

Employment for Women and the Irish Immigrant Girls Home

BY JOHN T. RIDGE

The year 1879 in Ireland marked the beginning of agricultural distress. A crop failure reminiscent of the time of the Great Hunger brought near starvation to many districts in Ireland. It seemed that with each passing week the conflict between tenant and landlord became all the more bitter. Newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic were filled with news of rural demonstrations, acts of violence and the hint of revolution. For the period between 1879 and October 1882 alone, 10,677 families or 53,723 persons were evicted from Irish farm holdings.¹

Emigration reached almost fever pitch as young people, including many girls and women, tried by any means to leave Ireland. In May, 1882, the New York Irish American newspaper published the following statement concerning female emigrants:

*That a vast emigration of the class most exposed to those perils may be expected to take place from Ireland during the Summer that is now settling in, would be natural, from circumstances of the country; that it will take place is shown by the fact, stated in a published letter from Mr. Vere Foster, that, on the mere announcement of his scheme of "assisted emigration" for females he had, up to the 13th of April "received upwards of twenty thousand applications on behalf of girls from the West of Ireland alone."*²

The desperate conditions in Ireland resulted in extraordinary instances of very young girls traveling from Ireland to America alone:

A red checked, blue-eyed little girl sat in Castle Garden on Monday and munched on a large sandwich while her eyes kept guard upon a queer looking carpet-bag on the floor beside her. It was Rosie McEnnery, eight years of age, who set out from her home in County Cavan,

*Ireland, to make a journey of over four thousand five hundred miles alone. The child said her mother was dead and her father deserted her and went to England four years ago. A month ago Rosie's cousin in Marshall, Michigan, sent her tickets for passage to that place, and bound thence the brave little girl arrived in this city with forty cents in her pocket. The Castle Garden authorities provided her with bread and ham to eat on the train going westward and Rosie seems to be quite favorably impressed with the institutions of the country.*³

In 1855, Castle Garden (formerly Castle Clinton), an old circular stone structure at New York's Battery, became the immigrant landing-place for the port of New York. Run by the State Commission of Emigration, Castle Garden received 2,541,148 Irish immigrants up to its closure in May, 1890 and its replacement by a federal facility at Ellis Island. The State Emigration Commission in 1882 was racked by internal dissension, almost bankrupt, and on the verge of being forced to shut down Castle Garden. Moreover, a Senate committee investigating its operations uncovered evidence of inflated prices for the food sold to immigrants and a baggage handling business with high prices and big profits for its franchise owner. Scandal and inefficiency meant that immigrants frequently failed to receive the help they needed.⁴

IRISH WOMEN AND THE LABOR BUREAU AT CASTLE GARDEN

One of the successes, however, of Castle Garden was the Labor Bureau, an office in the complex where young arrivals in need of a first job were matched with employers. In 1881 only 9% of the emigrants leaving Ireland were over age thirty-five.⁵

While only a minority of all the immigrant arrivals coming to New York used the Labor Bureau, Irish and German immigrants were espe-



Illustration: In 1882, the National Line was one of five steamship companies that brought immigrants from Ireland to New York.

Courtesy of John Ridge.

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cially likely to use its services. In 1877 10,314 individuals found jobs and of these the vast majority 9,817 or 95% were either German or Irish. The Irish alone accounted for 6,742 or 65% of the total employed. Of the 5,362 males the Germans were better represented and numbered 2,936 or 55% of the total while the Irish numbered 2,067 and composed 39%.⁶

Significantly different were the numbers for the female immigrants who found jobs at the Labor Bureau. In sharp contrast to the male employment statistics, practically all the females who found jobs at Castle Garden were Irish. Only a small portion of the non-Irish immigrant females found employment through the Labor Bureau. Of the 4,952 women for which work was secured, 4,675 were from Ireland and constituted 94% of the total. About 71% of all the female immigrants found work located in the State of New York while New Jersey jobs at 25% of the total accounted for most of the remainder.⁷

Whereas there were forty-two occupations in which employment was found for men, there was only one employment — domestic service as housekeepers, maids, cooks or the like — which was offered to women by the Labor Bureau.⁸

A Labor Bureau report for 1882 stated that the average salary for women who obtained jobs through their offices ranged from \$8 to \$10 a month. The average pay for a male laborer was \$1.00 to \$1.50 a day, while those who were employed on a monthly basis had salaries that ranged between \$7 and \$15 a month.⁹

Although the Irish portion of the immigrant arrivals in New York continued to drop almost invariably with each succeeding year in the 1880s and succeeding years, the Irish continued to get a large number of the jobs arranged by the Castle Garden Labor Bureau. During the year 1881 places were found for 19,494 Irish out of the 49,745 immigrants of both sexes who gained employment through the Bureau. The Irish comprised only 39% of the total—a drop of 26% from 1877. Employment for women immigrants, however, continued to be dominated by the Irish. And Irish women secured 8,363 (80%) of the 10,462 places. Again, it was in domestic service that women found jobs and at average wages which fluctuated according to the time of the year:¹⁰

