Emigration
Introduction

Irish women’s encounters with Enlightenment ideas about female education and societal roles were complex and defining for some women. The first section argued that there was a radical and a moderate view on women’s role and status emanating from contrasting concepts of equality between the sexes. Roman Catholicism, embourgeoisement and Enlightenment influences combined to shape the values of Catholic society as well as to define female behaviour in the pre-Famine period. The two chapters in the first case study in the volume, suggest that most women were influenced one way or another by at least a moderate view of equality. By the eve of the 1845–53 Famine, the woman reader, the school-going girl, the female religious and the woman patriot had expanded definitions of womanhood at least for upper- and increasingly middle-class women. This would continue with the female emigrant who is the focus of the next case study. She also exercised an element of choice and control over her life albeit within the wider context of the family.

Emigration became an integral part of Irish society. Irish arrivals in the USA peaked at 1.8 million in 1890, and ten years later the second generation Irish in America exceeded 3.3 million. By 1931 mass migration to the USA almost ceased.¹ When emigration to the USA resumed after 1945, it was still small relative to Britain, but significant in terms of the ‘continuity of

Irish migration … and the perpetuation of Irish and ethnic community life? In other words, despite the decline in departures for the USA after 1931, a depth of contact was set and the encounter became two-way in the form of the ‘return tide’ of emigrants, money, letters and packages. On the eve of the Famine, the concept and reality that was ‘America’ had already changed many Irish women’s lives, both those leaving and those staying behind. The latter’s lives were continuously effected by the subsequent indirect contact with American society and in time the ‘return tide’. This chapter examines how knowledge of America entered Irish women’s lives through the emigrant experience; the nature of that two-way encounter; and finally how the emigrant experience extended Irish women’s horizons so that an expanded concept of ‘America’ evolved over time.

All that can be known for definite about nineteenth-century emigrants is that they ‘took those steps up the gangway and onto the ship’.

The ‘push–pull’ explanatory model for emigration defines the push factors as religious and political oppression, lack of employment, population pressure and the pull factors as a tolerant society, greater economic and social opportunities, better working conditions and higher standards of living. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, additional push factors such as personal improvement and pull factors such as the appeal of urban centres became significant. Obviously the timing was occasionally influenced by specific personal, national and international events. But there is also ‘uncertainty’ about the relative influence of any one factor on the emigrant and if the decision to leave was even a ‘rational’ one. Nonetheless, the very step onto the gangway represented a break with family, home and place and some change in the lives of the individual and community was inevitable. This applied to men


and women alike.\textsuperscript{6} Recent research suggests that the traditional view of seeing women as ‘secondary emigrants’ is less relevant for any stage of the process. Women were actively involved in the decision, whether it was their own or that of family or friends.\textsuperscript{7} The implication of female agency in the decision to leave for the USA suggests that by 1850 the female emigrant was an integral figure in the transatlantic relationship.\textsuperscript{8} Moreover, as outlined in chapter two, the continuing expansion in female education, with the acquisition of reading and writing skills as well as the gradual abandoning of the Irish language, enabled more emigrants to be better informed about emigration while also preparing them for the challenge that lay ahead in the public rather than the private world. The availability of letters, advertisements for shipping lines in posters, newspapers and guidebooks, as well as the extension of the National School system of education from 1832 onwards strengthened the link between education, literacy and emigration, as noted in chapter two.\textsuperscript{9} Towards the end of the century, F. L. Dingley, a State Department official, who conducted a survey of the emigrant countries in western Europe, commented that the majority of the emigrants out of Queenstown, the busiest emigration port in Ireland, could read and write.\textsuperscript{10}

### Cultural Engagement: Knowledge of American life, 1600–1914

From the seventeenth century onwards America, shaped in part by the Enlightenment influences of liberalism and republicanism, was seen as a place of religious toleration, political freedom, a place where land could be obtained and a country of urban and industrial growth rather than a place of oppression, poverty and failure. Chapter one revealed how the concept of republican America was present in radical periodical literature read by


\textsuperscript{7} Travers, ‘Emigration and Gender’, p. 189; Van Vugt, \textit{Britain to America}, p. 122; See also Erickson, \textit{Leaving England}.

\textsuperscript{8} See also Daly, \textit{The Slow Failure}, p. 14.


women. For the Irish, many of the early-stage emigrants were from Ulster, and were Presbyterian, Protestant, Society of Friends (Quaker) and, to a lesser extent, Roman Catholic, who were escaping government oppression, continuous political upheaval and rising rents, while those who went as indentured servants were escaping poverty. Writing in 1808 when America had provided a home for her co-religionists and allowed them to progress within Thomas Jefferson’s Democratic–Republican party, Margaret Wright, a County Tyrone-born Presbyterian woman, described America as the ‘land of freedom and of liberty … the land of promise flowing with milk and honey to those labouring under Egyptian bondage’. Between one-half and two-thirds of those who left before 1845 were family groups. Moran suggests that because a family of five could find £60 to pay the fares and maintain themselves for fifteen months upon arrival, they were comfortable in Ireland. These pre-Famine emigrants were equally desirous to take advantage of the new economic, as well as religious and political opportunities to improve their lives. While these women may not have read Thomas Paine or Thomas Jefferson, they had a concept of America, albeit a vague one based on letters, newspapers and periodicals such as *Walkers’ Hibernian Magazine* and the *Freeman’s Journal*. When Quaker Margaret Boyle Harvey returned to Cork from Philadelphia in 1809, she commented that ‘the lower class of people here think it [America] is a wonderfully fine place’.

From the 1820s onwards more poorer Catholics began to emigrate and came to see America in similar transforming terms. During the nineteenth century between 250,000 and 400,000, ‘overwhelmingly Catholics’, received ‘full or partial’ assistance to travel to north America from government, landlords and philanthropists. These groups were close to the bottom of the economic scale and, unlike the middle-class and wealthy women in chapters one and two, left behind few personal diaries, though letter-writing continued to be one of the main mediums for women’s writing as in the


eighteenth century. Most wanted to escape the poverty and destitution although ‘others were indecisive’. It could be argued that these early Catholic groups would have gone anywhere and that America meant little to them. Yet, once settled, the role of the letter might have been life-changing for family and friends at home.16 This type of private writing, as noted in chapter one, was a way that women communicated with one another and maintained bonds. It was, therefore, an important medium of exchange. Letters could include money, contribute to chain migration and sustained contact with the home community into the twentieth century.17 By 1827, Alexander Carlisle Buchanan informed the Select British Parliamentary Committee on Emigration: ‘they send home flattering letters, and they send home money to assist in bringing out their friends.’18

In these early decades, observers also saw an increasing number of young Irish women arriving into New York harbour alone. Chapter two suggests that women by 1820 had more freedom to shape their own lives and these departures offer further evidence of this continuity albeit for different reasons. Although fewer in number than young men, together the single women comprised 60 per cent of the Irish classified as labourers or servants arriving into New York in 1836. On the eve of the 1845–53 Famine, as table 3.1 reveals, a significantly high proportion of women already featured among Irish emigrants to the USA.

### Table 3.1 Females per 1,000 Males among Emigrants from Britain and Ireland to the USA, 1841

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Among all immigrants</th>
<th>Among adults aged 15 years or older</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scots to the USA</td>
<td>521</td>
<td>551</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English to the USA</td>
<td>615</td>
<td>529</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welsh to the USA</td>
<td>702</td>
<td>700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish to the USA</td>
<td>805</td>
<td>758</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


---

In other words, along with married women, young single Irish women left for the USA before 1845.\textsuperscript{19} For these single women, America meant getting work most likely as domestic servants, maintaining contact with home and bringing out siblings and friends. Their subsequent actions and motivations would remain unknown for the most part and undoubtedly those who arrived destitute fared least well of all. Yet, the pattern was set. By 1840 the prevalence of Irish women in domestic service was a feature of urban life in the north-east at least. Five years later, US port officials described young Irish women immigrants as ‘servants’ or ‘spinsters’ who were influenced by claims in letters that ‘young women who can wash and sew well can find plenty of employment’ in US cities.\textsuperscript{20} Some prospered, as approximately nineteen per cent of the depositors in the New York City Emigrant Industrial Savings Bank were Irish-born females working in private domestic service and had arrived in the USA between 1816 and May 1845.\textsuperscript{21}

The extent to which this positive image of America as a place of paid work, wealth and prosperity was transforming Irish society by influencing people to leave, was already creating anxiety in some circles. From the 1790s, emigrants’ guidebooks on sale in Ireland warned the Irish against emigrating and outlined the dangers and hardships. In 1818, Thomas Addis Emmet, the Irish-American lawyer, politician and United Irishman, believed that most Irish emigrants ‘set out with false notions’, and William Murphy, a Cork doctor, stated in 1827 that there was ‘a great want of correct knowledge … with respect to … America’ within the local farming community. Ten years later, the Irish Charitable Society in Boston accused the Irish emigrants of viewing America as ‘sort of a half-way stage to Heaven, a paradise … the very El Dorado of Spanish romance’ and in the mid-1840s the Irish Emigrant Society in New York warned Irish emigrants ‘against entertaining any fantastic idea, such as that magnificence, ease and health, are universally enjoyed’ in America.\textsuperscript{22} Despite this, the powerful myth of America as a place of progress for women and men was reinforced by the arrival of money for the passage and remittances to alleviate hardship in Ireland, particularly in western parts.

