which has shaped Irish history fundamentally. However, this is not the place for a detailed investigation about the Great Famine because simply a true understanding of it comes only through recognition of a powerful complexity of its causes but rather it is an attempt to survey its effects.

The precise number of people who died is perhaps the most keenly studied effect of the famine: unfortunately, this is often for political rather than historical reasons. But most importantly, the consequences of the blight that devastated the Irish potato crop in the years 1845 – 1850 extended well beyond the borders of the Emerald Isle generating in a massive emigration. During the Hungry Forties, hundreds of thousands of refugees crossed the Atlantic to escape a situation commonly described and well known by historians. Irish immigration to America reached unprecedented rates shortly after the potato blight Phytopthora infestans ruined its first crop in the Irish fields in 1845. (Coffey 1997) In the
decade of 1840-1850, nearly 800,000 Irish immigrants entered the United States. (Griffin 1990) Therefore, it is thought that the calamity marked a watershed in Irish history, not only for politics but also for culture, religion, demographics, agriculture and industry by accelerating the restructuring of each domain. (Walsh 2005) However, its occurrence was neither inevitable nor avoidable.

It has, at times, been argued that decreasing opportunities in agriculture were a major reason for emigration. This would be reliable with the surveyed high emigration rates from counties in the rural west and south. Centuries of absentee English and Anglo-Irish Protestants landlords transformed agriculture in Ireland from a backward, small-scale subsistence activity to a modern, large scale, market-oriented one. (Walsh 2005) Due primarily to medical and nutritional advances which contributed to a reduction in the death rate of small children who would live to have children of their own, Ireland faced a tremendous population explosion in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – from a little more than two million Irish people in 1700 to above eight million in 1841. (Coffey 1997) In short, the west of Ireland was a densely populated area of poor farmers who, for generations, had depended on the potato as their main staple food. However, they were so poor that when the potato failed, no other cheap alternative food could be used for trading. (Woodham-Smith 1992)

Although the island was still predominantly agricultural in which the domain was carried on by peasants who competed against each other for the only source of living, farming yielded little in return for very hard work. (Crist 1997) On one hand, the policy of free trade had guided to an agrarian crisis and escape from the land. It brought to the majority of the British urban population, on the other hand, the advantage of cheaper agricultural products. On the contrary, the entire population in Ireland felt the disastrous effects of this policy. (Silagi 1990) Underdevelopment and capital scarcity are undoubtedly closely related phenomena of 19th Century rural Irish. (Mokyr 2006) More than 90 percent of the Irish made their living—directly or indirectly—from agriculture. (Palmer 1978) However, farming work was not rewarding enough.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, Dublin had a reputation for having perhaps the most horrible living conditions of any European city. While cities in the British Isles, such as London, Manchester, and Glasgow, possessed a number of factory districts and slum areas of equal destitution, they relatively represented small portions of the entire city in comparison to the ubiquitous Dublin's poverty. (Miller 1985) Thus, the excessive poverty that distinguished life from that of the other European courtiers for most of the Irish offered the

The motives behind emigration:

“Thousands of undocumented Irish felt as if they had been forced out of Ireland in the first place by circumstances beyond their control.” (Miller 1985) This exodus from Ireland was largely a result of poverty, lower salaries, worse living conditions; in short, and limited opportunities. Kerby Miller further explains that, “The motives governing most Famine emigrants were qualitatively different from those which had inspired earlier departures. In the previous Famine decades emigrants sought ‘independence,’ economic improvement, in a land fabled for opportunity and abundance. During the Famine, however, most emigrants aspired merely to survive: ‘all we want is to get out of Ireland,’
testified one group; ‘we must be better anywhere than here.’” (Miller 1985) Though some landlords helped them out of humanitarian motives, there were undeniably benefits to them, especially those who wanted to secure their land assets or change from the cultivation of land to beef and dairy farming.

