

Charles Dickens and the Irish in America

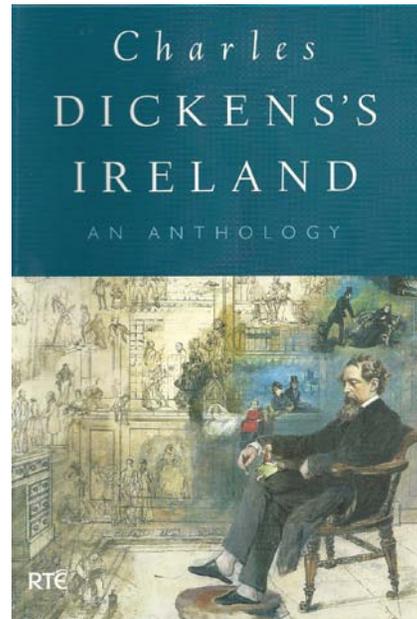
Amid celebrations of Charles Dickens's 200th anniversary, an article, *Irish in America*, published in Dickens's magazine, *All the Year Round*, 1 May 1869, London, holds particular interest for today's reader. Dickens (1812-1870) became an admirer of the Irish during his three reading tours in Cork, Dublin, and Belfast, 1858 to 1869 where audiences were "immense in number and brilliant in appearance." Dickens commented on the Irish, "Of their quickness as to the humour, there can be no doubt." He noted that, "Cork was an immense success. We found upward of a thousand stalls let, for the three readings. A great many people were turned away too, on the last night." And on the loquacity of the Jarveys [taxi drivers], he wrote: "they have something to say about everything." Today's emigrants who depart from Shannon or Dublin, not Queenstown in Cork harbor, might resonate with this account of their ancestors' experience over a hundred years ago "who every week flock on board the westward-bound Atlantic steamers, walk for the last time on their native soil, and gaze for the last time upon their dear home-friends."

The Irish In America

Emigrants leave Queenstown weekly: What will they do when they reach America?

There are few more suggestive sights to a thoughtful mind than that which may be witnessed, several days in each week, at Queenstown, the harbour of Cork. It is there that the hundreds of poor Irish emigrants who every week flock on board the westward-bound Atlantic steamers, walk for the last time on their native soil, and gaze for the last time upon their dear home-friends. No one can see the embarkation of these multitudes of forlorn creatures, the long painful parting from country and from friends, the crowding of the steerage deck as the steamer slowly swings out of the harbour into the open sea, the tearful eyes, covering the rude visages with honest moisture, straining to catch a last glimpse of the dear people who stand on the shore, the exclamations and growing out of arms as the beloved slopes of the Irish coast gradually recede from the view, no one with a heart can see this sight unmoved, or without feeling a keen sympathy for the motley, even ludicrous-looking, crowd which is huddled together in the 'forward' part of the ship.

Why have they left their native land, and what will they do when they reach America? Poverty and hardship, the impossibility of existing in their own crowded country, the accounts which have come from friends in America, and the wonderful narratives of lucky neighbours, who have returned to tell how the poor man thrives on the Western Continent, these are the causes which have determined the bold venture. What they will do when they reach the other shore, few of them have the remotest conception. They are haunted by visions of broad acres and vast meadows which await the first comer; by prospects of great fortunes easily acquired; by hopes of penetrating to the mines, and drawing thence endless nuggets of gold and silver. Some go in response to the urgent entreaty of relatives who have already tried the experiment. This old man is going to join his daughter Biddy, a prosperous maid-of-all-work in New York; or to see his lusty son, Pat, who has subdued a government-given tract of forest and prairie land in the Far West, so that it now yields him goodly crops of wheat, and enables him to live in ease and contentment. These brawny



fellows have had a message from a townsman, who is happy as a prosperous builder of railroads, and has told them that they have only to get over, to prosper likewise.

