

## June at the Museum!



### **Suffering, Humanity, Compassion, Reciprocity in the Irish American Experience.**

As we enter the 13th week of shutdowns because of Covid 19, and witness violence erupt across the country, I have been thinking again and again of the parallels between what our ancestors experienced over one hundred and fifty years ago, and what is happening today. Of course the details are not the same, but there are striking similarities in both the situations and sometimes the responses. It is impossible for me to watch the stories of those dying alone in hospitals, and to hear of all the healthcare workers who get sick while treating them, and not think about the experience of so many Great Hunger refugees. In cities across North America, many thousands of Irish refugees landed on these shores, sick and dying, unwanted and quarantined, dying separated from their loved ones, and often the very doctors, nurses, priests and nuns who tended to them, died as well.

Many thousands of those who came here on the coffin ships were sick with dysentery or typhus or cholera - in fact typhus was often called "Irish Fever" in an attempt to blame the sick people who brought the highly contagious disease with them. Coffin ships received their nickname for a reason - conditions aboard such a ship included disease-ridden quarters, non-existent hygiene, and no food and water for the one to two month trip

ahead. Some coffin ships landed at their destination with more passengers dead than alive. In fact, forty per cent of the Irish fleeing the Great Hunger died en route to their new life. Already in Ireland, many people died alone in their cabins, or the woods, or the workhouse separated from their family and buried quickly and without ceremony in an unmarked grave. Hospitals and dispensaries became dangerous places to work and at least 36 out of 473 medical officers appointed by the Board of Health died of "the occupational hazard of famine fever."

Between 1847 and 1855, Irish immigrants comprised between 23% and 56% of all those entering the port of New York each year. This large number of Irish arriving here was obviously a huge strain on New Yorkers and their resources. If a ship arriving in New York contained too many sick Irish emigrants, the ship was deemed infected and they would be "obliged to offload their sick at the Staten Island quarantine hospital and remain in quarantine for thirty days before landing at New York." These quarantine stations were essential to the survival of the original population. Of the 53,000 Irish who came to New York in 1847, most of them would be required to go through Staten Island. The island continued to be used as a quarantine station after the Great Hunger had ended, and was despised and feared by residents. On September 1, 1858 the site was burned down in a mob protest that stemmed from community outrage about the hazards of housing a quarantine hospital of this scale in what was essentially their backyards. Astoundingly, only two people died in the whole ordeal. One man was killed by a Quarantine co-worker who took the opportunity to settle an old score. Another died of yellow fever. At trial, the defendants argued that they had destroyed the Quarantine in self-defense. The presiding judge agreed. He noted that patients had been removed and that the local health board had previously identified the facility as a danger to the community. The judge owned property within a mile of the Quarantine and had asked the state legislature in 1849 to remove it from Staten Island.

Because of the large increase of starving and disease-ridden immigrants, the United States felt forced to find a way to control how many were admitted into their ports. *The Mary* was refused entry at Boston harbor because of "the destitute condition of its passengers" in 1847 - it made its way to Canada. Eventually, in the early months of 1847, Congress passed two Passenger Acts that raised the minimum fare from Ireland to America to £7 and regulated the numbers who could be carried on ships. Due to this raise of fare, many emigrants were forced to travel to Canada instead.

Grosse Ile in Canada became the next hot spot for fevered refugees - over 100,000 helpless Irish refugees arrived in Canada in 1847. Of these, nearly 40,000 passed through Toronto, completing overwhelming the city which had a population then of some 20,000. The quarantine hospital built on the island, built for 150 patients, could barely accommodate 200, and was already filled to capacity. Canadian officials were astonished by the 'unprecedented state of illness and distress' on the ships; they had 'never contemplated the possibility of every vessel arriving with fever as they do now', all of them carrying passengers 'in the most wretched state of disease'. On 23 May, between fifty and sixty deaths were recorded per day. By the end of the month, 900 people had died and a thousand more fever cases were on the island, housed in hastily erected sheds and tents. Dr. George Douglas, Grosse Isle's chief medical officer, was resigned to the prospect that many more would fall sick and require treatment. But since 'I have not a bed to lay them on or a place to put them in', he was obliged to flout the quarantine law and confine all passengers on board the ships at anchor in the river. By 31 May, forty ships lay off Grosse Ile, with 12,500 passengers, old and young, healthy and sick, dying and dead, crammed into grossly overcrowded quarters, packed as human ballast in the holds of merchant vessels built to carry Canadian lumber to England.