By mid-century, dependence on American relatives had become another

\textsuperscript{21} Lynch-Brennan, \textit{The Irish Bridget}, p. xix.
fundamental part of life for many.\textsuperscript{23} Asenath Nicholson, the Quaker philanthropist who toured Ireland in 1844 and 1845, visited a house located two miles outside Johnstown, County Kilkenny. It was the home of the family of a domestic servant, Mary H., who worked for her in New York, and she commented that the £40 sent home ‘not only kept her mother in tea and bread but had given them all the “blessed tobacco” besides’. Mary H. had visited home also by then and her mother recalled that she had insisted on ‘overturnin’ the cabin and cleaning beds and floors. Later Nicholson visited Cahirciveen, County Kerry, where she met a ‘tidy well-dressed young woman whose dialect and manner was so much like the Americans’ that she asked if she had been there. The woman replied that she had worked in New York for ten years and had returned to look after her sick mother. On the eve of the Famine, therefore, Nicholson noticed that other ‘servant girls’ had returned from America because a ‘great change’ was evident in their ‘dress, manner and language’. She continued

She ceases to be a beast of burden and the basket on her back, which she throws off, she will never lift again. She confines her services more to the inside of the cabin and this undergoes a manifest change for the better.\textsuperscript{24}

Against the background of famine, death, disease, destitution and evictions in mid-century, more married couples and unmarried women emigrated than ever before. Miller suggests that the image of America as a ‘free country’ still held sway but that most just wanted to escape. In this battle for survival, there could have been little gender difference in the perception that anywhere was better than where they lived.\textsuperscript{25} In the 1860s the availability of ‘free land’ for men and single and widowed women through the Homestead Acts refined this view.\textsuperscript{26} However, Hoerder’s transnational scholarship on European emigrant societies suggests that women emigrants may not have considered this opportunity to own land in the same way as men. He argues that married women were more cautious because while it would mean a ‘better future’ for their families, it might also mean geographical

\textsuperscript{23} Miller, \textit{Emigrants and Exile}, p. 271; Lynch-Brennan, \textit{The Irish Bridget}, pp. 57–58.
\textsuperscript{24} Asenath Nicholson, \textit{Ireland’s Welcome to the Stranger: On An Excursion Through Ireland in 1884 & 1845, for the Purpose of Personally Investigating the Condition of the Poor} (New York: Bakker and Scrivner, 1847), pp. 88, 246.
and social isolation. While ‘an unusually large proportion’ of Famine emigrants travelled in family groups and some succeeded in establishing themselves on American farms, most Catholics settled in America's cities and towns. By 1855, almost 176,000 Irish-born residents were living in New York city and comprised approximately twenty-eight per cent of the total population. Subsequent emigration followed this pattern. In other words, women and men from rural backgrounds sought and found work in urban areas and in the ‘lowest paid, least skilled and most dangerous and insecure employment’. America, as a place of free land, held less sway with those who came from Irish rural backgrounds. Not only did they change their lives by leaving for America, but they adjusted them further by working in urban areas and this was particularly true for young women.

In the post-American Civil War years, America assumed further transformative powers with ‘industrialisation, the growth of cities, the expansion of factories and mechanization.’ It came to be perceived as a ‘country of speed, great size and huge factories’ but also one where women were perceived to be ‘treated better … [and] … could get jobs’. This contrasted with the other options available to Irish women. Firstly, there was industrialised and urbanised Britain where women could also find work but which was a less popular destination. Irish subservience in Britain manifested through continued poverty, prejudice and discrimination persisted until well into the twentieth century. In 1853, Reverend Alexander Peyton, Catholic parish priest of Blarney and Whitechurch in Cork, who was sent by Archbishop Cullen to the USA to collect funds for the Irish Catholic University, later published a series of letters in the Cork Examiner and an advice pamphlet. He commented that ‘when contrasting the encomiums passed upon Irish servant maids in America, for their virtue, piety and honesty, with the advertisement for servants in England, “No Irish need apply”, I was forced to admit that the English have no respect for these enobling qualifications.’ Indeed it

30 Hoerder, ‘From Dreams to Possibilities’, p. 8.
was not until the inter-war period in the twentieth century that Irish female emigration to Britain overtook male emigrant rates.

Life in America also offered young, Irish, Catholic women, mainly from the western parts, more than was on offer in Ireland. Clear’s recent re-evaluation of evidence relating to marriage states that historians can be sure of just three conclusions in the period 1850–1922: ‘Irish people in general married at a lower rate than the European norm … they married comparatively late … the average age of brides in 1911 was 29 [years], that of bridegrooms 33 [years].’ A link can be made between emigration and marriage, namely that as soon as young Irish women realised that there was ‘no husband and no job at home’, they departed in greater numbers than men, particularly in the 1890s. This raises the question as to whether America, the predominant location, might have been seen as offering them a better chance to find a husband. Diner’s earlier work on the Irish in New York, Boston, Milwaukee, Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Detroit and other centres of Irish population suggest that the rate of marriage among the Irish in America ‘did outpace’ that in Ireland although it was less frequent than any other immigrant group. This she interprets as an Irish-American hesitation to marry. In other words, Irish women knew that going to America might not necessarily mean breaking with familial and religious traditions. Yet for others, America might have equated with delaying marriage or not marrying at all. Perhaps some took heed of ‘the … prominent Irish women – labour leaders, school teachers, religious leaders, and actresses – [who] never married’ and led independent lives. There is no evidence to suggest that delaying or not marrying was influenced by the emerging American suffrage movement or feminist ideology. Yet, in 1920, more Irish women were single than in other immigrant groups with one-quarter unmarried, suggesting a desire to shape their own lives.

33 Clear, Social Change and Everyday Life in Ireland, p. 74.
36 Diner, Erin’s Daughters, p. 49.
Irish women who had entered the religious life also developed a concept of America which could be life-changing. As noted in chapter two, nuns exercised important cultural influence over society, but the religious life was also a form of independent life. Convent life became popular in the early nineteenth century and this popularity continued into the twentieth century. There was an ‘eight-fold’ increase in the number of women who ‘refused marriage’ and entered a convent with a dowry. This path provided not just another powerful alternative to marriage as well as fulfilment of spiritual needs, but also offered an attractive ‘emotional and material experience’. Once fully professed into a religious order, most nuns had little or no control in their futures. Previous generations of persecuted post-Reformation believers saw America as a religious refuge but in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Roman Catholic authorities in Ireland, Rome and the USA viewed it as a site for missionary work, particularly among the recently arrived Irish communities. Irish nuns were at the centre of that mission, which was driven mostly by the invitation of bishops, priests and religious orders in the USA. Along with nuns and postulants travelling out, aspirants were encouraged to join orders in either Ireland or the USA and then depart for the American mission. Several thousand young women responded to these campaigns. They had a different American dream from that of their sisters and friends because the economic motivation was not their primary concern. In the USA, educated middle-class young women who entered with dowries went on primarily to become teachers and principals, nurses and matrons working in teaching, health care and social services just as in Ireland. Moreover, by the end of the nineteenth century, the dowry was replaced by education as a requirement for entry in the USA. These women were not ‘submissive servants of the male clergy’ due to their ‘pioneering’ work. Hoy describes Irish nuns in the USA who came to dominate the provision of Catholic education as ‘heroes’. This description could be applied to all missionaries irrespective of destination. However, the developmental state of the American Catholic Church in a rapidly progressing society and economy, did allow for a certain unity of vision about their American mission and also

fulfilled individual women’s occupational and professional hopes within the religious life.⁴¹

But it was the association of America with paid work in the post-Famine period which changed the lives of so many young, single, Catholic women. Despite the expansion in the variety of paid work opportunities in Ireland, the occupational choices for an increasingly literate and numerate, young, English-speaking female who sought paid employment in Ireland were decreasing. In 1861, 26 per cent of women were in employment, falling to 19.5 per cent in 1911. An expanding area of female employment was as workers in shops and stores particularly in urban centres, although the *Freeman’s Journal* in December 1881 compared their circumstances to a ‘system of slavery’. A constant source of employment for women in Ireland throughout the nineteenth century was domestic service. By 1911 one working women in three was in service.⁴² For women employed as domestic servants in Ireland and those who were unemployed, not only was work available in the USA but they also had regulated hours and wages.⁴³ As noted earlier, soon after the Famine, Irish female servants virtually monopolised domestic service in America’s cities and became an integral part of the ‘new middle-class culture’ whereby households had to have “live-in” servants. Reverend Alexander J. Peyton commented after his trip in the early 1850s:

Irish servant-maids in America have contributed much to the honour and dignity of our country; their virtuous conduct, their strict attention to religion, the faithful honest and conscientious performance of their respective duties, have elicited the marked approbation of their employers...⁴⁴

While the Catholic Church became less supportive of emigration, as will be seen, the number of women who declared themselves to be domestic servants in the US census increased from 559,908 in 1860 to 1,012,133 in 1920. The 1900 US census indicated that fifty-four per cent of the women in servant employment were Irish-born. The Irish ‘Bridget’ was an ‘integral part’ of the

---

⁴³ Hoerder, ‘From Dreams to Possibilities’, p. 8.
middle-class American home. The reality of domestic life was often marked by a difficult settling-in period as the women got used to the modern or American ways of cleaning, cooking and laundry and experienced prejudice, discrimination, exploitation, a loss of personal freedom and loneliness. Some domestics found work in hotels and boarding houses while other women worked in mills and factories usually manufacturing textiles and clothes. Cohen's study of female-headed households in Greenwich, New York between 1880 and 1910 indicates the presence of ‘asymmetrical wage scales’ among male and female linen workers as was the case in Gilford, County Down, but Irish female emigrants considered pay rates in domestic service at least ‘better than anything available at home’ and Irish female domestic servants who lived-in also received bed and board. It is difficult to ascertain if these women attained independence and power in their American lives, and if Irish-born women had less opportunity for upward mobility. But Kenny concludes that despite obstacles and difficulties, ‘they generally prospered … carving out new lives for themselves, financing the passage of siblings to America, and supporting their families back in Ireland.’


The pattern set in the pre-Famine period remains identifiable; Reverend Peyton noted in 1853 that Irish domestic servants ‘remit their hard earned wages’ and in 1868 the member of parliament John Francis Maguire who toured the USA in 1866, believed that Irish girls living in American cities sent home more money than their male counterparts.\(^{50}\) Later on in the 1880s and 1890s, one of the reasons why philanthropist Vere Foster favoured assisting young, single women to emigrate to the USA in his second scheme was because ‘they are the least able to get themselves out, and because … they are generally the most liberal in sending home help to bring out their brothers and sisters and parents, if they wish to go.’\(^{51}\) Reports from his correspondents were peppered with references to money and tickets being sent home. In February 1880, Maria Corrigan in Ballaghadreen, County Mayo, had received £3 from an aunt in America, while Catherine Flanagan and Mary McCann had their passages paid by friends who had emigrated earlier.\(^{52}\) Margaret McCarthy threatened to send no more money unless her family joined her in America. In this case a ‘mutual obligation’ existed between a daughter who had left, saved and sent the ticket price home and her family, who were expected to join her.\(^{53}\) Remittances in the form of bank drafts, cash and pre-paid passage tickets came through banks, mercantile houses, shipping firms, exchange agencies, private letters and returning emigrants. Between 1848 and 1900, Irish-Americans sent $260 million back to Ireland, and forty per cent or $104 million was in the form of prepaid tickets.\(^{54}\) In the mid-1860s, John Francis Maguire cited evidence that Irish women in New York, San Francisco and Lowell also sent money to Ireland.\(^{55}\) One of the many exchange agencies was founded by Patrick Donohoe, editor of the *Boston Pilot*, which remitted more than $180,000 annually from female Irish domestic servants in Boston by the 1880s.\(^{56}\)


\(^{52}\) O’Connell, ‘Assisted Female Emigration’, pp. 73, 148.


