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FACULTAD DE FILOSOFIA Y LETRAS
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***THE IRISH EXODUS TO THE
UNITED STATES AT THE TIME
OF THE GREAT HUNGER AND
ITS AFTERMATH***



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May the road rise up to meet you

May the wind be always at your back

May the sun shine warm upon your face

May the rain fall soft upon your fields

And until we meet again

May God hold you in the palm of His hand



Irish Blessing

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DEDICATION

To my son, who has given my life a sense of achievement.



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"Every immigrant is a citizen of two nations, torn between the opportunities of the New World and their memories of the Old. But for few is this so true, or so poignant, as for the Irish in America."

INTRODUCTION

The topic of the Irish immigration to the United States first comes to my mind due to the suggestion made by my professor Dr. Héctor Valencia at a seminar he was dictating. Having some previous knowledge about the subject and knowing that I come from Irish origin, he suggests I should research more about the Irish in America.

When I start digging up information about the subject, I am faced to a painful reality: these poor people who arrived in the U.S. during the Great Hunger and its aftermath were treated worse than slaves, especially because if they died, there was no monetary loss. Obviously, it immediately calls my attention so I decide to start to find out why.

First of all, I begin to look for information in books, later, more and more involved; I buy a lot of books related to the topic so as to become really acquainted with it. The more I read, the more I get concerned. It is hard

to believe that discrimination in a western country can reach such levels and one immediately wonders why.

So at the very beginning, after gathering enough information to state the problem, I look back to my previous question: why such discrimination against these unfortunate people?

That is the main reason to account for the grounds: the importance of this tragic ordeal the Irish had to undergo for years. It took them more than a century to place the first Catholic president of Irish origin in office, John F. Kennedy, the great grandson of Patrick Kennedy, an immigrant of the Great Famine who died of cholera at a young age and whose story I will retell in this work to explain its purpose.

Now it is of primary importance to pose the research questions and objectives. So after that, I continue collecting facts, letters from immigrants and any other element that can help me answer the research questions while developing the hypothesis.

Last but not least, I consult different sources, data, maps with the locations of the immigrants, and so on. Following a research method, I organize all the gathered information and start the hard work of elaborating my thesis.

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PROBLEM STATEMENT

Three of the principal reasons which induce people to emigrate are poverty, persecution and the desire for self-improvement. If one adds to the total of those who left more or less to their own accord, those persons who were transported or whose occupations took them overseas to live, perhaps for the rest of their lives, the numbers of emigrants leaving Europe between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries are enormous. (Yurdan, M., 1990)

Of course, only a small percentage of all those emigrants to North America was Irish: it was the proportion who left in comparison to the total population of the country which was exceptionally high. Not that this was a new trend, for the Irish have always had been noted for their willingness to travel, particularly to mainland Britain. St. Patrick himself, as long as the fifth century AD, took part in this coming and going, admittedly doing it the opposite way round, for he left England to settle in Ireland. Even today, Irishmen will sometimes define a Scotsman as an Irishman whose ancestors could swim, and those Vikings who were almost certainly the first Europeans to land in North America probably set out from an Irish port such as Limerick.

The mention of emigration in relation to Ireland immediately calls to mind the unfortunates who fled the Famine of the mid-1840s onwards. In 1848, the wave of emigrants left, mainly for America was much more superior in number sharing some common characteristics: their striking poverty and their beliefs. They were Catholic.

The problem we are dealing with is the case of the Irish Catholic immigrants to the United States during the period of the Great Hunger and the following years. Estimations say that a million and a half Irish left the island towards North America. On their arrival they suffered an

outrageous discrimination from the American people only compared to the one suffered by black people (still slaves at that moment).

The present thesis intends to describe and analyze the reasons for such discrimination which lasted for practically a century.



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ACQUIRED KNOWLEDGE

An Overview about Irish Immigration

Today, some 40 million Americans can trace all or part of their ancestry to those 7 million Irish immigrants. Likewise, nearly every one of the 5 million people who now live in Ireland has relations in the New World. This work, based largely on the letters and memoirs of Irish immigrants, represents an attempt to tell their history in their own words, to see their experiences through their own eyes, and to come to terms with their contradictory emotions.