With what self-denial have the poor souls hoarded up their pennies and sixpences, until they grew to the six sovereigns requisite to buy a steerage passage! And how crowded and huddled together are they over there in the forward part of the steamer, living scantily on the limited allowance of bread, water, and occasional saloon leavings! They manage, nevertheless, to make a right merry voyage of it, after the homesickness and sea-sickness are somewhat worn off, and a general acquaintance has been scraped; and on many a night, at sea, you and I, ensconced in the saloon, may hear their merry laughter, their rollicking songs, and the measure of their Irish jigs. And when the last morning comes, ushered in by cries of 'Land! There's Long Island!' 'There's Staten Island!' 'There are the masts of the vessels anchored at New York!' perhaps there is no one aboard the steamer who strains eyes shoreward with such anxious gaze, as do these poor Irish emigrants, come to a strange land and among a strange people to seek the means of bare existence.

Irish remain where they first set foot in America

Of the Irish emigrants who thus land at the American ports, a very large majority remain where they first set foot on American soil. It is characteristic that, while French, German, Italian, and Scandinavian emigrants are prone to scatter themselves, to penetrate to the Western States, to become settlers on the vast fertile lands which the American Government parcels out and divides among those who will take and till them, to find out new and growing towns, and there establish themselves, the Irish almost invariably confine themselves to the vicinity, or the district of country round about the place where they reach the new continent. Thus it is that in nearly, if not all, of the Eastern cities there is, in the suburbs, a distinct Irish colony huddled together, living in little shanties, or in big houses which accommodate twenty or thirty families, and which is usually nicknamed by the native population 'Dublin'. According to the census, a large preponderance of the foreign population of the Atlantic cities is Irish; in the Western cities they are exceeded by the Dutch and Germans. Even the Frenchman, belonging to that nation which, of all civilised nations, travels least, is found in America to take more kindly to the life of a backwoodsman than the native of Erin.

The Irishman is essentially a social animal; he sticks close to civilisation, hanging about its skirts; he huddles with groups of his own race near to populous cities and towns. The foreigner who visits New York for the first time is called upon to visit a certain notorious district in that metropolis, known, the land over, by the name of the 'Five Points'. It is in the heart of the lower town, and its name is derived from the junction of five narrow and filthy streets, which meet in a kind of open space in its centre. Here the Irish herd in squalid masses, living in houses where several families occupy a single room, issuing thence in the daytime to earn, or to pilfer, the pittance which is to keep them from starving for the next twenty-four hours. Here one sees the Irish in their state of lowest degradation. Here they are, thieves, vagabonds, murderers, garroters, burglars, here it is unsafe for the well-dressed citizen to pass, even in broad daylight, without an escort: so frightfully desperate is the misery of its low Irish denizens. Still, this 'Five Points' district is, in a manner, a political power. Universal suffrage gives the people of the Five Points control over the elections. There exists a coterie of wretched native American 'roughs', bar-room-keepers, gamblers, prize-fighters, who, by acts corrupt, yet shrewd, have managed to get this Irish population under their leadership. The result is seen in the election of corrupt mayors, of more corrupt judges, and of pugilists and gamblers to seats in the national congress. Electoral corruption, intimidation, and bribery, are here carried on openly, unblushingly, and unmolested. It is unsafe for any man to approach the polls in the 'Five Points' for the purpose of giving a vote against the favourite candidate. The polls are guarded by troops of ruffians; the population of this quarter is a perpetual mob, ever ready for action; even if the police were not kept away by the corrupt authorities which the 'Five Points' have put into power, they would hardly dare to engage with so

formidable a mass of desperate vagabonds. The riots which now and then break out in the American metropolis have their rise in the 'Five Points', without exception.