By the turn of the century seventy-five per cent of young female emigrants had their passage paid by a sister and all were going to join a sister in the USA. Murphy suggests that sibling bonds were strengthened but so was the idea that women could prosper in the USA.\(^{57}\) The hopeful emigrant Péig Sayers in Dingle, County Kerry, was disappointed when ‘ná raibh fheidir lei [Cháit Jim] an costas a chur chugam’ [she was unable to send me the cost]. She did not receive the price of the ticket because her friend hurt her arm and was unable to work.\(^{58}\) Money also went towards buying land, building houses, improving houses, paying bills, the price of dowries and buying animals. In the early 1880s two young nuns sent back money to families in the west of Ireland to buy a horse to do the work of gathering seaweed which they had both done for their families.\(^{59}\) Indeed John Millington Synge’s experiences in Wicklow, west Kerry and Connemara between 1898 and 1905 revealed that female emigrants’ money from America maintained many families in those areas.\(^{60}\) Food, knitted gifts, photographs, rings, watches and clothes were also sent, representing the continuous presence of American material goods in Irish life and reinforcing the positive American encounter but also sharply contrasting it with life in Ireland.\(^{61}\)

Relatives received money to leave but learned from letters that conditions in America could be transforming. Lynch-Brennan’s work on domestic service indicates that while living spaces and food were not always adequate, Irish girls still flocked into domestic service.\(^{62}\) By early 1900, even the lowliest paid domestic servant living in Brooklyn who might have lived in a ‘tiny space in a stuffy attic’, had a room of her own. It was ‘dry’ and she had ‘creature comforts’ such as ‘running water, gas light and work indoors made easier by modern conveniences’. In New York, many lived in


\(^{61}\) Neville, “‘She Never Then After That Forgot Him’”, p. 279; Neville, ‘Land of the Fair, Land of the Free?’, p. 63; Grace Neville, ‘Dark Lady of the Archives: Towards an Analysis of Women and Emigration to North America in Irish Folklore’, in O’Dowd and Wichert (eds), *Chattel, Servant or Citizen*, p. 212.

the neighbourhoods of Brooklyn Heights, Carroll Gardens or Park Slope, which meant access to ‘gardens and tree-lined streets and the expanse of Prospect Park’. A domestic servant could participate in parish activities in the expanding neighbourhoods or in one of the Irish community-organised picnics and dances and meet friends from home. During her leisure time she could shop in nearby New York or take the streetcar to Coney Island. In other words, despite loneliness and unhappiness at times, she enjoyed a ‘measure of privacy, independence and autonomy’ which contrasted vividly with her previous life of little or no financial or material resources. While she may not have contrasted her new autonomous life with the patriarchal, restricted life predominant in rural Ireland, as some scholars argue, she did not reject what she encountered in America and instead transferred information about these hallmark activities of a modern society back home to family and friends.

Scholars who have worked on letters acknowledge their problematic nature, particularly in terms of veracity. Miller’s study based on over 5,000 letters and folklore testimonies notes that letters were often responsible for disseminating the view that America was a ‘veritable paradise’. Yet, letter-writers provided negative as well as positive information about their lives in America, in particular that working lives were harsh. Another aspect of the negative experience was the physical and moral danger some young girls encountered not just in America but during the journey and sometimes family in America were less than welcoming of the new arrival. Moreover, letters did not always contain money. The disappointment could be acute. Some parents blamed themselves for forcing emigration upon their children and others held a long-lasting resentment which reinforced the idea that America was a materialistic place where family ties mattered little.

empty letter and negative information should have had a dissuasive effect on young women thinking of emigrating but it did not. Instead, Miller maintained that the receiver of the letter in Ireland selected what they wanted from it. It was the descriptions of enjoyment gained from a train journey across America, from work as a maid, from leisure time and earning and spending money that were more influential. Harris takes this further to suggest that young Irish women may have interpreted positive information from their female relatives and friends as evidence of independence and autonomy in America.

The returner in the pre-1914 period
Such impressions may have been reinforced by the returned female emigrant. Following Nicholson’s observation about the pre-Famine period, while just 2.1 per cent of all Irish emigrants to the USA returned between 1899 and 1910, more women than men returned in this turn-of-the-century period. Return could last for any length from three, six, or twelve months to permanent stays. Murphy’s work on 1898 and 1906 suggests that many single women returned from the USA for short visits. American-born Margaret Dineen, a single woman travelled to Ireland alone in 1898 to attend the ‘great celebration in honour of “Wolfe Tone” and returned again in 1907 for the Dublin International Exhibition. Others came back with enough money to marry and set up businesses with their husbands.

This reality had also infiltrated English- and Irish-language literature, memoirs and songs. Schrier has outlined many emigrant ballads and among the best known are Percy French’s ‘Donegan’s Daughter’ (1897) and ‘The Emigrants’ Letter’ (1910). Female emigration was a regular concern of the popular writer Rosa Mulholland and following from her 1888 novel, A Fair Emigrant, in which second-generation Irish-American heiress ‘Bawn

69 Harris, “Come You All Courageously”, pp. 170–75.
71 Diane Dunnigan, ‘Coming Home: Return Migration to Ireland, 1890–1920’, paper presented to the Migrations in Irish History Symposium, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 8 June 2011.
74 Schrier, Ireland and the American Emigration, pp. 97–102.
Desmond’ returns, she commented that ‘America is a very levelling place’. Her 1908 novel, *The Return of Mary O’Murrough*, dealt specifically with the female returner and can be read as favouring or rejecting emigration.\(^{75}\) The poet Martin Ó Direáin recalled returners in *Feamainn Bhealtaine*. One of John Millington Synge’s informants in Mayo told him that so many women returned that ‘there is hardly a marriage made in the place that the woman hadn’t been in America.’ Irish domestic servant Margaret Hegarty returned from New York to County Kerry, married and stayed permanently, albeit in unhappy circumstances. Synge also described the ‘perfectly clean’ cabins of returned female ‘yanks’, the presence of photographs of the ‘Sistine Madonna’ on the walls of their homes unlike the ‘hideous German oleographs on religious subjects’ in most Irish cabins, and the wearing of ‘new American blouses’ in some places.\(^ {76}\)

This evidence does not fully support the contention of an ‘Americanising’ of the mentality of the Irish female whether or not she emigrated. However, it does suggest that by the beginning of the twentieth century, the returned female ‘yank’, whether she stayed for long or short periods, represented cultural difference.\(^ {77}\) Contemporaries agreed. F. L. Dingley, a US State Department official charged with visiting the main emigrant countries in western Europe, accounted for the ‘phenomenon’ of the ‘increase in the swarm of young [Irish] women’ to the USA because it ‘is singularly adapted by its sense of fair play to woman to give her an independent career’.\(^ {78}\) By then a similar view was embedded in the folklore; America was ‘favouring girls more than boys’, girls could do ‘much better in America than at home’ and it transformed women from ‘docility to financial independence’. Unsurprisingly the latter was unwelcomed by the largely male respondents in the National Folklore Commission project because it made women ‘arrogant, critical and difficult to please’.\(^ {79}\) Nonetheless, young, single Irish women and their families regarded America as a place of opportunity more than exile, a place where personal ambition and hopes could be met as well as decent living conditions secured for themselves and their families left behind.\(^ {80}\) Thus, the traditional explanation that women did not desire to


\(^ {78}\) Dingley, *European Emigration*, p. 308.

\(^ {79}\) Neville, ‘Land of the Fair, Land of the Free?’, pp. 66, 68; Neville, “‘She Never Then After That Forgot Him’”, p. 286.

\(^ {80}\) See Hoerder, ‘From Dreams to Possibilities’, pp. 1–27.
emigrate and did so only to accompany their ‘menfolk’ or to rejoin them can be questioned.\textsuperscript{81} Irish women, like German women, held an image of life in America characterised by higher status, greater freedoms, employment opportunities and economic independence.\textsuperscript{82}

The entrenchment of this idea of America and its consequences for Irish rural life was such that some Irish Roman Catholic clerics promulgated the view that leaving for any reason other than political pressure was unacceptable, and women were a particular focus for such views. In 1903, Fr. Joseph Guinan, then a curate in Athlone, County Westmeath, published the first of his eight novels, *Scenes and Sketches in an Irish Parish Or Priests and People of Doon by a Country Curate* which accepted that the eldest girl, ‘Rosie’, ‘now about twenty years of age, seeing no chance of employment at home, resolved to emigrate’ to America. Fr. Guinan preferred to see ‘Rosie’ stay in the ‘mud wall cabin’ than become ‘victim of hellish agencies of vice’.\textsuperscript{83} The Catholic Truth Society, founded in 1899 to promote an interest in Irish and Catholic themes, published millions of cheap penny booklets in the following years. Among the concerns of its writers who included the Irish–Ireland advocate Mary Butler and Mulholland, was the continuous flow of emigrants. The former lamented the dilution of a Gaelic Ireland culture.\textsuperscript{84} When the character ‘Moya’ in Mulholland’s ‘The Hungry Death’ was forced to emigrate with ‘Coll’, it was ‘for better times’ than were available in Inis Meáin in the west of Ireland.\textsuperscript{85} Against the background of papal condemnation of every form of liberalism including individualism and ‘unrestricted competition’, beginning with the 1864 *Syllabus of Errors* through to the tenure of Pope Pius X (1903–14), Catholics were urged, in Lee’s words, ‘to save their souls in holy Ireland rather than to hazard them for the world’s goods among American heretics’.\textsuperscript{86}

Ironically, although lamenting emigrants’ departure, it was the Catholic, conservative, patriarchal values embedded in rural economy and society which condemned them to leave.\textsuperscript{86} Moreover, these young Catholic women were

\textsuperscript{81} Travers, ‘Emigration and Gender’, p. 187 also deals with the issue.

\textsuperscript{82} Hoerder, ‘From Dreams to Possibilities’, pp. 23, 15.