As a matter of fact, many things stimulated the Irish to emigrate from their homeland – the promise of a section of land (640 acres in Kansas for free or ridiculously cheap) was a huge attraction for an Irish farmer on ten or twenty acres. In the long run, labour appears to have been pulled out of the Irish agricultural sector by higher wages abroad. (O'Rourke 1991) “The vibrant American economy described in letters home from earlier immigrants had a strong appeal to people who had endured such trials, and they began to dream of an American Eden overflowing with milk and honey.” (Bradley 1986) Stories of tremendous wages abroad tempted young men and women who slaved on the family farm year after year and seldom had the price of a drink or were able to pay their way into a dance. Charmed by such promises, many young Irish families, thus, perceived their futures in America and not Ireland. The changing routes for emigration also reflected profound despair. Previously, passengers had embarked at the major parts in Ireland, or from Liverpool. Now emigrant ships left from small, little-used parts such as Westport, Kinsale and Killale. This partly had an affect on Ireland as those who were most active and who could immensely contribute to Ireland had just left Ireland.

Nevertheless, the essence of adventure and the simple desire to escape the oppressive effect of the religious and ethical regime in Ireland in the aftermath of the Great Famine were also great incentives to leave all behind. Most young people at that time were disposed of a strong adventurous spirit. A dry comment dismissively suggested that if one had a problem they should ask a young person – while they still knew everything. The temptation of adventure was hard to resist, particularly when the chances of making one’s fortune at home in Ireland became ever more so tiny if not entirely non-existent.
In the summer of 1845 an unknown fungus, *Phytophthora infestans*, suddenly struck and destroyed the crop at a terrifying fundamental way of life across the fields of Ireland. (Bradley 1986) “The country … is greatly alarmed on account of a disease in the Potato Crop,” confessed a farmer's wife, “we are feeling the effect of it but God knows no how it will end.” (Bradley 1986° The desperate situation is brilliantly described in Kerby Miller’s *Emigrants and Exiles*:

“The leaves turned black, crumbling into ashes when touched, and the very ‘air was laden with a sickly odor of decay, as if the hand of death had stricken the potato field, and . . . everything growing in it was rotten. In many places the wretched people were seated on the fences of their decaying gardens, wringing their hands and wailing bitterly the destruction that had left them foodless.” (Miller 1985)

Because Irish economy mainly depended on agriculture rather than industry, the region was to endure from the effects of the famine that plunged the country into a serious depression. Unable to keep up with the demands of their British landlords, Evictions became common among Famine victims on outdoor relief and significantly peaked in July at almost 840,000 people. (Ross 2002) Untold thousands perished, and the survivors, destitute of hope, wished only to get away. The situation was so bleak that most Irish were forced to choose between starving at home and attempting to survive abroad. By 1851 census figures showed that the population of Ireland had dropped to 6,575,000 - a fall of 1,600,000 in ten years. (Ross 2002) Although it is described as a famous source, Cormac Ó Gráda and Joel Mokry would contend the 1851 census arguing that the amalgamation of
institutional and individuals figures provides “an incomplete and biased count” of the total fatalities during the famine. (Ó Gráda 2006)

“In one Union”, said Sir Robert Peel “at a time of famine within one year, 15,000 persons have been driven from their homes... I do not think the records of any country, civilized or barbarous, ever presented such scenes of horror. All the better land is turned into pasture; and on what remains of the soil, the remnant of the peasants are allowed to huddle together.” (Duffy 1884) In ten years, 252,000 peasant homes were destroyed and a million and a half of the Irish people crossed to America. Indeed, many unscrupulous landlords used the infamous Gregory Clause as an excuse to evict thousands of unwanted cottiers from their estates. Gallagher explains that British absentee landlords owned 70 percent of Ireland, therefore the potato blight served as a perfect excuse to evict the Irish. (Gallagher 1982) Evictions became common among the Irish who couldn't keep up with the demands of their British landlords. The Potato Famine forced the Irish destitute, starving, to be evicted and take their chances on ships headed for America as their only hope for survival. (Byron 1999) In 1849, the police recorded a total of almost 250,000 persons as officially evicted between 1849 and 1854. (Póirtéir 1995) Yet, Donnelly considered this to be an underestimate. According to him, if the figures were to include the number forced into involuntary surrenders during the whole period (1846-54) the figure would certainly exceed half a million persons. (Póirtéir 1995)

Figure 2: A picture showing an Irish family being evicted.
Figure 3: "Ireland's Holocaust" mural on the Ballymurphy Road, Belfast. "An Gorta Mór, Britain's genocide by starvation, Ireland's holocaust 1845-1849."