Majority of Irish succeed in America

It may be here remarked that the criminal statistics of New York, indeed those of all the large Eastern cities, prove that a great majority of the murders, thefts, and arsons committed, are the work of the foreign population, and especially of the Irish. The 'Five Points' and the 'Dublins' of the Atlantic cities are very pandemoniums of strife and quarrelling; and it is hard to conceive a more abandoned ruffian than the downright bad Irishman. The same spirit which commits agrarian crime on the soil of Erin, survives the Atlantic voyage, crops out on the other side, and fills the American courts and prisons with criminals of a most desperate and incorrigible class. All the virtue and patriotism in New York has hitherto been unavailing to destroy the political power which has its seat in the 'Five Points'.

But this is the darker side of the picture; it is a necessary penalty for the hospitality which America extends to the vagrants of all nations. While, however, the lower, desperate, poverty-stricken stratum of the Irish do certainly constitute a great sore on the face of all the large American cities, the better and more honest class of Irish are a highly important element in American society. The vast majority of the Irish who emigrate to the Western continent, not only succeed in getting a good living, and comfortable situations, but they give in return an ample equivalent in their industry, and capacity for hard rough work. Probably every railroad in America was built by Irish hands; nearly all the heavy, disagreeable drudgery to be performed in the country is done by them. It is the Irish, and the Irish alone, who clean the streets, dig the gutters, build the roads, make the sewers; the farms teem with Irish labourers; they are the best fellers of wood and diggers of potatoes. They are, in America, emphatically toilers by the sweat of their brow.... The Irishman works heartily and sturdily. He is impudent, he is obstinate, he is inclined to get into hot discussion with his comrades - but he works with a will. I have often seen Irishmen working on New England farms; I never saw one with an inclination to indolence. This indefatigable capacity for hard toil enables the Irishman to outbid every competitor. And his lot is not to be despised. Let him once find work on a New England farm, and he has capital wages, comfortable lodging, healthy meals, good land to work on, plenty to drink, and people to bicker with. He was never born to manage a farm; he is not thrifty; as good a piece of ground as there is in the peerless Shenandoah valley of Virginia would go to ruin under his control; but set him his farm work - leave him no option but to dig this acre of potatoes, or reap that field of wheat - and he stands unrivalled. The rule is, of course, not a universal one; there are exceptional Irishmen who, from obeying, do learn to command; from inhabiting a farm, and plodding on it, these get to be thrifty and able to manage.

If he be as good as the 'boss', and worthy to break bread with him, why not aspire to be a 'boss' himself?

Such an Irishman sometimes takes his place among the independent farmers; one of the richest farmers in Massachusetts - a man who gets from his land some three or four thousand dollars a year - is an Irishman who emigrated to America twenty years ago without twenty shillings in the pockets of his patched trousers, who plodded and plodded, bought a little plot, added to it, and now sends his daughters to fashionable boarding schools, his sons to the university, and his wife to town in a two-horse carriage. Among the farmers in the rural districts of New England - and especially in New Hampshire - it is the custom to treat the labourers and servants much as if they were members of the family. The Irish 'helps', male and female, take their places at the table with the farmer, his wife, sons, and daughters; they are helped from the same dishes; they join in the conversation, they enjoy their

post prandial pipes with the 'boss', on the little lawn in front of the farmhouse. They are provided with bedrooms in no respect inferior to those occupied by the master and mistress; they join in many of their amusements - go a-fishing or picnicking with them; they sit in the parlour and hear the papers or books read in the evening; and, in short, partake of all the comforts and enjoyments of home. And the constant companionship of the average New England farmer's family is no mean advantage to the poor, ignorant Irish emigrants.

The New England farmer who so democratically admits his poorest and most ignorant 'hand' to his table and his family circle, is almost without exception a man of some education, and of vigorous and independent habit of thought. He is not only capable of reading and writing, but he has a keen love of papers and books; is admirably posted in the politics and events of the day; is himself a most enthusiastic politician, and fairly revels in argumentation with a rustic opponent. He has been educated at one of those free schools of which New England people are justly proud: working on the farm, when a boy, during the summer months, and availing himself of the bleak winters to attend the little rustic school which a wise legislation has provided for him. Thus the Irish labourer, separated from the association of other ignorant Patlanders like himself, having in the association of the farmer's family and in the comforts of the farmer's house an efficacious substitute for the public-house, becomes more intelligent and more industrious, and is gradually moulded into a useful member of democratic American society. Treated as an equal, ambition of a worthy kind is begotten in him; if he be as good as the 'boss', and worthy to break bread with him, why not aspire to be a 'boss' himself?