The origins of Irish immigration to the New World are buried in the remote past. In the sixth and seventh centuries, Irish missionaries left their homeland to spread Christianity. One of them, the legendary St. Brendan, supposedly sailed west across the Atlantic and discovered America long before the Vikings or Columbus. St. Brendan's voyage may be fictitious, but even today Irish folklore records ancient memories of mythical lands and journeys beyond "the western ocean".

Apart from these legends, the historical record of Irish immigration to the New World begins in the 17th century, when between 50,000 and 100,000 people left Ireland, most of them transported overseas as indentured servants. Others came as prisoners, Irish rebels and felons. They had been sentenced by British courts to long terms of banishment and involuntary servitude on the sugar plantations of the West Indies or on the tobacco plantations along the banks of the Chesapeake.

During the 18th century, Irish immigrants came in much larger numbers, perhaps as many as a half-million, looking for land on the frontiers of Pennsylvania, the Carolinas, and elsewhere in colonial America. Most of those who left Ireland during the decades immediately before and after the American Revolution were Protestants and came from Ulster,

Ireland's Northern Province. Some were Anglicans; a few were Quakers, Methodists, and Baptists.

However, most were Presbyterians of Scottish ancestry, the so-called "Scotch-Irish", who brought to America such historically familiar names as Jackson and Buchanan, Wilson and Crockett. In the 1600s their ancestors had moved from the Scottish Lowlands to Northern Ireland, in a migration organized by the British Crown known as the Plantation of Ulster. Now, in the 1700s, oppressed by high rents and resentful of tithes and taxes, hundreds of thousands of Scotch-Irish left Ulster and crossed the ocean to what their Presbyterian ministers optimistically called "the land of Canaan".

After the American Revolution, during the 19th and 20th centuries, the Scotch-Irish and other Irish Protestants continued to immigrate to the United States and, increasingly, to Canada. But in the 1790s and early 1800s the Scotch-Irish were joined by a new and much larger stream of Irish immigrants. They came not only from Ulster but also from Ireland's eastern, southern, and western provinces, Leinster, Munster, and Connacht. These new immigrants would have distinctly different reasons for leaving Ireland and distinctly different experiences in America, in large part because they were Catholics.

Of course, even prior to the American Revolution, a small number of Irish Catholics settled in the New World. But it was in the early 19th century that Ireland's Catholics began their mass exodus overseas: to Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, even to South Africa and Argentina – but primarily to the United States. During the half-century before the Great Irish Famine of 1845-50, perhaps a million Irish, about half of them Catholics, came to North America. From the Famine years until today, another 5.5 million Irish immigrants have come to the United States, the great majority of them Catholic.

These vast migrations of human beings were of enormous historical significance, for they shaped the future of both American and Irish societies, just as they shaped the lives and families of the immigrants themselves. For Ireland, the results of sustained mass emigration have been devastating. Between 1841 and 1926 the population of that small island fell by half, from about 8.5 million to only 4.25 million. Many Irish have blamed what they regard as Ireland's social stagnation and cultural conservatism on the log, enervating drain of young, vibrant, and dissatisfied men and women. Even today, as the Irish playwright John B. Keane laments, "Emigration in Ireland is a predominant way of life."

For the United States, however, the results of Irish immigration were mostly positive. The Irish brought labor, skills, capital, and sheer energy to build the farms, cities, industries, and transportation network that laid the foundations of much of America's prosperity. Indeed, it would be difficult to list briefly the many Irish American contributions to the history of the United States.

By 1776 the Irish comprised at least 10 percent of the population of the Thirteen colonies. And in many areas, such as Pennsylvania, they were active participants in the American Revolution. Eighty-five years later, more than 200,000 Irish immigrants fought in the American Civil War, the great majority on the Union side. (Miller and Wagner, 1994)

The Irish, Catholics and Protestants alike, became prominent in American agriculture, business, the labor movement, religion, culture, sports, and politics. Irish immigrant farmers, lumbermen, and canal – and railroad-builders helped push the nation's frontier ever westward.

