

Famine Orphans from Roscrea

By Joe Coughlan



In the mid 1700s the British jails were hugely overcrowded and the government decided to transport a lot of these prisoners to the colonies to be indentured as labour and to work out their sentence. This helped to alleviate some of the problem of overcrowding in jails and dealt with the problem of when they were released that many reoffended and were back in jail again. This was so successful that they used it to help colonise Australia. People were sent for the pettiest of crimes such as a woman from Carlow was transported with her children for stealing the lid of a pot. Others had their

death sentence for more serious crimes commuted to transportation. In 1747 the first fleet of British ships set sail under Captain Phillip with about seven hundred convicts with less than one hundred of these being women. This was the start of a scheme which was to bring thousands of convicts to Australia over the years to come.

In 1848 during the height of the famine in Ireland it was decided that there was a shortage of women in Australia due to the disproportionate amount of male convicts that had been transported. Some members of parliament expressed a fear that they would end up with a mixed blood race if the convicts mixed with the aboriginal population.

A scheme was devised which would take young orphan girls from the workhouses of Ireland and England and send them to Australia to work as domestic servants or as one MP put it bluntly "breeding stock". The scheme was the brainchild of Earl Grey (of the tea fame) and the first ship to sail with these orphans was called after him. Over four thousand girls between the ages of thirteen and eighteen were chosen for the voyage as domestics with a view to marriage and keeping pure the white race. Most of these girls were married within 2 years and went on to have an average of 12 children. Many of them were badly abused by their men and there was a high death rate from domestic abuse. Many were married off to cattle drovers who lived in the huge open range and were never heard from again. Some of these drovers may be away for two years at a time and the women would be left to fend for themselves and their children in cabins in the wild. Others married well and went on to prosper. A high percentage of these women were widowed for periods of twenty years or more due to marrying men who were so much older than them.

Among them were ninety girls from Roscrea work house sixty in 1848 and thirty more in 1850. On December 29th 1848 Lieutenant John Henry of the Royal Navy arrived in Roscrea workhouse and hand-picked sixty girls between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. These girls would have been checked out for diseases and looked healthy and clean. Their conduct

in the workhouse would also be taken into account. The people in the workhouse at that time would be very emaciated and starving as their rations were just barely enough to keep them alive. Many parents would probably be pleading to have their children taken as they saw it as their only hope of survival.

When Matthew Hughes from Roscrea married Catherine Scolfield in 1831 little did they know the horrors that lay ahead of them. In 1848 they and their family were to seek refuge in the workhouse. By December of that year Catherine and Matthew would have died in the workhouse and left behind their children among them three girls Theresa aged fourteen, Mary aged fifteen, and Eliza aged seventeen. All three were picked by Henry for the trip to the far side of the world. The board of guardians at the time were required to pay their passage and equip them for the journey. This would have been considered a lot cheaper than keeping them in the workhouse. They would be given a trunk or wooden box with their names stencilled on it and it would have the following list of items.

6 shifts, 1 shawl, 2 pairs of shoes, 2 gowns, 2 wraps, 2 petticoats, 1 shawl, 1 cloak. 2 neck and 2 pocket handkerchiefs, 2 linen collars, 2 aprons, 1 pair of stays, 1 pair of mitts, 1 pair of sheets, 1 bonnet, Day and night caps, 2 towels, 2 bars of soap, Combs., Brushes, Needles and thread, A few yards of cotton or calico material, A bible, a prayer-book and a rosary.

Most of these items would have been made by the inmates. It is hard to imagine how these girls would have reacted when they would have been given these as many would have been in a filthy state or in the coarse workhouse uniform and probably didn't know what most of these items were as most of them had never owned a pair of shoes. So all these things which we take for granted today must have been like being handed a treasure chest. This was at a time when parents were selling or bartering the clothes off their backs to get food to try to help keep their children alive.

These girls would have left the workhouse with the knowledge that they would never see Roscrea or have any contact with their families again. They were taken by horse and cart to Limerick port to board a ship to Portsmouth. This was to be the start of a long journey which in all would take more than six months. Even this part of the journey must have been very frightening as it would have taken place on a cold December day in open carts. Most of the girls would never have travelled more than a few miles from their homes and then only with their families. They may have been waiting for days in Limerick for girls from other workhouses to arrive before the ship set sail.

When they reached Plymouth they were taken off of the ship and taken to a holding area. It was surrounded by high walls to keep them separated from the local people as they were in fear of fever and disease from these "filthy urchins". Here they would be cleaned up, have health checks done again and nourished for their journey ahead. They would have been handed three square meals a day which would be unheard of to these girls as they would have spent most of their lives on the brink of starvation. While they were there tutors were

brought in to teach them the basics of being in domestic service such as housekeepers, maids and nursemaids. This would all have been alien to these girls because most of them would not have even seen cutlery before so already their conditions would have vastly improved from those that they would have left behind in famine-stricken Ireland. They would spend six weeks here waiting for a ship to take them to the far side of the world.