Irish become landed proprietors

And so it comes about that now and then examples appear, of Irish men becoming landed proprietors. But the larger part of the emigrants who penetrate beyond the cities, are of a nomadic, restless, roving disposition. They wander about the country in the summer time, picking up a farming job here and there, indisposed to remain long in one place, working with a will, but thriftlessly spending their earnings as fast as they make them. Labour is so much in demand, that they never have to go far without employment, and in return for whatever work they do, they receive what must seem to them, coming from over-crowded Ireland, a very handsome wage. Notwithstanding all its advantages, the Irishman in America does not appear to take so kindly to farm work as to the irksome drudgery which is his lot in the cities. After all, he prefers to live in 'Dublin', if it be only the imitation Dublin which hangs on the outskirts of every American city. Here he has his mates and his wife, and here he cheerfully digs gutters, and clears streets, for the privilege of living in an over-crowded and dirty nest of children of Erin like himself. And here, in the cities, he is a godsend to the corporations, who get their more humble jobs done better and cheaper by the Paddies than by any other workmen.

The mass of Irish remain in the Northern and Eastern States. To the South the Irishman is loath to go, for he finds in the negro a competitor who contests the market with him at great advantage. No white race can compete with the negro on a cotton, rice, or sugar plantation. The Irishman cannot exist on so little as the black man. The Irishman is the more vigorous labourer in the North; but the Southern sun melts him, gives him sunstroke, paralyses him, while the hotter the day, the livelier the negro. It is amusing to note what an instinctive antipathy exists between these two rival races for securing the work of the American employer. Each seems to be conscious of this rivalry - each seems to feel that the other is in his way. Each affects a profound contempt for the other; and as both are gifted with a facile use of the tongue, and a perfect arsenal of epithets, a hostile dialogue between the white and the black is one of the most unique and amusing imaginable. Sometimes, in the more northerly of the States where slavery formerly existed, Irish and negroes are found huddled together in the same quarter or suburb; then there is constant quarrelling and strife.

It is odd that, much as the Irish like to huddle together and live in crowds, such a thing is scarcely ever heard of as an Irish colony in the vast plains of the West. Natural farmers as they are, you never

hear of their associating together, taking a westward course, and settling on the rich domains which the American government offers free to all who will 'squat' and till. In Michigan there is a famous Dutch colony, where nothing but Dutch is spoken, nothing but Dutch dishes are eaten, nothing but Dutch pipes are smoked, and none but Dutchmen hold office; a colony imported from Amsterdam. Further South - in those States which formerly composed part of the French colony of Louisiana - French colonies may be found, where you would starve before you found a man who could understand your order for dinner in English. In Missouri, Nebraska, and Kansas, German settlements may be found quite as characteristic and exclusively foreign. There is so large a leaven of the Teutonic element in Missouri, that a German refugee has just now been elected United States senator to represent that great and growing state. But the Irish have not, as a mass, a capacity of self-reliance. They must cling as dependents upon another civilisation; so they remain in the East, and leave the emigrants of other nations to patiently build up communities stamped with their own national traits in the boundless West.

Irish girls are invaluable in private homes

What becomes of the Irish girls who constitute a large majority of the emigrants? The great mass of them become cooks, maids-of-all-work, chambermaids, and household servants of some sort. Probably the chambermaids and scullery maids of every hotel in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago - all the cities - are buxom Irish girls. At least nine-tenths of the servants in the private houses in the North and East are of the same nation. The healthy Irish girl, who leaves her own country to seek her fortune beyond the ocean, has in her excellent stuff for the fulfilling of household duties. She is strong, she is quick to learn, she is willing to work, and wherever she is wanting in taste, tutelage by the mistress goes far to mend it.