Irish entrepreneurs, including banker Thomas Mellon and mine-owner Marcus Daly, built many of the nation's giant corporations. Other Irish Americans, such as Terence Powderly and "Mother" Jones, helped create the labor unions that battled the corporations to secure decent

wages for Irish immigrants and for workers of other nationalities. Bishop John Hughes of New York and Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore built the Catholic Church into the nation's largest denomination, while Irish Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Methodists played major roles in shaping their churches in American.

In American literature and drama, few have analyzed the human condition and the American Dream more eloquently than Irish American novelist James T. Farrell or playwright Eugene O'Neill. In the world of sports, few have enjoyed greater success or popularity than boxer John L. Sullivan, the son of an immigrant from County Cork. And, finally, from the very beginning the Irish have been unusually prominent and successful at all levels of American politics, and no fewer than ten Presidents – including Jackson, Wilson, Kennedy, and Reagan – have traced their ancestry back to Ireland.

However, for the Irish immigrants themselves, and for their descendants, the results of migration were more mixed and ambiguous. Today, Irish Americans enjoy higher social status and greater wealth and influence than almost any other ethnic group. But the long history of Irish immigrations is tinged with sadness, anger, and even tragedy.

Many Irish immigrants, past and recent, did not want to leave Ireland, even for the United States. Often they regarded themselves not as voluntary immigrants seeking opportunity, but as involuntary "exiles," compelled to leave Ireland by "British tyranny" and "landlord oppression." Many assuaged their fears and resentments with the fond belief that the United States was a fabled "promised land" – with "gold and silver (lying in) the ditches, and nothing to do but gather it (up)," as one young immigrant dreamed. However, although a few found their *caisleáin óir*, or castles of gold, in America, great numbers quickly discovered that such illusions were false.

Most Irish Catholic immigrants, especially in the 19th century, were poor and unskilled and had to begin life anew at the very bottom of the American socioeconomic ladder. Further, most Irish newcomers, particularly the large majority who were Catholic, did not receive friendly welcomes from native-born American Protestants. The society that these Irish encountered in the United States was not initially or automatically tolerant and pluralistic: the Irish had to make it so, through strength of numbers and determined efforts, often against bitter opposition. On both side, but especially for the immigrants themselves, the period of mutual adjustment was long and painful.

Eventually, despite much collective suffering and many individual failures, the Irish Catholics were successful, achieving great prosperity and prominence in all walks of American life. However, the burden of their Irish heritage and the scars of the immigrant experience often proved enduring.

Even those immigrants who achieved security or success in the United States passed on to their children and grandchildren a heritage tinged with bitterness. Sometimes they expressed a certain skepticism or ambivalence about the so-called American Dream that had cost them so much to achieve. More often they channeled a strong resentment, or even a burning hatred, toward the British government and the Irish landlords whom they held responsible for having forced them to leave Ireland as unwilling exiles.

As a result, a profound homesickness was widespread among the Irish in America, even among “comfortable” immigrants such as Maurice Woulfe. Despite that homesickness, and as Woulfe himself suspected, most Irish immigrants understood they could never really return “home” to Ireland – and very few ever tried to do so. Like Woulfe, they would live and die in America – and raise offspring who, try as they might,

could never fully comprehend what their fathers and mothers had endured.

Thus, perhaps of all the different nationalities that came to the United States from Europe, Ireland's Catholics most forcefully and poignantly reflected the painful ambiguities of the immigrant experience. On the one hand, the Irish have risen with great determination to the heights of political, cultural, and economic life in America. On the other hand, they have nurtured a deeply felt longing for an often idealized image of old Ireland – the "Emerald Isle."