On arrival at Grosse Ile, the ship's master had to bribe his crew, at the rate of a sovereign per corpse, to remove the dead from the hold. As the summer wore on, the dying continued. 'Six men are constantly employed', said Douglas, 'digging large trenches from five to six feet deep, in which the dead are buried.' So many were interred, two or three deep, and so close to the surface, Douglas had to arrange to bring soil from the mainland to cover the dead. Even so, rats came ashore from the ships to feast on the cadavers.

In early July, Douglas finally addressed the critical problem of congregating the sick and healthy on board the ships. Attempting to prevent the spread of disease by segregating the healthy from the sick, he instituted a form of triage. He set up a tent camp at the eastern end of the island to shelter the healthy. The new hospital area was made permanent by the rapid construction of a dozen prefabricated wooden hospital sheds. By August, the hospital sheds and tents could accommodate some 2,000 sick people, 300 convalescents and as many as 3,500 healthy people. The year-end summary report of public works on the island listed a total of twenty-two hospital sheds.

And as the Irish died, they infected their hosts. At Grosse Ile, two of the seventeen Anglican clergymen died, as did four of the forty-two Catholic priests who served there. Douglas also reported the deaths of thirty-four workers: stewards, nurses, orderlies, cooks, policemen, and carters. At the end of the year, Douglas raised a monument at the mass graveyard on Grosse Ile, to mark the sacrifice of the four doctors - Benson, Pinet, Malhiot and Jameson - who 'died of typhus fever contracted in the faithful discharge of their duty upon the sick.' Dr John Benson is a striking symbol of the whole complex of the epidemic of 1847. He was a sixty year-old physician with experience in the fever hospitals in Ireland, who had been evicted from an estate in Castlecomer, County Kilkenny. He arrived at Grosse Ile on the Wandsworth on 20 May, volunteered to assist Dr Douglas, contracted typhus and died within a week.

The monument also bears this inscription:

In this secluded spot lie the mortal remains of 5,424 persons who fleeing from Pestilence and Famine in Ireland in the year 1847 found in America but a Grave.

The 'ocean plague' exacted its price further afield, claiming more victims in Quebec City, Montreal, Kingston and Toronto. The first typhus cases were seen in Montreal in late May, and soon the immigrant sheds there presented scenes of utter horror, and the stench of disease and death filled the neighborhood. Somehow, people found the courage to help. Nine priests including Fr Hudon, Vicar-General of Montreal, died in that city. On July 8, the first of St. Patrick's priests, Father Patrick Morgan, died, to be followed by three more in the next week. The Grey Nuns, founded as a nursing order in Montreal, to the grim surprise of no one were prominent among those serving, and dying. In late July, The Gazette reported every one of the Grey Nuns was ill. "Nevertheless," the newspaper added, "the exertions of the Roman Catholic Clergy are unwearied by fatigue and undeterred by danger. There never, surely, was any church which in the times of most fiery persecution proved, at the sacrifice of comfort and life, its devotion to religious duty." On July 23, a Friday and the day that would be Father Richards's last, The Gazette reported 1,626 people lay ill in the sheds and that 33 had died. In November, John Mills, the Mayor of Montreal whose energy and altruism ensured relatively safe and healthy conditions for the famine victims, caught the fever at the sheds and died. The same fate befell Toronto's first Catholic bishop, Michael Power.