On February 4th 1849 Mary, Theresa and Eliza Hughes and fifty seven other girls from Roscrea along with two hundred and forty three girls all between the ages of fourteen and seventeen from the workhouses all over Ireland were taken back to Plymouth dock and were put on board the ship Pemberton for the one hundred and thirteen day journey to Port Phillip in Melbourne Australia. The captain of the ship was Captain J.H. Richardson together with a matron, a head mistress, four sub matrons and a crew of sixty-three. They were inspected by Her Majesty's emigration officer Lt. Carew who advised the crew to "treat these unfortunate orphans with every respect during their voyage". They were to be given instruction in reading writing and deportment as well as given spiritual and moral advice. Some of the girls from Dublin and Cork had a good standard of education and were tasked with teaching some of the other girls. There were also eleven couples on board with four children under fourteen. The Pemberton was one of the biggest ships in the British fleet at that time. It is very hard to imagine how these girls would have felt heading off on this ship in the middle of winter to the far side of the world away from the ravages of famine to a country that they probably never heard of.

On May 14th after a trip of 113 days at sea which took them to Santa Cruz in Tenerife where they took on fresh water and vegetables then headed for South America, from there to The Cape Of Good Hope where they took on more supplies including fresh meat. Their last stop was Hobart in Tasmania before heading on to arrive at Port Phillip in Melbourne.

Before they could disembark the immigration officer would board the ship and check both passengers and cargo. The chief surgeon Dr Sullivan said: "The ship arrived in a superior state of cleanliness. The arrangements are said to be highly satisfactory and the immigrants are said to be very grateful for their treatment by the captain and his crew.

On arrival they were again held in a stockade where they would be held until arrangements would be made to have them hired. The local population in Port Phillip despised these girls as being wild and unruly. As most of the population were Protestant and Presbyterian they did not want these Roman Catholic girls influencing the locals. "Whenever news spread that a shipload of these young girls was due to arrive, hoards of men would assemble on the docks to try to claim their share of the imported goods", was the description given by a Mrs Sommers in the local paper at the time.

The girls were then prepared for hiring and when a date for the hiring was set they were taken to the hiring room. Entry to the Female Immigration Depot hiring room was by prior application to the agent. Prospective employers would apply for a pass in advance of the hiring day. The girls were taken to the hiring room and put on display and "hired" to the

highest bidder. Employers seeking domestic servants had to compete with lustful drovers and sheep farmers. Some were hired as domestic servants in big houses and went on to marry their employer and prosper. It was not uncommon for a girl of fourteen to be married to a man in his forties or more. Others were not so lucky being hired to farmers and drovers who lived in the wilderness hundreds of miles from civilisation. Many of these went on to have up to twelve children and spent their lives in a cabin in the wilderness while their husbands went driving cattle and sheep thousands of miles across the range and may not see them for up to a year or more at a time. Others were recruited or coerced into brothels and many of these died young through violence, disease or alcohol abuse. Others left the hiring room and were never heard from again.

Theresa Hughes aged fourteen seems to be one of the lucky ones. She was held in the stockade until mid June when she was hired out to JW Steiglitz for eight pounds for a period of 2 years. Mr Steiglitz arrived in Australia from Germany in 1844 and received a pasturing licence to rear sheep on the open range. He Married Marcella Belcher from England in 1845 and opened a post office in Ballarat about one hundred miles from Port Phillip. Theresa was employed as a nursemaid to their children and completed her two year term with him.

When she finished her time with Steiglitz she met and married twenty two year old William Morgan who came from Bristol in England. William seems to have been very prosperous as he is listed at the time of their marriage as being a farmer in Ballarat and being the owner of a hotel in Miner's Rest near the gold mines. Theresa and William went on to have eleven children. One of their Daughters – Alice married Pembroke Armstrong Greville. He was the son of Thomas Greville who was a noted horse breeder and trainer and also was a publican in Ballarat. They went on to have seven children one of whom Clifford Thomas Greville joined the Australian army and was sent to France during the First World War. He was killed in action in Villiers Bretenaux France in July 1918 aged nineteen. Theresa died on August 22nd 1892 aged sixty one and is buried in Ballarat.

Mary Hughes aged fifteen was employed as a nursemaid for six pounds for two years to Honora Treacy wife of Matthew Treacy, a surgeon in Little Lonsdale St Melbourne. Eliza aged 17 was employed by M Davis, Elizabeth St Melbourne. Eliza and Mary lived nearly on the same block so would have had contact with each other. There are no further records of Eliza and Mary so we do not know how their lives progressed. All we can do is hope they had good lives and prospered.

Over four thousand young girls were plucked from their own environment and were taken on a terrifying journey to the other side of the world to in many cases untold hardship and cruelty. These girls were to be the foundation stone on which Australia was built and made it what it is today. It is only in the last few years that these girls' stories have come to light in this part of the world but in Australia they are held in such high esteem that it is considered a badge of honour to be a descendent of one of these brave strong and powerful girls.