

*...As that prison ship sailed out against the sky
Sure she'll wait and hope and pray
For her love in Botany Bay
It's so lonely 'round the fields of Athenry.*

"Fields of Athenry" by Pete St. John



AUSTRALIA: HOW DID THE IRISH GET THERE?

A look at the population of Australia will turn up a large percentage of Irish surnames. One might ask how so many people from such a poor nation as Ireland managed to emigrate there. The answer to that question is that, although some emigrated voluntarily, especially from the 1840's onward, a very large number of them never paid for their passage to Australia -- they came as "guests" of the British Empire.

For many years, the English, as a way to lessen prison over-crowding and make a profit, had sold convicts to shipping contractors, who then sold these men and women to planters in the New World as indentured servants, usually for terms of seven years or longer. But with the start of the American Revolution and with the growing preference in the Americas for black slaves, whose labor was bought for life, a new destination had to be found for these surplus convicts.

In 1786, the English found this new destination: Botany Bay in eastern Australia. Although Botany Bay itself soon proved to be an unsuitable location for a penal colony and the colony was moved to Port Jackson, near Sydney, the name Botany Bay entered Irish folklore as the destination of all convicts. The first ship with solely Irish convicts was the "Queen" in 1791; the last Irish convict ship arrived in August of 1853. Though that marked the end of ships leaving Ireland for the sole purpose of transporting convicts to Australia, convicts were still shipped there until 1868. The last ship to arrive included 62 Fenians who had participated in the 1867 Fenian Rising. In the end, perhaps as many as 40,000 Irish men, women, and children had been "transported", the euphemism the British used for deportation, to Australia.

The Irish who were transported to Australia were torn from family, friends, and a country many of them loved dearly, and never to return. They endured a perilous journey which often included brutal treatment by the ship's crews such as flogging, chaining and other indignities.

Certainly most Irish would argue with the term "convict" being applied to most of those who were transported. Many were unquestionably political prisoners -- such as Thomas Francis Meagher and John Mitchel. But, if we look at some of the crimes committed by others who were

transported: theft of linen or a shirt or a handkerchief, many for stealing sheep and cattle, turnips, corn, or potatoes (many of these later offenses during the Famine), it is obvious that even though these people were not technically political prisoners, these people were, at the very least, victims of a corrupt political system. Some of those who were transported were as young as eleven or twelve. Considering the impossibly low standard of living that was imposed on the native Irish population, living in a land of abundance, how can the English colonial system in Ireland be looked on by any unbiased person as anything but incredibly corrupt?

As is often the case when a terrible social injustice is done to one or several generations, the succeeding generations may actually benefit from the terrible suffering of their ancestors. Many Irish-Americans may live better today than they would if their ancestors had not been driven from the country they loved. But that fact does not in any way excuse or mitigate the crimes against those ancestors.

The vast majority of the Irish who were transported to Australia were ordinary people who did what they had to do to survive. For many years, Australians were reluctant to study or talk about the history of the so-called convicts from whom many of them descend. That is unfortunate because Australia is a richer land today -- their history, their contributions to the nation, and their suffering should not be forgotten.

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