Month	Wage
January	\$8.00
February	8.00
March	10.00
April	10.00
May	10.50
June	10.50
July	10.50
August	10.00
September	10.00
October	9.00
November	8.00
December	8.00

There was only one male occupation, farm laborer, which similarly paid on a monthly basis.¹¹

PRIVATE CHARITIES AND THE ARRIVING IMMIGRANTS

Private charitable institutions established by the New York Irish community were not adequate to the task of easing the burden of arriving immigrants. The best-known society, the Irish Emigrant Society, used the money earned from its large remittance transmittal business to Ireland to aid immigrants.

Previous to 1865 the Irish Emigrant Society had disbursed its charitable donations on an individual basis. But in that year it was decided that it would be more effective if the disbursements were made to charitable institutions instead. One of these recipients, the Institution of Mercy, Houston Street, received \$22,450 between 1865 and the close of 1881 for the "protection and care bestowed on poor Irish girls." The House of the Good Shepherd received \$20,000 for "the protection afforded young Irish girls and care bestowed on the unfortunate of our race." These two donations, plus the \$7,083 sent to maintain the Labor Bureau at Castle Garden, seem to have been the extent of the donations that had some direct effect in helping young immigrant girls. The remaining expenditures of the Irish Emigrant Society were distributed to a variety of institutions caring for the poor, orphans, elderly or sick. Additional donations were made for education and for "famine" relief in Ireland. The total amount donated for all charities by the Irish Emigrant Society for the sixteen-year period was \$144,433.¹²

A typical criticism of the Irish Emigrant Society came in April, 1882 from the *Irish American*:

*We must state again, as we did some-time ago, that we have no fault with the useful exchange business which the Society carries on, or the very charitable uses to which it applies the profits resulting there from, but what we do say is the Society was never established to make money for charitable institutions, no matter how worthy, and that it does not protect the Irish emigrants arriving in this port in the manner intended by the good men who had it incorporated....*¹³

The *Irish American* also reported in 1882 that, when six-hundred Irish girls (the oldest, twenty-three) were landed that same week from the S.S. *City of Montreal*, there was no one to meet or help them. The paper predicted similar situations awaited thousands more who would soon arrive "in an extraordinary era in the history of the Irish exodus."¹⁴

A VOICE IN IRELAND FOR FEMALE EMIGRANTS
In Ireland there was one voice calling attention to the plight of Irish emigrants, especially female emigrants. Charlotte O'Brien was the daughter of William Smith O'Brien, an Irish patriot well known as one of the '48ers who brought Ireland to the brink of revolution. Charlotte O'Brien was herself a gifted writer and poetess whose contributions to the *Dublin Nation* made her almost as famous as her father. In 1881 she had won by her pen and voice an improvement in shipboard conditions in steerage class on the British steamships, but she quickly turned her attention to conditions in ports like Queenstown where emigrants were often victims of a criminal class who cheated, robbed and exploited them. She established a lodging for emigrants in Queenstown and began a crusade to establish similar institutions in American ports. Through letters to the *Chicago Tribune* and correspondence with the leaders of the Irish Catholic Colonization Society, an organization dedicated to establishing farm colonies of Irish in the western states, she argued for a home to be established for immigrants in cities like New York. Although a Protestant she felt that such an institution had to be under the

direction of a Catholic priest because he would be more effective as a representative of Ireland's most influential Christian denomination. She boldly issued a challenge:

*The scandals daily being revealed in connection with Castle Garden are bad enough, but worse lies outside. Seeing that it is a present hopeless to get the steamship companies to exert themselves, I have decided, if I can get others to work with me, on going myself to New York to endeavor to get on foot some house for the protection of women. But will they put all the work on the shoulders of a woman?*¹⁵

Charlotte O'Brien felt that the causes of male and female emigration were different:

*I think political causes and lack of work and distress have much to do with the male emigration. Not so with females. I believe the women come to America partly because so many of their friends are here, partly because of the wages here, the greater probability of good marriage; and, beyond everything else because of the love of adventure.*¹⁶

PRIME MOVERS FOR AN IMMIGRANT GIRLS HOME

The prime mover in America for the establishment of an Irish immigrant girls home in New York came not from New Yorkers but from the Chicago-based Irish Catholic Colonization Society and the western Roman Catholic bishops. By June, 1882, the organization had committed itself morally and financially to a New York immigrant home. At a meeting of bishops of the New York Province the idea was endorsed, and Bishop Ryan of Buffalo, another western colonization advocate, called on Cardinal McCloskey to secure his help. The New York Cardinal chose one of his own clergy, Father John J. Riordan, who had been serving at St. Bernard's Church on West Fourteenth Street, as the first director. Together Bishop Ryan and Father Riordan visited Castle Garden where they were at first discouraged until they met with William Connolly of the Labor Bureau who convinced them of the pressing need

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J. J. McCORMACK, Smithfield St., Pittsburgh.