\textsuperscript{83} Rev. J. Guinan, *Scenes and Sketches in an Irish Parish Or Priest and People of Doon By a Country Curate* (3rd edition; Dublin: M. H. Gill, 1903), pp. 34–47.


blamed by the Catholic hierarchy for being more susceptible than young men to ‘some bright vision beyond the Atlantic’. Similar paternalistic views also influenced the Catholic clergy in New York to establish the Missionary of Our Lady of the Rosary for female, but not male, Irish emigrants.87 Between 1884 and 1890 the Mission priests gave valuable help to 25,000 Irish women, but noticed in 1891 that the arrivals now wanted to ‘improve their social position’ as well as secure a livelihood. In turn, this personal aim led fewer women to turn to the Mission, which was heavily criticised by Catholic clergy.88 An assistance programme in Boston run by the Charitable Irish Society of Boston and the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, which also aimed to prevent young Irish women from engaging in immoral behaviour, had the additional aim of preventing proselytizing. By 1913, it also had experienced a decline in the demand for its services.89 Both programmes could also be seen as part of the Catholic Church’s efforts in America and Ireland, to ensure that the behaviour of Irish emigrant women accorded with a moral code. Notwithstanding this position, it was the comment from Denis Lee from Goresbridge, County Kilkenny, who followed his sister to America in 1903 that America was ‘a good country, especially for girls’, providing work and an opportunity for self-improvement that echoed the views of Irish women and their families.90 Lee was identifying a pattern present since the early nineteenth century. Indeed, there was some recognition of this in Boston at least, where the Irish Charitable Society moved to establish an employment bureau in 1918.91

The Appeal of America, 1922–60

National independence was widely expected to signal the end of emigration through the provision of employment.92 Instead unemployment increased

---

90 National Folklore Collection (hereafter NFC), Delargy Centre for Irish Folklore, University College Dublin, MS 1409, Denis Lee, Patrick and Michael Silke.
rapidly after 1920 and was accompanied by widespread distress and hardship. Women’s employment stagnated or declined from the 1920s to the 1980s. In the inter-war period, government policy in Ireland sent out certain messages to women who regarded paid employment as a way of fulfilling personal aims.\(^9^3\) Between 1926 and 1935, the marriage bar was extended to all civil service posts. In 1936, the Conditions of Employment Act permitted the Minister for Industry and Commerce to prevent women from working in certain industries. These restrictions could be justified in the short term on the grounds of poor economic circumstances, but the marriage bar remained in place until 1974. Throughout the period, the state made it clear in the respective reports on technical education in 1926, seasonal migration in 1937–38 and youth unemployment in 1951 that female ambition, particularly among poorer classes, should be confined to the domestic environment.\(^9^4\) Clear has shown that many women, particularly those who were married, were too busy surviving to be overly concerned about these restrictions on their earning ability and other limitations on their personal life and citizenship roles.\(^9^5\) But the economic climate and legislative framework affected their daughters, who continued to leave.

Throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century, for every eight males leaving, ten females departed.\(^9^6\) Evidence presented to the inquiry into the decline of the Irish language was littered with references to the personal and familial assumption of emigration to the USA for young women and men. Dr Bartley O’Beirne, the Tuberculosis Officer for County Galway, indicated in 1925 that girls in his area ‘were waiting for their time to go to America’.\(^9^7\) America remained the favoured destination and even after the depression hit the US economy, in 1929 when M. K. McGurl, a teacher in Spiddal, County Galway, asked his pupils what would they like to do when


97 *Coimisiún na Gaeltachta, Reports and Minutes of Evidence* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1926), Minutes of evidence, Dr Bartley O’Beirne, MD, DPH, TB Officer, Co. Galway, 3 June 1925, p. 4.
they grew up, one after another the whole class said one word ‘America’.\textsuperscript{98} As economic conditions worsened in the USA and emigration to Britain escalated and rumours circulated in Ireland that visa restrictions to the USA would be reduced, US Consul General Henry H. Balch in Dublin reported an increase in callers and letters. He stated that ‘in the main the demand for immigration visas is from impecunious relatively young, country-women who desire to seek employment in the United States as domestics.’ But he was also convinced that ‘for a long time to come it must attract the younger generation of this country’ because so many Irish had settled there.\textsuperscript{99} From 1946 to 1952, 16.2 per cent of total departures, equivalent to 19,400 people, emigrated to ‘overseas’ destinations and largely to the United States.\textsuperscript{100} Once again most of those leaving were from the western counties, aged under thirty years, and in the 15–19 years age-range, more women than men departed.\textsuperscript{101} Between 1951 and 1961, ten per cent of total departures went to the USA and over half of them were women.\textsuperscript{102} America was embedded in popular mentality and was still part of the life-cycle in some parts of Ireland.

Continuing from the nineteenth century, Irish women departed for America because it was still equated with employment, better working and living conditions and, increasingly, personal fulfilment. Female participation in the US labour force increased from 18.3 per cent in 1900 to 22 per cent in 1930, unlike in Ireland where the number of women ‘gainfully employed’ fell from 30 per cent in 1926 to 24.1 per cent in 1951.\textsuperscript{103} Mairead’s two aunts and cousins who left Crusheen, County Clare, for America in the 1920s because ‘there was nothing [in terms of work] for them’ locally except in domestic service. Over 80,000 women were ‘maids’ in the USA in 1926, one-quarter of all working women. Many left for the USA and immediately after arriving


\textsuperscript{99} National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter NARA), General Records of the Department of State (hereafter S/D), American Foreign Service Inspection Report (hereafter AFSR), Dublin, Ireland, July 1938, pp. 6, 7, 12; NARA, S/D, RG 49, roll 1231.9, Sidney A. Belovsky and Henry Balch, 9 November 1934.


\textsuperscript{101} Delaney, ‘Irish Migration to Britain’, pp. 270–71.

\textsuperscript{102} Connolly, ‘Emigration from Independent Ireland: 1922–1970’, p. 149; Daly, \textit{The Slow Failure}, p. 188, table 3. See also Manuscripts and Archives Research Library, Trinity College Dublin (hereafter MARLTD), The Arnold Marsh Papers (hereafter AMP), MS 8301, S.S. 1 (a) for further on emigrant women to the USA in the 1920s and later Britain.

in New York found house-cleaning work. These young women could have worked as servants in Ireland or Britain either in private houses, hospitals or increasingly in hotels, but similar work in America offered a path to better paid work, a future, and for many, joining family and friends. Nora Joyce did housework in Dundrum, County Dublin, for two years but emigrated to join her sister. In 1920s America, she secured domestic work but quickly moved to ‘better’ paid work; ‘I got more dollars. From seven dollars a week to twelve dollars.’ An emigrant from the Gaeltacht area in Ring, County Waterford, Mary Terry Kelly who worked in the Irish College departed in 1923 because ‘Ní raibh morán airgead ann ag an am sin. Dúirt mé go dtiocfainn anseo.’ [There was not a lot of money around at the time. I said I would come here.] Soon she was earning twelve dollars a week. Although conditions for domestic servants in the USA deteriorated during the 1919–21 recession, there was ‘discord’ between the ‘maids and mistresses’ during the 1920s and reform did not come until the late 1930s. Some live-in servants enjoyed a set day off each week, limits on the nature of their work and minimal standards of accommodation. Moreover, some emigrants believed it was now the ‘land of hope and glory for the housemaid, where the electrical appliances turned kitchen drudgery into play.’

In Ireland, the ‘maid problem’ rumbled on into the 1940s and the ‘shortage of female domestic servants’ was raised in Dáil Éireann in 1946. Long hours, unsuitable time off and wearing a uniform instead of an overall characterised domestic servants’ working conditions in middle-class homes. In 1950, Irish women were criticised for treating their employees as ‘something labelled servant’ and the Irish Housewives’ Association unsuccessfully called for a code of employment and wage rates to be established by the government. The young women who worked in service preferred to do so in Britain rather than Ireland, but America still held its attraction. In the late 1950s, the


Kerryman carried advertisements for ‘general domestics for first class homes’ in America; the fare would be advanced to girls aged between eighteen and forty years, no experience was required, the wage was stated and full board offered. At her first job in America in 1955, Frances Newall Coen earned thirty dollars a week working as a cook for the Brickley family living on Reservoir Avenue in Chestnut Hill in Boston. She left to ‘make more money’ and earned fifty dollars a week working for the Kruegers. Mary Walsh earned forty dollars a week childminding a Catholic family in Brookline where there was also a cook from Gort, County Galway. Later she moved to a cooking job where ‘you’re not as tied down’ and earned fifty dollars each week.

The range of paid occupations for women in Ireland evident in the 1926 census was described as a ‘story of infinite romance and adventure’. In addition to domestic service, work was now available in the growing commercial sphere and in the professions. The arrival of Woolworths in 1914 with better rates of pay and conditions, contrasted sharply with those available in drapery houses, particularly in rural places, where junior apprentices received accommodation, food and lodgings but no wages as late as 1965. The same range of occupations and many more were available in Britain and in the USA. An unnamed Roman Catholic priest explained to 500 Irish emigrants just arrived into New York harbour in July 1922 that American girls became secretaries, book keepers, stenographers and clerks with ‘good salaries, short hours and a day off each week’. The Women of 1923 yearbook found that ‘overalls, grease and heavy manual labour no longer had any terrors’ for women. They could work as stevedores, dock labourers, sailors and deckhands, blacksmiths, machinists, carpenters, brick makers, tin smiths, wood choppers and freight agents. American women drove trucks, cleaned streets and were plumbers and there was always clerical and factory work. Even though immigrant labour was still exploited, second-generation Irish women were educated to higher levels and infiltrated nursing, teaching, clerical work and other professions. In other words, while

113 Walsh, When the Shopping Was Good, p. 121.
114 Irish Independent, 11 July 1922.
115 Irish Times, 28 December 1922.
most first-generation immigrant Irish Catholic women in the USA lived in ghettos and later on in suburban neighbourhoods, socialised in Irish organisations and were attended to by Roman Catholic clergy, soon they or at least their daughters made compromises and adopted the prevailing standards of the majority, particularly in a swiftly industrialising and changing society. The New York Times reported on 4 May 1927 that young Irish women arriving wanted to be stenographers, not servants. When Bridget Dirrane felt ‘the strains of over-working’ as a nurse, she became a catering supervisor in the Duncan Park Hotel in Boston.\(^{117}\)

Against the background of post-World War Two economic depression in Ireland and boom conditions in Europe and America, the ‘Feminine Angle’ column in the Kerryman drew attention to the presence of American women workers in traditional industries but also in new areas such as transportation as pilots and mechanics. Such work gave them financial independence because American women controlled seventy-six per cent of the money in savings banks in the USA.\(^{118}\) Eimear, who left for Boston from Connemara in the 1950s, commented that ‘America seemed to be offering the golden opportunities … [to] become a whole person – jobs and work and development, just growing.’ She found work immediately in a factory in Lynn, Massachusetts, but moved to another factory where the ‘money was much better’. Around twenty of her friends from home joined her.\(^{119}\) By the 1950s, forty per cent of all American women aged over sixteen years held a job, despite the rise of the cult of domesticity.\(^{120}\) Even in the improved economic climate of 1960s Ireland, emigration persisted, albeit at a slower pace, because to use Mary Walsh’s words about returning to America after a journey home in 1961, ‘it was easy to find work.’\(^{121}\)

A further feature of the American world of paid work was noticed by Irish women. Most American married women continued to work in the home but from the 1920s to 1960s more worked in the paid public sphere. Of course it was a necessity for poorer families. The educated Dirrane commented that ‘there was no marriage embargo on workers in the USA. A young girl could have two or three jobs and be married as well.’\(^{122}\) This latter information

\(^{117}\) Erickson-Coble, Cleaning Up, p. 182, fn. 40; see Bridge Dirrane, A Woman of Aran (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1997).

\(^{118}\) Kerryman, 22 April 1950; 29 April 1950; 14 October 1950; 4 November 1950; 16 December 1950; 25 December 1954.

\(^{119}\) O’Carroll, Models for Movers, pp. 65, 66.


\(^{121}\) ‘Mary Walsh – 1950s’, p. 72.