Death from starvation and disease was extremely unbearable in the 1840s and many saw no choice but to abandon a land that had caused them so much hardship, and resolutely perceived on creating a better life in America. (Bradley 1986) Emigration reached new heights and the infamous coffin-ships crossed the Atlantic in large numbers carrying people fleeing from the famine. (Keneally 1999) Most of all, according to Kerby Miller, “the vast majority of Catholic emigrants left home for essentially mundane reasons similar or identical to those which produced mass migration from other European countries.” (Miller 1985) As a proportion of the population, the pace of emigration from Ireland was more than double that of any other European country, with as many as 13 persons per 1,000 emigrating on average each year. Unusually, in comparison with male-dominated emigration from other European countries, Irish emigration was composed almost equally of males and females. Females accounted for 48 percent of all recorded emigrants over the period as a whole. (Hatton 1993)

For almost one-fourth of all Irish in Ireland to survive the Great Famine, they would have to live long enough to reach a port of embarkation, leave Ireland by whatever means available, and reestablish their Irish identity in new lands. In 1847, approximately forty immigrant-laden ships were arriving at New York City docks each week. (Jenkins & Swacker 2006) “Emigration became an accepted, if painful, necessity.” (O'Donnell 1997) Laxton concludes that, “Death by Famine or departure by emigration, can logically claim a loss to Ireland in real terms, of two and a half million people—more than one in four.” (Laxton 1996) Between 1850 and 1913 more than 4.5 million men and women fled Ireland for a new life overseas to try new things, to expand, to live the more abundant life, spiritually as well as materially. According to Table 1, the overwhelming dominance of the flow was to the United States. Actually, immigration to America was referred to as ‘the
America Wake.’ (Jenkins and Swacker 2006) However, the exact total number of Famine Irish immigrants to the United States will never be known. (Laxton 1996) Figures to be mentioned throughout this essay remain only approximate. Kerby Miller notes, “In all, over 2.1 million Irish—about one-fourth of the island’s pre-Famine population—went overseas; more people left Ireland in just eleven years (1845-1855) than during the preceding two and one-half centuries.” (Miller 1985)

As shown in Figure 7, the Irish population fell sharply from 6.5 to 4.4 million between 1851 and 1911 as an effect of this mass migration. Thus, the great famine ignited an explosion in the magnitude of emigration as the number of Irish who entered the U.S. was undoubtedly estimated to skyrocket in the 1840s; nearly 2 million came in that decade. (Walsh 2005) The flow carried on ever more for over the next 5 years averaging 200,000 per year, as the first immigrants began to make the resources of sending for relatives and friends.

**Population Fall in Ireland 1841–1851**

![Population Fall in Ireland 1841–1851](http://www.ijhcs.com/index.php/ijhcs/index)

Figure 4: The map shows the sharp fall of population across Ireland.
Table 1: Emigration to Ireland to various countries, 1876 - 1913

The journey to America

Though many couldn't speak or read English, advertisements for emigration from passenger brokers were placed throughout Ireland. (Hatton and Willamson 1993) This appeared as a cruel action if one thinks of the act being committed in itself. During their most important depression, the Irish were wretchedly helped to leave their country. People didn't relate to them in one of the simple ways. As they perhaps didn't know that the majority of the Irish population couldn't speak or read English. Yet one would deduce they had knowledge of this but simply chose to disregard it. Often, priests explained the advertisements and then blessed each traveler before departure. The latter was the bitterest and people regretfully wept as they left all behind: their families, their friends, their tiny villages but most of their homeland. The promise of opportunity and the blessing of the priest were their only reassurance. Nevertheless, it was one of those challenging journeys that required strength of mind and of body.