Many family matrons prefer to take a raw emigrant rather than a girl who has been long in America. She is more honest, she is not troubled with too many beaux and acquaintances, she blunders yet is willing to learn, she does her best, and she has not yet acquired those grand notions of dress and independence which the Irish girl long resident is apt to have picked up. She is capable of making a really good plain cook, and if she be taken straight from shipboard, may be educated to her mistress's peculiar style of cookery - every mistress, be it said, having a style and dishes of her own. The main trouble with the Irish servant is that she is prone to be too social in character, readily makes acquaintances, and holds high carnival in the kitchen with the family provisions. Still, with all her shortcomings, she is nothing less than invaluable to American households. It is only in the far West, and back in the rural districts of New England, that Native American girls are found in service. The negro 'Mammies', now free, are probably destined to become rivals of the Irish 'Biddies'; still, the former usually prefer their native South to the bleak and unfruitful North.

Irish become part and parcel of American life

During the war of the Rebellion, the Irish naturalised citizens of the United States did sterling service for the Federal cause. Throughout the land, volunteer regiments were formed composed exclusively of Irishmen; and more than one illustrious name among the Union generals betrays the Celtic origin of its bearer. Sheridan, now second in command of the American army, was the son of Irish parents; the gallant Colonel Corcoran, of the New York Irish Regiment, was one of the most brilliant soldiers and best loved commanders of the epoch. The revival of Fenianism since the war is often attributed to the martial spirit engendered among the Irish soldiers during that great struggle; and this is no doubt partially true. But the spirit of hostility to England among the emigrant Irish of America was universally prevalent long before the war; and while that event gave greater force to the movement in favour of Irish independence, it by no means developed any greater rancour than that previously felt

towards the mother country. Fenianism owes much encouragement to native American demagogues who have hounded it on for their own political purposes; but it chiefly owes its popularity among the American Irish to the energy, boldness, and eloquence of a few Irish leaders, most of whom were Federal officers in the war.

If anything were wanting to prove the incapacity of the Irish character for self-government, the course of Fenianism in America proves it. They are too bellicose among themselves; they never have been cordially united; they are credulous, and allow swindlers to rob them; they are quarrelsome, and dissipate their energy and resources in internal dissension. The poor Irish servant, ardently attached to 'darling Erin', and excited by the harangues against England, saved her little weekly pittance, and cheerfully gave it up to Fenian 'circles' to be devoured by the leaders of the cause, and to be embezzled by the swindlers to whom they confided it.

The Irish in America, although, as has been said, they are clannish, do yet gradually merge themselves into the general community, and become part and parcel of the American population. The second generation of the emigrant Irish are educated at the free public schools, rise to a higher sphere of labour than their parents, in many instances become Protestants, and then freely mingle with the rest of the community as thoroughly Americanised citizens. Many of the most eminent American statesmen, scholars, and merchants have been the children of emigrants, or have come from the generation next succeeding the native Irish generation. Presidents Jackson and Buchanan were sons of Irish parents; so was Vice-President Calhoun, one of the greatest of American orators. A.T. Stewart, the merchant prince of New York, was a native of Belfast. James T. Brady, foremost of criminal advocates in New York; Meagher, the general and writer; were Irish. This proves that the boast of Americans, that their country offers its prizes to all who will compete for them, is not unfounded; it also proves that there are characteristics, even among the poor classes of Irish who are driven to emigration for existence, while are capable of development into the power of leading men, and into a high influence upon the age.

* *Irish in America*, published in Dickens's magazine, *All the Year Round*, 1 May 1869, London, pp. 510-514 quoted in: Charles Dickens's Ireland: An Anthology by Jim Cook (Woodfield Pr. October 1999).