These seemingly contradictory impulses were passed on to succeeding generations, but they were most acute for the Irish immigrants themselves – for those whose lives transformed, and were transformed by, the histories of both their abandoned and their adopted countries. (Miller and Wagner, 1994)



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Life in Ireland

To understand the above mentioned details, it is necessary to go back to Ireland and have a general perspective of life in that country. In the Irish, or Gaelic, language the act of leaving Ireland was most often described by the word *deoraí*. *Deoraí* translates into English not as “emigration” but as “exile”. Similarly, When Irish poets and peasants described the act of emigration, they said, “*Dob éigean dom imeacht go Meirice,*” meaning “I had to go to America,” or “Going to America was a necessity for me.” Thus, in the traditional Irish Catholic worldview, emigration was involuntarily -the result of fate or force, not of individual ambition. And although the Irish language declined rapidly in the 19th century, the same sentiments were translated and reproduced in the new English dialects spoken in the Irish countryside-and in those Irish songs and ballads that portrayed emigration as tragic exile.

Of course, it was not simply their language that disposed the Irish to regard emigration to America as exile or banishment -it was the impact of English conquest and colonization on Irish Catholic society and culture. The physical and political consequences of that conquest can still be seen: in the ruined castles gracing the island’s landscape, in the armed border dividing the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland; and in the murals and graffiti adorning the walls of Belfast and the other war-torn cities of the north. The psychological scars are less visible, but equally enduring, both in Ireland -and in Irish America.

The rich and lovely valley of the Boyne River, in County Meath, about 50 miles north from Dublin, witnessed the birth and the political death of traditional Irish Catholic society. At Newgrange, impressive stone monuments, “passage graves” for ancient Irish chieftains, were constructed more than 5,000 years ago, long before the coming of St. Patrick and Christianity to Ireland. Not far from Newgrange is the Hill of Tara, the ceremonial capital of ancient Ireland, where the High Kings of

Gaelic society were crowned and appointed. A few miles away are the ruins of medieval castles and of Catholic churches and monasteries, such as the Cistercian Abbey at Mellifont. Also lying in the peaceful river valley is the broad field on which raged the Battle of the Boyne. In that great conflict of July, 1690, the Irish armies of the deposed Catholic English King, James II, were defeated by the Protestant forces led by King William of Orange. X

As early as 1530s, English Protestant rulers such as King Henry VIII, his daughter Queen Elizabeth, Oliver Cromwell, and William of Orange had tried to conquer Catholic Ireland for reasons compounding equal measures of politics, prejudice and greed. Again and again, Irish lords and chieftains, fearing the loss of their estates and their religion, had risen in revolt: under the leadership of Hugh O'Neill in 1590s, Owen Roe O'Neill in the 1640s, and Patrick Sarsfield and the Catholic King James in 1688. Each time the Irish lords were crushed.

Many of their leaders and followers fled into exile in Catholic France or Spain and were replaced as landlords and tenants by Protestant English and Scottish colonists. By the time of the great defeat at the Boyne in 1690, even the Gaelic bards, whose songs and poems had once spurred the Irish into battle against the hated foreigners, had abandoned hope that Catholic Ireland could ever rise again.

In the years following their victory at the Boyne, the Protestant colonists and the British governments imposed on Catholic Ireland a vast system of social, political and economic control known as the Protestant Ascendancy. Nearly all land in Ireland was confiscated and given over to about 10,000 Protestant families, a few hundred of whom owned so much land that their estates and mansions dominated the landscape. Most Catholics were reduced to the levels of tenant farmers, peasants, laborers and servants.

Those Catholics fortunate enough to lease farms from their new masters were obliged to pay increasingly higher rents for the privilege of tilling the soil formerly owned by their ancestors. If they fell behind in their rent, or if the landlords' profits were better served by grazing cattle or sheep, the farmers would be evicted and their homes-even entire villages-would be leveled to the ground. In addition to rents, Catholic farmers had to pay tithes for the maintenance of the Protestant Church of Ireland. Although Catholics still comprised more than 75 percent of the island's population, the church of their landlords was now the legally established religion. (Miller, K. and Wagner, P., 1994)



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