Most of those who emigrated relied on their own resources; some landlords helped through direct subsidies or by relieving those who left of their unpaid rent bills. The
landless poor simply could afford to leave. Most people paid their own fares to make the trip, although perhaps 3% had their fares paid by their landlords. (O Grada, 1995) The cheapest fares were to Canada, around 55 shillings while a fare to the USA cost between 70 shillings and £5 (100 shillings). (Edwards and Williams 1999)

As shown in the following picture, the scene in the Waterloo dock, at Liverpool, where all the American sailing packets used to be stationed, was at all times a very busy one. “There was even a shortage of ships to carry away the desperate refugees who had could scrape together money for their passage.” (Bradley 1986) And on the morning of the departure of a large ship, with a full complement of emigrants, it was unusually exciting and interesting. The passengers would have undergone inspection, and many of them would have taken up their quarters on board for twenty-four hours previously, as they were entitled to do by terms of the act of Parliament. Without enough food or clothing for the journey, many fled in a panic crowding aboard the notorious ‘coffin ships’ for a dangerous midwinter voyage.

There were more often than not a large number of spectators at the dock-gates to witness the final departure of the noble ship, with its large freight of human beings. It was an appealing and impressive sight; and the most heartless and indifferent can barely fail, at such a moment, to form convivial wishes for the pleasant voyage and secure entrance of the emigrants, and for their future affluence in their new home. It was the uppermost feeling in the mind of many thousands of the poorer class of English emigrants at the moment when the cheers of the spectators and of their friends on shore proclaim the instant of departure from the land of their birth. They left from Sligo, Cork, Dublin, Londonderry [Derry], and Liverpool. They left sadly, often to unhappy songs like the *Lament of the Irish Emigrant*:

“I’m bidding you a long farewell,  
My Mary kind and true,  
But I'll not forget you, darling,  
In the lad I'm going to:  
They say there's bread and work for all,  
And the sun shines always there;  
But I'll not forget old Ireland,  
Were it fifty times as fair.” (Bayor and Meagher 1996)
There were two ways one could travel, either in a standard class or in steerage. Standard passengers had berths and could walk in the deck. Steerage passengers were crowded together below decks and often could not use the deck. For many emigrants, steerage was the most they could afford. But the departure was just the first of many challenges facing the Irish emigrants during the Famine era as most of them “had left the Irish port towns in the barely seaworthy ships with nothing but the clothes on their backs, a few cooking items, bedding, and a small amount of cash.” (Jenkins and Swacker 2006) For the Irish who were fortunate enough to avoid starvation and contagious diseases, the next obstacle was surviving the journey across the Atlantic to reach America. No fewer than 59 emigrant ships were lost en route to America between 1845 and 1853. In their attempt to cross the Atlantic, thousands of Irish men, women, and children seeking the “Golden Land of the West” perished. (Griffin 1990)

Although travel conditions had improved greatly in the 1840s and since the eighteenth century, the voyage from Ireland to America was still a hard one. Moreover, the fearful state of disease and debility in which the Irish emigrants have crossed the Atlantic must undoubtedly be attributed in a great degree to the destitution and consequent sickness prevailing in Ireland. Conditions on emigrant ships have been further aggravated by the neglect of cleanliness, ventilation and a generally good state of social economy during the passage, and has afterwards been increased and disseminated throughout the country in the mal-arrangements of the government system of emigrant relief. (Bradley 1986) Because of the unsanitary conditions on board what became known as the “coffin ships”, people endured hardship as vessels were more than eighty years old, built in the 18th Century, and carried more than 300 passengers, more than the legal limit. For all these people there
barely existed berths. “In many ships the filth beds, teeming with all abominations, are never required to be brought on deck and aired; the narrow space between the sleeping berths and the piles of boxes is never washed or scrapped, but breathes up a damp and fetid stench, until the day before the arrival of quarantine, when all hands are required to ‘scrub up,’ and put on a fair face for the doctor and Government inspector. No moral restraint is attempted, the voice prayer is never heard; drunkenness, with its consequent train of ruffianly debasement, is not discouraged, because it is profitable to the captain, who traffics in the grog.” (Griffin 1990)

Figure 6: The picture below shows the conditions in the steerage area of a "coffin ship".