*Illustration: In 1883, ads for the Inman Line promised women in steerage separate quarters with matrons in attendance.
Courtesy of John Ridge.*

for such a mission. Father Riordan observed:

I was not long at Castle Garden before it became apparent that there was a great work to be done. Every other day brought its shiploads of immigrants who, after they passed through the hands of the registration clerks took their places in the Labor Bureau to wait for employment. Where were they to go at night if an employer did not turn up in the meanwhile? Their only alternative hitherto had been to go indiscriminately with the first lodging house keeper who got possession of them. For any one acquainted with the life of a great city, it is unnecessary to dwell on the dangers to virtuous young girls and unsophisticated young men were thus exposed. It is impossible to exaggerate these dangers. Many a young woman has been ruined for life on these occasions; and many a young man has had his whole career wrecked at the outset, by the associations and circumstances among which he has there been thrown. Moreover the trials to be faced by penniless emigrants appealed forcibly to commiseration; charity had a most noble and useful field here, I have found the advancement of a railroad fare to a point where employment had been offered, enough to start many an immigrant on the road to success. The condition of immigrants who have had to wait weeks, as is often the case, especially during the winter, before receiving an offer of employment, and have spent all their little means on their support in the meantime, was pitiable in the extreme. From what fate God alone knows, have men and women in such a plight been rescued by the timely bestowal of a night's lodging, and a meal that at least stayed the pangs of hunger.¹⁷

The Mission of Our Lady of the Rosary for the Protection of Irish Immigrant Girls, as the home was officially known, started off slowly in the last half of 1883. Father Riordan made a trip to western cities to firm up contacts with the Irish Catholic Colonization Society (whose annual one thousand dollar donation was critical in those early years) and to create a network of cooperating societies to which immigrant girls could be

channeled. The bulk of this cooperation came from the St. Vincent de Paul Society whose agents in various cities like Chicago, St. Louis, Omaha, Kansas City, Denver and St. Paul, arranged to meet the immigrant train arrivals. Up to May, 1884, the arriving immigrant girls were domiciled in "respectable" boarding houses in the vicinity of Castle Garden, but in that month a temporary home was rented at 7 Broadway and a "Mrs. Boyle," formerly matron for the Labor Bureau, was installed to care for the guests. No charge was ever made, and some nights up to 160 girls were accommodated — the majority for one night, but some for three or four nights.

After a trip to Ireland to discourage "reckless" emigration, Father Riordan made the rounds to the stronger "Irish Catholic" parishes of Manhattan and preached the cause of the new home. Twenty-one churches contributed \$9,305 in a few weeks and together with parishes in Yonkers and Wilimantic, Connecticut, and a number of private donations the total reached \$12,500. By December, 1885, a heavily mortgaged building at 7 State Street was purchased and become the first home in America for thousands of future women immigrants. It was an instant success and lead influential individuals like Father Edward McGlynn to comment "it is a wonder that the work was not begun before."¹⁸

EMPLOYMENT—AN ALLEGORY FOR IRELAND'S TROUBLES?

Arranging employment for Irish immigrant girls was viewed as not just an economic necessity, but as a means to save the innocent from falling into the hands of questionable characters. One example which Father Riordan cited served almost as an allegory for Ireland's troubles:

A single instance will be sufficient to show the nature of the work which the Mission is accomplishing almost daily for their protection. Two attractive Irish girls arrived at Castle garden recently. I noticed the marked attentions two young Englishmen paid them, and upon inquiring where they were going they replied to Philadelphia. I asked where they intended to stay the night in New York, and they informed me that two Englishmen were going to provide them with accommoda-

tions at a hotel. My suspicions being aroused I prevailed on the girls to come to the Home. After attending to their religious duties in the evening, they informed me that they had deceived me at the Garden as to their destination, that they had no friends in this country, and had decided to go to Philadelphia with their ship acquaintances who promised to provide them with situations there. I lost no time in procuring them employment in this city the next morning. Shortly after they left the home the two Englishmen called with two officers of the ship, and were most persistent in their efforts to discover their address, which of course, I refused to furnish. This is sufficient to show the importance in having such a mission at Castle Garden.¹⁹

Father Riordan shortly before his death in 1887 summarized the accomplishments of those first years:

During the brief period which the mission has been in operation it has been the means of guiding thousands of immigrant girls into the employment of Christian families. Its beneficent influence has been felt all over the country, and is acknowledged with gratitude in the communications from every part of the nation.²⁰

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Illustration: The Irish Immigrant Girls Home at the turn of the century. Photo as reproduced in centennial publication of the Church of Our Lady of the Rosary. Courtesy of John Ridge.