\(^{122}\) Dirrane, A Woman of Aran, p. 51. Dirrane is not fully informed here, see chapter one.
made an impression on Noreen in Moycullen, County Galway, whose brother emigrated. She knew that married women in America could work after marriage, could go to clubs and ‘had more freedom’ than their Irish counterparts. Similarly, Patricia from Kilkenny who had step-sisters in America, knew that some married women in America could choose to work outside the home or ‘to stay at home’ with their children. Irish women with children became ‘fixtures’ as waitresses in the major restaurant chains, Schraffts, Lintons and Horn and Hardart, from the 1920s to 1970s. The implication was that American women’s working lives equally meant hard work often in the low-paid, unregulated, twenty-four-hour world of unskilled work, but that their income-earning abilities were not ended once married.

America and Other Life Choices

The link between family structure, land-inheritance practices and migration patterns has been demonstrated for the post-Famine period. In the twentieth century, insufficient and inadequate urban and rural employment and housing did not encourage marriage to take place at the average life stage, between 18 and 30 years of age. Bridget McLaughlin Creggagh from Carrenmullen, Malin Head, County Donegal, knew her future husband ‘pretty well’ when he emigrated to the USA for work in March 1925 and soon she followed. Aged twenty years she arrived in Boston in August and soon her friend ‘came to call on her’, and after he secured a licence as a brewery engineer they married five years later. In the interim she worked as head waitress at Groton School and was in domestic service in Brookline. Sarah Anne and her two friends, Mai and Mary Bann, emigrated from Leenane, County Mayo, to New York, in 1928 and all three worked exceptionally hard. Sarah Anne admitted later that until she met her husband ‘I never thought

I’d get a man.” Once in America, Almeida indicates that the ‘typical’ immigrant in the post-World War Two years found work, then ‘tended to marry, settled down in the communities to which they migrated and sent their children to Catholic schools.” Gaining a job in America made marrying, as well as delaying it, possible.

Nora Joyce expected to get married but not in her home in the Aran Islands in the 1920s, because she saw arranged marriages, women bearing ‘ten, eleven, twelve’ children and living with in-laws. She emigrated in 1928 and met her husband in the following two or three years. But she ‘didn’t want to get married and be poor. I didn’t want to get married and not have heat in the house. There was no rush in getting married.’ She worked as a domestic servant until she married and progressed from living in apartments to having her ‘own place’ because she knew ‘how to save’ and bought ‘bargains’. She had three children, bought a second house which was rented out but eventually returned to work because ‘what would I be doing around the house? It’s good for you.’

Another who delayed marriage was the nurse Bridget Darrane who had met her future husband, Ned, in Dublin before she went to America: ‘it was the first time I fancied him.’ But it did not stop her emigrating to Boston in 1927 and once there she met him again and started going out with him ‘for a few years prior to our marriage’ in 1932. Even though they were both in their thirties when they married, which was an age as late as at home, they were both working and had sufficient money to rent an apartment, and a few days after their wedding Bridget started a new job nursing in Forest Hill Hospital in Jamaica Plains where she ‘worked long and hard, doing much overtime and being paid a good rate per hour’ while her husband’s pay as a manual labourer increased over time also. Mary Terry Kelly ‘wasn’t anxious to get married’ at all. She worked as a cook in homes, schools and hotels and was well paid, had a circle of friends, went to dances every Saturday night and sometimes on Thursdays, and ‘had lots of fun’. Eventually she married and had two sons.

Some women who married were able to exercise an element of independence also through limiting the size of their families. One study concluded that Irish-born women in the USA in 1910 were ‘more likely to

132 Darrane, A Woman of Aran, pp. 50–53.
133 ‘Mary Terry Kelly’, p. 50.
control their fertility’ than other immigrant groups and more likely to use contraception than the native-born white population. The birth control movement was well established in the USA by the inter-war period, with Margaret Sanger a prominent advocate. Although it was frowned upon by Catholic conservative forces, as was the case in Ireland, the relatively smaller size of Irish-American families compared to their Irish counterparts could not have gone unnoticed by women in Ireland. Mary did not emigrate with the aim of marrying either and like so many other young Irish women she was a practising Roman Catholic. When she did marry during the 1960s, she believed in ‘birth control, in family planning and I also believe you should have a free will’. She had two sons. She associated return to Ireland with ‘happiness’ but America meant a ‘broadening of horizons’ due to educational and business opportunities for the married woman. At eighteen years of age, Eimear emigrated from Connemara in the early 1960s but planned it during the previous years. She did not go to America to marry but her ‘idea of America at that time was to go and make some money, save it and come back and live in Ireland’. She saw America offering ‘golden opportunities … I was going to be transformed overnight by coming to America. Become a whole person – jobs and work and development, just growing.’ Eimear was acutely aware that she was embarking on a new life in America.

This sense of freedom for young women was reaffirmed in accounts of socialising in America. By the 1920s dancing, shopping, cinema-going and eating out were all part of women’s social lives. Their revelling in a new-found independence, even if tinged by sadness, also emerges in early 1960s testimony from Eimear and her friends who were members of an alcohol abstinence association and enjoyed its social gatherings. They also went to dance halls in Boston and supported Gaelic Athletic Association football teams. Mary Walsh and her friends, who worked in a wealthy neighbourhood outside Boston, found ‘plenty of opportunity’ to attend dances, ball games, the Mission Church and meet up three or four times each week. Eileen and Bridie O’Donnell had Thursday as their day off work in their childminding jobs in Brookline in Boston between 1959 and 1963, and they ‘went into town, spent money and went dancing … hopefully we’d get a date’.

Another trend that continued from the early nineteenth into the twentieth centuries was that America offered some young women an opportunity

135 Cohen, America: The Dream of My Life, p. 38.
to proceed with a religious vocation and embark on missionary work as teachers and nurses. In 1922, the Sisters of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament of Corpus Christi (Texas), Franciscan nuns (Illinois), Sisters of St Joseph (Indiana) and Sisters of Mercy (Texas and Georgia) visited Ireland offering young women the opportunity to join as postulants.139 In July 1932 the Mother House of the Sisters of Charity Congregation in San Antonio, Texas, requested Irish visas for postulants to enter the USA.140 With less importance afforded to the need for a dowry and greater emphasis placed on being educated, these young women chose to serve God in America, not Ireland. There was a further reason that might have been influential. US Consul General in Dublin Henry Balch believed in 1938 that ‘not all Irish girls who enter American orders to train to become nuns remain at the end’141 Perhaps some used it as a way to bypass the usual visa restrictions to get into America but subsequently left the order. The missionary work to the USA continued into the 1950s. Six members of the Irish Sisters of Charity left Shannon Airport on 22 September 1953 to establish the first house of the community in the USA.142 It is likely that they had no say in their departures but missionary work in the USA might have entailed fewer hardships than in African or Asian countries. Indeed Clark suggests that for many the religious life in America represented ‘high religious idealism’ yet also brought with it ‘the prospect of higher ethnic social status and education’.143

Undoubtedly as the twentieth century unfolded, the changes wrought in Irish women’s lives by emigration to America were softened somewhat for themselves and their families, particularly in western and southern counties, by the reality that America was regarded as an extension of home. Most women went to relatives and friends in America, which contained the largest Irish-born community living outside Ireland between 1871 and 1951.144 In 1938, US Consul Balch commented that practically all of the ‘young country-women’ who contacted the Dublin legation had ‘quite close relatives or friends in the United States … [who] indicate their willingness to ensure their support’.145 These familial bonds still made departures less traumatic for all. One witness to the Coimisiún na Gaeltachta (Commission of Inquiry into

139 *Irish Independent*, 21 July 1922; 11 August 1922; 26 July 1922; 2 August 1922; 24 August 1922; 29 August 1922.
140 National Archives of Ireland (hereafter NAI), Department of Foreign Affairs (hereafter D/FA), Letter Books, President, 1932, Walshe to Permanent Secretary to the President, 24 September 1932.
141 NARA, RG 59, IRFS, Dublin 1938.
142 *Irish Times*, 23 September 1953.
144 Commission on Emigration, table 95, p. 126.
Irish-speaking areas) in 1925 commented that for Connemara people when they got to America ‘they are amongst their own people, their own relatives … if they came to Dublin they would know nobody’. Almost thirty years later, many people along the western seaboard from Donegal to Kerry had more relations in America than in Ireland. Bridget Dirrane from Inishmore emigrated in 1927 to ‘Boston to be specific. Boston is the place where so many Inishmore people before me had gone.’ Similarly, in the 1950s a Donegal woman, Katie, recalled ‘you would feel more at home in Boston than you would in Malin.’ This suggests that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century chain migration created extended family- and friend-based networks with strong geographical links that persisted into the twentieth century, thereby further reducing the trauma of departure and offering some security upon arrival. America was still new and different for these women motivated by economic factors, but it was no longer the alien and hostile place predicted by the Roman Catholic Church at the turn of the century.

**Cultural Exchanges:**

**The ‘Return Tide’ in the Twentieth Century**

**Money**

The impact of emigrants’ gains in America through the medium of the return tide of money, letters and packages continued to alter life in Ireland. In the 1920s, ninety-five per cent of those leaving had passages paid by relatives in America, which emphasised the strength of family ties. Prior to the practical cessation of emigration to the USA, emigrant remittances, mainly from America, comprised 3.4 per cent of gross domestic product and about 10 per cent of the merchandise imports. In 1933, US Consul Balch

---


147 TCDMD, AMP, MS 8301 summaries of evidence 153 fols., S.S. 1 (a) Congested Districts; NFC, MS 1407, Seán Tom Ceárnáí.


149 NFC, MS 1411, Conall C. O Beirn.


estimated that American remittances amounted to approximately $15 million, and five years later he calculated that Ireland received annually from the USA approximately $11,150,000 in emigrants remittances, $2,250,000 expenditure by American tourists and more than $30 million paid to the Irish Hospital Sweepstakes Trust.152 As the US economic depression gathered pace there was a drop in remittances, but by 1947 American remittances and legacies comprised $13.2 million, equalling almost half of Ireland’s dollar earnings. It is likely that remittances from Britain exceeded those from North America in the 1940s.153 ‘The impact of such monies on western communities was noted. In the 1920s, Reverend S. J. Walsh, parish priest for Aran Island off the coast of County Donegal, believed that the ‘government would have had to be supporting the Aran Islands for the past three years were it not for America’.