The passage generally took anywhere from one to three months, depending on the weather. (Jenkins and Swacker 2006) Although the voyage cost was about $15 a head in steerage, ‘tween decks,’ the food and space were meager, the sanitary conditions were poor. (Bayor and Meagher 1996) For many it was a miserable, if not fatal experience. Passengers had to rely on whatever they had managed to bring abroad and a maximum of only two pints of water per person a day was available. “The food is generally ill-selected and seldom sufficiently cooked; in consequence of the supply of water, hardly enough for cooking and drinking, does not allow washing.” (Griffin 1990) When Irish emigrants arrived off New York City after a long and painful journey of forty-one days, all the water was unfit to drink. For those attempting to use the Liverpool route, as well as overcrowding, starvation, disease and other dangers included unscrupulous middlemen and landlords, thieves, conmen, and the extortionate tactics of ships’ agents and owners.

In Fleeing the Famine, the misery of being a passenger that traveled in steerage in 1847 is well described in the letter of Stephen deVere: “Hundreds of people, men, women and children, of all ages from the driveling idiot of 90 to the babe just born; huddled together, without light, without air, wallowing in filth, and breathing a fetid atmosphere, sick in body, dispirited in heart; the fevered patients lying between the sound, in sleeping
places so narrow as to almost deny them the power of indulging, by a change of position. The natural restlessness of the disease; . . . living without food or medicine except as administered by the hand of casual charity; dying without the voice of spiritual consolation, and buried in the deep without the rites of the church.” (Mulrooney 2003)

Emigration soared from 75,000 in 1845 to 250,000 in 1851. “This chaotic, panic-stricken and unregulated exodus was the largest single population movement of the nineteenth century.” (Campbell 2000) On most of the ‘coffin ships’, the struggle for survival sometimes ended in murder. (Griffin 2000) It is estimated that as many as 40% of steerage passengers died either en-route or right away after arrival. “Thousands more died at disembarkation centers.” (Ranelagh 2005) In Paddy’s Lament, Gallagher writes that, “out of roughly 100,000 emigrants carried aboard British ships to Canada in 1847, 25,000, or one in every four, died en route or within six months after arrival.” (Gallagher 1982) Only the slave ships of the previous Century would have had such awful conditions, though they were privately owned, and some captains hideously overcrowded them in order to get more fares. Mulrooney adds that there were more passenger deaths aboard ships and in quarantine after arrival in 1847 than in any other year in the nineteenth century. However, as miserable as conditions were on board these ‘coffin ships,’ most deaths were caused by diseases brought on board the vessels. Typhus was the greatest killer, and it wasn’t until the twentieth century that it became known that it was spread by lice. (Mulrooney 2003) The Irish were tested during their six to eight week voyage, and only the strongest survived. Unfortunately, many of the Irish emigrants who reluctantly left their homeland in hopes of surviving abroad only found a watery grave. Laxton found that of the more than 5,000 ships that sailed during the six years of the Potato Famine, about 50 foundered, ending the hopes of these starving emigrants before ever seeing American shores. (Laxton 1996)

In some respects, considering the conditions of the ship, those who survived were estimated lucky. They survived the weeks at sea and successfully passed through the quarantine station ultimately headed for the United States—by the back door, if necessary. Most of them, as a result, ended their trip in New York, not so much because it was their intended destination but because the shipping concerns deposited them there. (Bayor and Meagher 1996) “The immigrants were lemmings rushing to America, and nothing was going to stop them,” says Joseph Robins, a retired social historian in Dublin. However, the Famine emigrants who survived the journey did not know that they would arrive in America at a very opportune time, and that they would develop a symbiotic relationship with the young country as it matured. Once settled in America, Irish emigrants were first inclined to view themselves as exiles rather than voluntary emigrants. They were simply the victims of a forced and bitter exodus committed not only by the potato blight but mostly by their English imperial masters. (Kenny 2000)