Ten years later, the Irish Monthly noted the ‘dearth of remittances’ in western Ireland and described it as ‘a prop on which it has relied for a very long time’. Informants to the emigration commission in 1948 from the western seaboard counties agreed.155 Folklore informants looking back from the mid-1950s admitted that if ‘you needed money you had no place else to turn your face’ and accepted that ‘the people have gained through the prosperity of America’.156

Although the Folklore Commission material is replete with references to sons, brothers and uncles sending money home, an exception was Micheál Ó Conaire from County Galway, who recalled an old man saying ‘O Lord, poor was the house I had until my first daughter went over.’157 However, emigrant women confirmed that they sent assistance home. In the 1920s, Nora Joyce sent money home to Inis Meán off County Galway, three or four times a year, including in August to buy turf for the winter.158 In the same decade Mary Terry Kelly emigrated from a small farm in County

154 Coimisiún na Gaeltachta, Minutes of evidence, 20 August 1925.
156 NFC, MS 1411, Conall C. Ó Beirn; MS 1409, Proinnsias De Búrca; MS 1408, Matthew O’Reilly.
157 NFC, MS 1409, Micheál Ó Conaire: ‘Ó a Thighhearna, ba glas a’ teach a bhí agam no go ndeacha an chéad inghean liom ann!’
158 ‘Nora Joyce’, p. 38.
Waterford and sent money home even though her parents ‘never pressured her’ to do so.\(^{159}\) Even after marriage, some women continued the practice. Mairead’s married aunts always sent money to their siblings and father in Crusheen, County Clare, and to their married sister in nearby Clarecastle. Mai was remembered for sending money every few weeks, Lily sent money for her sister’s birthday and to mark St Patrick’s Day, Easter and Christmas events.\(^{160}\) Throughout the period, Eilis’ sisters who settled in Connecticut sent dollars home to County Clare even though she recognised that it ‘wasn’t easy for them to help us a lot’. Throughout the 1930s, the money was used to buy a turkey and extra coal for the fire. Sometimes Eilis’ father could not afford to pay the grocery bill in the local shop and on one occasion her ‘father was so desperate … he told the shopkeeper to send the bill to one of my sisters in the States whose address he gave. My sister paid the bill and from then onwards, she paid our monthly grocery bill so that we could eat. That went on for some time.’\(^{161}\) By 1955 after three or four generations of departures from the Blasket Islands, ‘a good lot of money or remittances’ had come from America and it was used to buy food, clothes, pay debts or rent, improve houses or lands, buy land, pay costs to the USA and buy drink.\(^{162}\) Similarly in Donegal it paid for animals, houses, funeral costs and debts incurred particularly in the local shop.\(^{163}\) Katherine John (née McLaughlin), was known to have sent home money to build ‘big slate houses’ in Goorey, County Donegal, but there were few signs of improvement to a house in Castle Plunkett in County Roscommon, paid for by a daughter who emigrated in 1922.\(^{164}\) Sean Murray’s sister, Annie, regularly sent home money which helped to fund his post-primary education in 1930s County Cavan.\(^{165}\) Pattern days, sibling’s birthdays, communions and confirmations, Christmas and Easter could be marked also by the arrival of dollars, along with donations to the Roman Catholic Church in Tullyroan, County Leitrim.\(^{166}\)

---

\(^{159}\) ‘Mary Terry Kelly’, p. 49.
\(^{160}\) ULOHP, Tape 3.
\(^{161}\) ULOHP, Eilis, born 1920, Ennis, Co. Clare, interviewed 16 August 2001 (hereafter Tape 5).
\(^{162}\) NFC, MS 1407, Seán Tom Ceárnáí.
\(^{163}\) NFC, MS 1411, Conall C. Ó Beirn.
\(^{164}\) NFC, MS 1411, Conall C. Ó Beirn; MS 1409, James J. O'Donnell.
\(^{165}\) University College Cork (hereafter UCC), Irish Centre for Migration Studies, Breaking the Silence Project (hereafter BTSP), Sean Murray, http://migration.ucc.ie/oralarchive/testing/breaking/narrators/.
\(^{166}\) ULOHP, Tape 3; NFC, MS 1407, Tadhg Ó Murchadha; MS 1411, Conall C. Ó Beirn; MS 1409, Thomas Duggan; MS 1409, Liam Ó Briain. Pattern days were parish religious celebrations held on the feast day of the local patron saint. American money paid for gravestones. ‘American Material Culture in Ireland: Headstones and Monuments’ (ongoing project directed by B. Whelan).
An empty letter was noted also. Nonetheless, in 1960, emigrants’ remittances and foreign pensions comprised 3.2 per cent of personal income in Ireland and a figure as high as 10.5 per cent in County Mayo, 7.0 per cent in County Donegal, 6.3 per cent in County Longford and 6.2 per cent in County Leitrim. The percentage would decrease during the 1960s but the importance of it to families in western parts was noticeable. Irrespective of whether money came from female or male relatives, it confirmed certain notions about emigration, for example, it could ease financial burdens, while also giving siblings the means to emigrate and thus bring sadness into a household again.

**Parcels**

Similarly, the arrival of a parcel caused mixed reactions. In Ennis in County Clare in the 1950s, it was greeted with great ‘excitement’ by all residents living on the street; ‘it was like … a social outing.’ Eilis was ‘always so afraid’ her father could not pay the customs duty. Peggy’s friends were sent secondhand ‘very fussy, frilly and sequined’ dresses belonging to American cousins who were of ‘a bigger frame’. Their father thought they were ‘wonderful’ and insisted they be worn to the local dance but the girls ‘hated them’. They used to bring their own clothing to change into and ‘dreaded these American things’. Brigid in the 1950s would ‘wear them sometimes’ but they could be ‘very loud and you wouldn’t wear them, you wouldn’t want to wear them’. Matt’s sisters in 1940s and 1950s Offaly ‘were reared on American parcels’ although again ‘wearing something new’ might provoke jibes from class mates; ‘oh ye got an American parcel didn’t ye.’ However, Carmel born in the Liberties in Dublin city in 1938 could still remember ‘one particular dress’ among the many clothes that her aunt sent home from America and ‘it was gorgeous.’ Maura from Ennis in County Clare, related that in 1950s Ennis, ‘men had a good suit on a Sunday and a white shirt and a tie and ordinary clothes for the week’ while women’s clothes were ‘dull, they were usually navy … a navy jacket and skirt and sensible shoes’. The

167 NFC, MS 1411, Conall C. Ó Beirn; MS 1409, Thomas Duggan.
169 AOHP, Maura, born 1947, teacher, Ennis, Co. Clare, interviewed, 7 January 2008 (hereafter Tape 8).
170 ULOHP, Tape 5.
171 ULOHP, Peggy, housewife, Johnstown, Co. Kilkenny, interviewed 4 April 2001 (hereafter Tape 8).
172 AOHP, Tape 7.
173 ULOHP, Matt, born 1920s, auctioneer, Birr, Co. Offaly, interviewed 24 October 2001 (hereafter Tape 9).
174 AOHP, Carmel, born 27 April 1938, housewife, Dublin, interviewed 30 January 2008 (hereafter Tape 3).
American ‘tartan style … multi-coloured … short sleeve’ shirts for men were recalled and the ‘shoes … lovely heavy coats with fur around the collars … the absolute colour’ and the ‘beautiful jewellery’ and ‘hair bands’ for women. Even the clothes of a ‘fashion conscious’ aunt of Maura’s did not match the American clothes for ‘colour or a lovely frilly blouse’ and ‘different styles’.

Eilís’ sisters sent ‘parcels with … nice, warm, winter clothes … lovely, warm pyjamas and slippers … At Christmas we got … books, games and many other toys. One year I got a beautiful doll which I cherished very much.’

Brigid’s uncles did not send ‘that many parcels home’ but her sister-in-law, Mary, sent her a ‘big parcel of baby clothes’ that were ‘nicer’ than anything at home. Noreen, a mother of six children, welcomed the children’s clothes and ‘blouses’ with ‘big frills’ and a suit for herself. Indeed a local woman in Moycullen used to copy some of the American frocks and embroider them.

O’Kelly suggests that parcels ‘more often than not’ were sent by a female. But the response to such clothes depended on the economic circumstances of the household and the kind of clothes sent. O’Kelly concludes that the American parcel was about ‘economy and utility but it was also about memories and dreams’. The permanence of memories of the effect of such clothes on individuals and a household in both rural and urban areas is noticeable. Their ability to transform by introducing new styles and colours was signalled in Maura Laverty’s work. In Never No More, published in 1942, ‘Lizzie Doyle’ sent to her sister ‘Maggie’ a ‘plentiful supply of clothes’ including fur coats, leather handbags, silk stockings, clinging, vivid, wonderful frocks and a silken chemise, which changed her from a good-looking girl into a ‘raving beauty’, drew ‘Denis Carroll’s’ attention to her and consoled her at other times. Two years later in No More than Human, Laverty related how ‘Delia Scully’ from Ballyderrig used the reference point of a ‘cape Molly McDermott sent home from America’ for her mother, to illustrate the differences between Ireland and America.

In addition to receiving clothes and shoes, Mairead’s family in Clarecastle, County Clare received bed linen from her aunts in Connecticut. Food

175 AOHP, Tape 8.
176 ULOHP, Tape 5.
177 AOHP, Tape 7.
178 AOHP, Tape 1.
179 O’Kelly, ‘Parcels from America’, p. 87.
180 O’Kelly, ‘Parcels from America’, p. 95.
183 ULOHP, Tape 3.
parcels of tea, sugar, flour, prunes and rice were much appreciated particularly between 1941 and 1946 when rationing was in place. Immediately after the war, when Aine’s aunt came home to Moycullen in County Galway, and brought half a pound of tea, ‘it was better than a thousand pounds now’ because ‘everything was rationed’. For some families, the arrival of money, clothes and packages could, and did, make the difference between a comfortable and uncomfortable existence at particular times. Moreover, the packages confirmed an image of America as the ‘greatest place’, according to Theresa. Her sister-in-law, Sarah Anne, who emigrated in 1928 with her friends Mai and Mary from Leenane, County Mayo, sent parcels home with gifts for Theresa’s children. But Theresa knew the parcels also meant they had ‘worked hard … scrubbed floors … they did everything and anything that girls do’. She emphasised that ‘it would be the girls now I’m talking about. They worked terribly hard’. Even Carmel from the Liberties in Dublin, whose aunt and brother ‘went over’ to America before and after the World War Two ‘always got the impression that it was a great place there … they must have loads of money’.