In addition to the fortuitous timing of the arrival of Famine emigrants, their sheer numbers would help them endure their displacement as a massive group as they began the long and painful process of assimilating into American communities. Once the Famine emigrants arrived, William Shannon notes, “Neither the cities nor the Irish were ever the same again.” (Shannon 1966) The Irish and the cities they settled in would grow together. The determination of the Irish to succeed in America would eventually eclipse their desire to survive.
Industrialization was about to transform the American continent, and the Irish would be there in time to contribute to its industrial and political machines. Dennis Clark describes the opportunities that faced Famine emigrants, “Paradoxically, what almost wiped out this group also sent them to America as an emergent people ready to take up new ways and ideas. Patterns of chain migration, prepaid passages, family, and occupational connections would emerge that would greatly stimulate American life and change the history even of the nation’s most powerful city.” (Clark 1986)

At first, Americans did not readily welcome what they saw as hordes of impoverished and diseased immigrants unfit for almost any kind of work. Still, the new arrivals flocked to the large cities, where they lived in slum areas and picked up work as unskilled labor. Only 10 percent headed to the familiar rural areas in search of a life with which they had been familiar in Ireland. America was not at all like the promises of fame and easy fortune made by the sipping lines. (Albion 1939) The land had betrayed them once; the fear was that it just might happen again.

Most people who came in touch with Irish emigrants declared that they seemed innocent, disorderly, and uncivilized. It was argued that the economic circumstances engendered by the Great Famine made the Irish undesirable additions to the republic, hereditary characteristics defined the Irish as beings of inferior order. (Knobel 1988) They didn't have time to worry about whether Canada was in British possession or if their shoes were nicely polished and their hair brushed to perfection. It's obvious that they would seem to have a savagery about them after working their land, seeing crops fail numerous times, and being absolutely starved for years. They were frowned upon simply because they were unaccustomed to other cultures and because they’d been, in some ways, out of touch with much of life's ordinary dealings. They were often offered advice from organizations such as the Christian society, which told them to have energy, patience, benevolence, and good sense. These constructs are anything but helpful and much too general to be of any use to emigrants whose focus is to eat, sleep, and simply survive their experience on a coffin ship. It was torment enough for the Irish to leave their beloved country, let alone be forced to adhere to rules and culture shock.

Conclusion

The paper attempted to explore the disastrous impacts of the Great Famine including emigrant diaspora, religion, and cultural awareness. Within this framework virtually every aspect of the life of the Irish in America is examined. Even though the famine itself probably resulted in about one million deaths, the resultant emigration caused the population to drop by a further three million. The declining working opportunities as well as economic deprivation deteriorated life conditions in Ireland and pushed thousands of Irish to look for new chances overseas. Although most earlier emigrants had been sensitive to reports of hard time in America and difficulties in the journey in particular, the exodus continued to grow even in the face of the most disappointing reports from abroad and the savage hardships of a mid-winter Atlantic crossing. Like the lovers in the ballad “Farewell to Enniskillen,” they wished only to leave the hunger, oppression, and even the small world of the village. Once settled in a world free of contrasts, “they think no more of Ireland, nor Enniskillen town.” (Coffey 1997) Still, even the most enthusiastic immigrant found what was literally a new world, one for which most were unprepared.
Starting with the Famine of the 1840s, such a great migration revolutionized the small Irish community previously there and facilitated the metropolis's colossal development. Spectacular physical and economic growth, in turn, spurred on even more transatlantic migration. (Diner 1996) In these years, the destinies of the United States and the Irish became undividable. Three decades later America could legitimately claim the earlier mature distinction that New York was America's “most Irish city.” It not only lodged America's largest Irish community but also subsisted at the center of Irish American political, cultural, and social activism.

The road from colonist to citizen had been a long and difficult one. It was one easy for immigrants arriving from farm to town during the colonial and antebellum period to adjust to foreign surrounding, new customs, conditions, and language.
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