*Letters*

Along with the parcels came the letters, most of which were now written in English. Significantly, Nora from Passage West, County Cork, who knew emigrants in America and England in the 1950s, believed that people who went to America ‘kept in touch with families’ because ‘they were further away’ whereas ‘some people who went to England lost touch more easily’. Outlining ‘how they were getting on themselves in America’, letters also helped to create an impression of America as a prosperous place and shaped some young people’s ambitions. Letters could provide information on work and educational opportunities, wage levels, the standard of living, as well as family news and photographs. Deirdre, whose three uncles, godfather and aunt emigrated to America, believed that women corresponded with home because ‘men weren’t … great communicators’ and men were even less inclined to write if there was only a male relative in the home place as was...
the case with her widowed father.\textsuperscript{190} When a letter arrived into Mairead’s house in the morning, her mother would read it and then read it again to the children after their return from school. The letter was ‘so important’ and she thought ‘once I read the letters, wouldn’t I love to go there. That it was a great country.’\textsuperscript{191}

However, Mrs George Sweeney from County Donegal, who emigrated for nine years and returned, explained in 1955 that while many people accepted the clichéd expression often repeated in letters, ‘I am well and working and making money’, she knew that the ‘real truth of the matter was that there were far more poor and hungry people in one of its big cities than there is in Inishowen altogether’.\textsuperscript{192} Others at home were also aware of the ‘hardships’, as one respondent put it, and that the recurrent message of ‘all well and doing well’ in the letters was often a ‘false picture’. Life in America was known by some at home to be ‘so different and so unfriendly’ and it was impossible to go to mass on Sundays in some parts. Workplaces such as factories were often dangerous, domestic service was ‘hard work … down on their hands and knees to scrub floors’ and older people could struggle to survive.\textsuperscript{193} It was still the case that emigrants who were unsuccessful were more likely to lose contact with their home communities. Indeed a ‘great number of girls’ who emigrated from north-west Mayo at the end of the nineteenth century were never ‘seen or heard about anymore’.\textsuperscript{194} Seán Ó Dúbhda in Báile na Gall, Dingle, County Kerry, believed in 1955 that ‘bad or shameful news’ was rarely written, instead it was brought home ‘by word of mouth’. According to him, three themes permeated letters and songs about America; it was ‘(a) A beautiful country, no matter what’s said, for those who are able to earn their bread, (b) The land of liberty, (c) The land of the free.’\textsuperscript{195}

Irish political and religious leaders were in no doubt about the changes which such information and the remittances were having on Irish society. By the late 1920s and after decades of continuous departures from the west of Ireland to America, one witness commented to the Coimisiún na Gaeltachta that ‘The eyes of the youth of the Gaeltacht are on America …

\textsuperscript{190} AOHP, Deirdre, born 1928, nurse, Hospital, Co. Limerick, interviewed 9 January 2008 (hereafter Tape 5).
\textsuperscript{191} ULOHP, Tape 3.
\textsuperscript{192} NFC, MS 1411, Mrs George Sweeney.
\textsuperscript{193} NFC, MS 1411, Conall C. Ó Beirn; for reference to Irish domestic servants see Dirrane, \textit{A Woman of Aran}, pp. 50–51. Brendan Malin in ‘The American Scene: Not For Me This Life of Rush, Noise and Bustle’, \textit{The Kerryman}, 4 April 1953, criticised the ‘exaggerated impression of wealth conveyed’ by American letters and visitors.
\textsuperscript{194} Hoerder, ‘From Dreams to Possibilities’, p. 6; NFC, MS 1410, Charles Doherty.
\textsuperscript{195} NFC, MS 1407, Seán Ó Dúbhda.
they are encouraged to emigrate to the States by those who have gone there ahead of them, and who, in many cases, send prepaid passages.’ Another witness commented that young people looked to America because of the lack of employment but others saw that it offered a ‘better education’ and ‘better spirit’ than in Ireland and ‘even if they have to work hard, they will be independent anyway.’\(^{196}\) Thirty years later, the Commission on Emigration and Other Population Problems report accepted that the positive information made a ‘more favourable’ impression ‘than the facts warrant’.\(^{197}\) This position may underestimate the more nuanced understanding that many had gained of America from letters and photographs. Deirdre, whose aunt, three uncles and godfather emigrated before she was born in 1927, agreed that the letters and accompanying photographs gave the impression that ‘everything was wonderful’ but ‘it had no reality to our everyday life you know.’\(^{198}\) Yet, other women noticed the differences in living standards between the two countries particularly when relatives returned to visit.

**The returner**

The Irish return rate continued to be low into the twentieth century, as noted above. The returnees, whether for short or long stays, were seen particularly by women to expect certain standards in domestic facilities. Johanna, who witnessed three generations of emigration in County Tipperary, recalled a sense of embarrassment ‘when they came home first’ because there ‘was no such thing as the toilet or bath or anything like that’.\(^{199}\) Brigid, living in Moycullen, County Galway, whose sister-in-law and her two sisters began to return for holidays in the 1950s and 1960s, recalled that when the ‘yanks came home’ they stayed in her house ‘before we got the running water’ and it was ‘very hard’.\(^{200}\) Similarly, in 1970s Clarecastle an American relative had to go to ‘neighbours down the road, who had a bathroom, for his bath’.\(^{201}\) It was not until the late 1950s that over half of rural households had electricity, and even in 1971 forty-two per cent of rural homes lacked a supply of running water and less than one-third of rural households contained a fixed bath.\(^{202}\) It was not surprising, therefore, that accommodation and amenities

\(^{196}\) Coimisiún na Gaeltachta, Minutes of evidence, 16 June 1925, p. 11, 17 June 1925, p. 22, 1 October 1925, p. 22.

\(^{197}\) Commission on Emigration, pp. 135, 174.

\(^{198}\) AOHP, Tape 5.

\(^{199}\) ULOHP, Johanna O’Dwyer, born 1907, Thurles, Co. Tipperary, interviewed 28 March 2001 (hereafter Tape 1).

\(^{200}\) AOHP, Tape 7.

\(^{201}\) ULOHP, Tape 3.

\(^{202}\) Mary E. Daly, ““Turn On the Tap”: The State, Irish Women and Running Water’, in
in houses sometimes underwent a transformation with the imminent arrival of American visitors. Mairead remembered the occasion when a first cousin visited Clarecastle, County Clare, from New York in the early 1960s: ‘we painted, we papered … a new bathroom went in … you name it, it was in the house.’ The returnee noticed change also. Mary McGrath, who began to come back from New York to east Clare in the 1960s, identified the addition of bathrooms within the house as ‘change’ in Ireland. The improvement in facilities, specifically bathrooms, for the American visitor suggests an awareness that Irish standards of domestic amenities were lacking particularly in rural areas, and made a deep impression on Irish women. At the very least, visiting Americans drew attention, to use Nora’s description, to the ‘very backward’ nature of rural Ireland particularly felt by women in the home, while Mairead felt that her visiting American relatives, starting in the 1950s, ‘seemed to have had so much more than we had, far more than we had’. The difference was more of a reality for Tom Kennedy’s mother, who worked as a domestic servant in New York, returned from America in the late 1940s and married a farmer while her sister in New York remained single, owning a town house, a house and land in the Catskills, had a chauffeur-driven car and later owned apartment buildings.

The phenomenon of the permanent returnee emerges in the folklore memories from the turn of the century and Murphy’s research has identified that some women returned for a short stay while the ‘self-dowered’ woman settled permanently. Each census between 1926 and 1961 indicates that every county had American-born residents. Already in 1925, the presence of returned single women with money was noticed in County Galway, the wider Gaeltacht area along the western seaboard and in west Kerry. In 1955, Seán Tom Ceárnáí provided an overview of the incidence of returned

---

203 ULOHP, Tape 3.
204 UCC, BTSP, Mary McGrath.
205 ULOHP, Tape 4.
206 ULOHP, Tape 4.
210 Coimisiúin na Gaeltachta, Reports and Minutes of Evidence, Minutes of evidence, Dr Bartley O’Beirne, MD, DPH, TB Officer, Co. Galway, 3 June 1925, p. 4 and Dr Seaghan P. MacEinri, Coiste Gnotha, Conradh na Gaedhilge, 16 June 1925, pp. 7, 12.
emigrants in the Blasket Islands, off the north-west Kerry coastline: ‘if the returned yanks with their families were taken [out] of the population there would not be many left.’ But it was not just a west coast phenomenon. In Kilrane, County Wexford, in 1955, Tess Hayes and Mrs Keating (formerly Moore) were identified among the ‘returned yanks’. This trend emerged also in recent testimony obtained for counties Clare, Cork, Galway, Offaly and Limerick city. Male informants believed there were ‘hundreds’ of returned women in the Inishowen peninsula in north Donegal, and at least five alive in 1955 in Ballyhillion. Their presence led to a view that ‘there is no one as easy pleased … as a woman who has spent a while in America.’ They were seen as so desperate to marry that even a ‘bottle washer’, an ‘old “sriosán” of a man’, a ‘beggar’, ‘the worst looking “fixture” in the place’ or a small farmer sufficed their needs just to stay at home. The females who returned to Claregalway with savings which served as a dowry had ‘no difficulty in finding husbands’. Many ‘such brides’ were known of in County Roscommon in 1954. Women ‘often came home with plenty of money and married farmers’ in County Cavan.

Micheál MacÉnri of Bangor Erris in County Mayo, was hostile towards all returned Americans; ‘they were the great swanks … with all their money and jewellery.’ He reserved his greatest invective for the ‘girls’ who came home as ‘great swanks and finding all the faults … with everything and everybody … I’m telling you they took men here after spending their time in America, that they would not get lookin at before they went to America.’ According to him, other returned women without money deceived other suitors into marriage. Another informant seemed equally derogatory of the women who returned to County Galway, with dowries or ‘fortunes’ because ‘some of them would not be too young either. People would say when such a one got married – “she was only an old yank, but she had the money.”’

A less harsh view was present in Kerry. Jeremiah Murphy recalled in his memoir about Kilquane, north Kerry, between 1902 and 1925, that

many of them [emigrants] saved some money and returned for a trip or desired to settle down on a farm … The girls especially were prime targets of the young farmers contemplating matrimony and they provided almost unfair competition for the other girls left at home.

211 NFC, MS 1407, Seáín Tom Ceárnáí.  
212 NFC, MS 1407, John Murphy, Richard Joyce.  
214 NFC, MS 1411, Conall C. Ó Beirn. ‘Sriosán’ translates as an eraser or rubber.  
215 NFC, MS 1409, Thomas Duggan; MS 1409, James J. O'Donnell; MS 1410, James Argue, Micheál MacÉnri; MS 1409, Michael Galvin.
They were smart looking, well dressed and their manners and speech were a distinct asset ... when asked if they were going to marry a farmer, some retorted, “I guess, I’m too wise for that.”

In south Kerry, when returnees ‘went as sons-in-laws, or daughters-in-law into other farms – they were always readily accepted, as they had “the name of money”’. Another informant put it that ‘girls’ gave their ‘savings as dowry, felt quite happy and reared families at home’. Undoubtedly some did and it fulfilled their wants. Nora Murphy from County Galway, who returned before 1955 to improve her health, ended up staying for a few years and got married. Her experience illustrated that marriage was a natural expectation for many women and male suitors got a good deal also: ‘most of the girls who came home got married – if they had some money, it was easy for them to get a husband and a place unless they were too old.’

Other reasons accounted for women returning also. Eimear returned in the early 1960s: ‘Once I had my money saved, my goal was reached, I headed home. I stayed home for almost a year. I was returning to the nest. It was a much freer life. You weren’t as restricted. That’s the difference between this country and Ireland ... People don’t enjoy life. It’s all clock and time.’

Breda Walsh identified the fast pace in her daily office work in New York as a notable feature of her life which changed upon return. Similarly Mary McGrath, who emigrated in 1953, worked in health insurance companies in New York, married and returned later, said it was ‘easier to be oneself in Ireland’. In other words, Eimear and Mary wanted a less restricted working and home life for themselves.

Women returned to retire also. Nellie Owens who emigrated from Edenderry, County Offaly, to America in 1900, worked in a department store and then in the Hotel Commodore in New York, married there but returned with her husband in 1927 and ‘lived on their savings’. Similarly, George McGuire’s aunt returned to County Wexford ‘after making an awful lot of money in America’ which he inherited after her death. The ability of

---

217 NFC, MS 1407, Tadgh Ó Murchadha, J. O’Keefe.
218 NFC, MS 1409, Nora Murphy.
220 UCC, BTSP, Breda Walsh.
221 UCC, BTSP, Mary McGrath.
222 NFC, MS 1408, Richard Joyce. See also testimony about women returning with money by Dr Bartley Ó Beirne, TB Officer, Co. Galway to Coimisiún na Gaeltachta on 13 June 1925 and by Dr Seaghan P. MacEinri, Conradh na Gaeghilge on 16 June 1925, Coimisiún na Gaeltachta, Reports and Minutes of Evidence.
223 NFC, MS 1408, John Quigley.
these female returnees to use their labour and create wealth for themselves in America made their presence in a rural society, where women had fewer opportunities, noteworthy. Many of the single women settled into traditional roles but did so on their own terms while married women had chosen their partners and possessed savings. Indeed it might be suggested that much of the begrudgery centred on their income-earning ability.

Those who stayed permanently, settled down to retirement or to make a living on a farm, pub or shop. In Edenderry, County Offaly, the returnees were ‘level-headed people who did not “show off” their wealth’. In south Kerry, returnees were ‘never idle, having acquired the habit of hard work and constant “driving” during their time in America.’ Continuing from the late nineteenth century, returned women in the area were known ‘to cultivate tidiness and cleanliness’, not only in the home but also in the dress and personal appearance of themselves and other members of the family, while female returnees to Castlerea, County Roscommon, were ‘mostly good hard-working’ women who had a reputation for ‘being economical’. The impact of female returnees around Killala, County Mayo, merited a full-page article in the newly established *Irish Farmers Journal* in 1959. Journalist Joan Curran reported on the number of people who had returned to farm. Three of the four women, Mrs Sheila McDonnell, Mrs Massey and Mrs Nancy Jordan, had returned from the USA and came to Curran’s attention because of their work with county agricultural instructor, Terry Gallagher, who gave advice on vegetable-growing and poultry-rearing. Eimear believed that even having worked hard in the USA and coming back with money in the 1950s ‘you had to prove yourself’. The qualities noticeable in the returned emigrant to Edenderry, County Offaly, were ‘love of work and industry, personal cleanliness, thrift, early to rise in the morning, efficiency in their work. The women were good housekeepers and good cooks. The men folk improved their homes and farms. They showed no class distinctions.’ While these informants identified and praised the work ethic of the returned Americans, many of the 1955 informants agreed that their ways were not copied and indeed some soon fell out of their American ways. In other words, their transformation was at surface-level only and was deliberately set aside perhaps due to the need to integrate into the local community.

224 NFC, MS 1408 Matthew Mangan.
225 NFC, MS 1407, Tadgh Ó Murchadha.
226 NFC, MS 1409, Thomas Duggan.
228 ‘Eimear (alias)’, p. 67.
229 NFC, MS 1408, William Byrne.
230 UCC, BTSP, Breda Walsh, interview, listen/log summary.
The returnee also elucidated the differences between American and Irish ‘ways’. Breda Walsh who worked in the AT&T telephone company, a popular occupation for English-speaking Irish women, and who returned with her husband, John, in 1961 defined the ‘American ways’ as ‘businesslike’ and involved doing everything ‘pretty fast’ and the ‘Irish ways’ as ‘easy going’ at a ‘nice and easy pace’, to which she soon adapted.\footnote{UCC, BTSP, Breda Walsh.} Oonagh O’Malley, a young architect who graduated from University College Dublin in 1958, returned to urban Dublin in the early 1960s, because a ‘good quality of life’ in America required ‘wealth’ whereas in Ireland as a single, working woman she was able ‘to support a better lifestyle’ in the capital city. Although she experienced discrimination in the workplace in Ireland, earning just sixty per cent of the male salary, in America professional women were equally underpaid but she found they were expected to be ‘sexy’ not ‘blue stocking’. Thus, after her return while the marriage ban remained in the Irish Civil Service, pay inequality persisted and there were ‘small cars and cold houses’, she was ‘happy’ in Ireland. As a young, middle-class, returned ‘yank’ who was used to higher standards of living in America, she could accept Irish standards because it was home, where her parents resided. Despite the persistence of defined roles for Irish women in relation to work, she was happy to escape the ‘modern American woman’ stereotype.\footnote{Irish Farmers Journal, 29 August 1959.} Nancy Jordan, who worked as a nurse in the USA where she earned a good salary, came home to west Mayo, married a farmer, Michael, and had three children by 1959. A sense of relief was noticeable in her comment that ‘we have a milking machine, electricity and a car. And we will soon be sinking a well to lay on water to the house too.’ But she and Sheila McDonnell and Mrs Massey also paid tribute to the assistance received from the National Farmers’ Association, the farmers’ co-operative movement and the help of Gallagher the county Agricultural Instructor.\footnote{NFC, MS 1408, Philip Tobin; MS 1409, Patrick and Michael Silke.} They had returned used to higher standards of living, but could see that modernising forces were slowly permeating Irish rural life.

The clothing and behaviour of returned emigrants also transmitted certain messages about the individual’s transformation to prosperity or, as Philip Tobin from County Wexford and the Silke brothers in County Galway put it, they had become ‘gentry’.\footnote{NFC, MS 1411, Conall C. Ó Beirn; MS 1409, Seán Glennon, Thomas Moran.} Men and women noted that male returnees often had more than one suit and tie in colours other than blue, and check shirts were associated with returnees.\footnote{NFC, MS 1411, Conall C. Ó Beirn; MS 1409, Seán Glennon, Thomas Moran.} The male returnee’s watch, chain,
cufflinks and diamond-studded ring came to define him also.236 By 1910 some Irish women had adopted the ‘yankie style’ and wore capes which hung from the shoulders and fastened at the neck with one button.237 Theresa and Brigid agreed that returned women, like men, had ‘more than one rig-out’. They had ‘winter clothes’, ‘spring clothes’, ‘different styles’.238 Johanna in Thurles, County Tipperary, took it further and said ‘they were more stylish.’ The impact on children may have been intense. Eimear lived in Connemara in the 1950s and she remembered the ‘great excitement’ when a ‘yank’ would arrive. They would arrive ‘in all their finery and it was very impressive to a fourteen or fifteen year old who was running around in her bare feet’.239 Some times the clothes were considered ‘too loud’ but the general opinion held in Tadhg Ó Murchadha’s Kerry locality was that the individual ‘must be possessed of great wealth’, or as Mairead in Clarecastle, County Clare, put it, the ‘Americans when they came home … had full and plenty’.240 The ‘chief effect of their dress’ in Claregalway was ‘to reinforce the idea th[at] America was a wonderful country’.241 Such impressions were perhaps more noticeable in rural than urban parts.

The male returnee also permeated literature intended for a female audience. ‘RMH’ writing in Woman’s Mirror in April 1948 penned a fictional story about meeting the returned ‘Jay Sullivan’. Titled ‘I Met an American’, the writer noted ‘really the way the girls gazed at him was too bad! anyone would think he was Adonis. Just because he was an American. I refused to admit that he was good looking’.242 ‘RMH’ implies that a certain American look in a man was attractive to women and their association with wealth brought them attention also. Maura Laverty penned ‘Courtship by Proxy’ in Woman’s Life magazine, recounting the ‘timidity of a returned American (man)’ who was ‘responsible for ‘Nora’s’ unhappiness’ because she mistakenly believed ‘portly, prosperous … kindly middle-aged’ ‘J. J. Blake’ was interested in her. Eventually the returnee ‘J.J.’ brought happiness to ‘Nora’ and her mother ‘Nuala’ by marrying the latter and buying the former and her future husband ‘Tom’ a house.243 ‘J.J.’s American experience had improved life for all.244

236 NFC, MS 1407, Tadgh Ó Murchadha, Seán Ó Dúbhda; MS 1408, Joseph Wade, ULOHP, Tape 8.
238 AOHP, Tape 7, Tape 6.
239 ‘Eimear (alias) – 1950s’, p. 64.
240 NFC, MS 1407, Tadhg Ó Murchadha; ULOHP, Tape 3.
241 NFC, MS 1409, Seán Glennon.
242 Woman’s Mirror, April 1948.
243 Woman’s Life, 18 July 1936.
244 NFC, MS 1407, Tadhg Ó Murchadha. Recollections of emigrants who had not
Conclusion

Enlightenment ideas influenced views about women’s roles and also informed perceptions of America as a place of personal and political freedom. From the beginning of the nineteenth century when young, mainly Catholic women, largely from rural Ireland, encountered America they exercised independence. The circumstances surrounding departure were usually tinged by sadness, the settling-in marked by the harsh realities of life in an urban environment and traditional familial roles replicated. Nonetheless, America equated with the public world of greater life choices, higher standards of living and ambition. Although America was no longer the primary destination after 1931, contact with later generations remained strong and seemed to be sustained through female agency. America became an extension of the private domestic world of home for many Irish, Catholic families.

Even though some failed to prosper, America transformed the lives of many Irish emigrant women and in time the cultural encounter became two-way and the ‘return tide’ brought welcomed and unwelcomed change to their families in Ireland. It fuelled ‘imaginings’ about America and offered evidence of personal success along with reducing material difficulties for families and highlighting differences in living standards between the two countries, which were particularly manifest in the home environment.\(^\text{245}\) The female emigrant, just like her male counterpart, was at the centre of the transfer of American ideas, behaviour and money to Ireland. But the female departees, their letters, parcels and some returnees increasingly personified the idea of America as a place of opportunity and prosperity for men and women alike which contrasted with life in Ireland in the century after the 1845–53 Famine. Additionally, it might also be suggested that this Irish female emigrant experience in the USA contributed in the long term to the expansion of the horizons and expectations of those women who stayed behind. The latter also encountered America in the twentieth century through other avenues.

---

\(^{245}\) O’Kelly, ‘Parcels from America’, p. 80.