So amidst all the suffering and death, people rallied to try to help. In Boston, a public meeting was held at Faneuil Hall on February 18, 1847 in order to figure out how that could help the starving country. A force called the Boston Relief Committee, lead by Major Josiah Quincy Jr., was formed. The Committee raised more than \$150,000 (almost \$400,000 today) from donors across the country, and set out to petition Congress for permission to send supplies to Ireland on a naval vessel. The proposal was a success, and the government handed over the *U.S.S. Jamestown* from the Charlestown Navy Yard. On St. Patrick's Day, teams stocked the ship with more than 8,000 barrels of beans, bread, beef, rice, peas, pork, corn, flour, potatoes, and supplies. The *Jamestown* made it to Ireland in a little over two weeks. By the summer of the same year, Americans had sent thousands of pounds of supplies and more than \$500,000 to the country.

There were famous donations from wealthy people like Queen Victoria and the Ottoman Sultan Abdülmejid, who donated £1,000 to famine relief. But most impressively, donations came from groups of people who were themselves poor, marginalized, and despised. These included a donation from inmates on a prison ship in London, who sent 17 shillings made up of pennies, and who were all dead a year later from prison fever; money was sent from formerly enslaved people in the Caribbean who gave from their hard-earned wages; and contributions came from Native Americans, whose rich lands had been taken from them and they and their culture labeled as savage. Despite their poverty, these people all gave from their own meagre resources to help the starving in Ireland.

In 1847, the Choctaw people collected \$170 to send to people in Ireland who were starving during the potato famine. The struggles experienced by the Irish were familiar to the tribal nation: just 16 years earlier, the Choctaw people had embarked on the Trail of Tears and lost thousands of their own to starvation and disease. Major William Armstrong came to Oklahoma for a meeting intended to raise money "for the starving poor of Ireland," and the Choctaw dug deep. By June, the donation by the Choctaws was being reported in Irish newspapers, many simply noting, "the Choctaw tribe of north American Indians have contributed a sum of \$170 dollars for the relief of the distressed Irish." One Cork newspaper wrote, "Lo! The Poor Indian - he stretches his red hand in honest kindness to his poor Celtic brother across the sea." In a separate article, the same paper lamented on "The Irish Exodus" and the inevitable depopulation of Ireland. It warned that the emigrants who survived were being sent to the backwoods of America to replace the Native Americans, who

had been "extirpated by the fire-arms and fire-water of most Christian England."

The act of kindness was never forgotten, and the solidarity between the Irish and Native Americans continued over the years. In 1992, 22 Irish men and women walked the Trail of Tears to raise money for famine relief efforts in Somalia. They raised \$170,000 - \$1,000 for each dollar the Choctaw gave in 1847. Every year, a delegation of Choctaw officials participate in an annual walk in County Mayo to commemorate the Doolough Tragedy, a starvation march that occurred during the Hunger. In 2017, the town of Midleton in Ireland unveiled a sculpture commemorating the Choctaw's 1847 gift. Irish Presidents, Mary Robinson and Michael D. Higgins, have expressed their gratitude on behalf of the Irish people to representatives of the Choctaw Nation. In 1995, President Robinson was made an honorary Choctaw Chief - the first woman to be so honored. In March 2017, An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, when visiting the Choctaw Nation announced that a scholarship had been created for Choctaw students to study in Ireland.

Today, there have been more than 5,000 cases of the coronavirus and 231 deaths among the Navajo Nation's 173,000 residents in Arizona, and donations are pouring in from people across Ireland for a GoFundMe campaign set up to support the Navajo Nation and Hopi. As one Irish donor on the fundraising page wrote: "You helped us in our darkest hour. Honoured to return the kindness. Ireland remembers, with thanks." The Irish Cultural Center in Phoenix organized donations drives and the Irish American community in Arizona donated over \$30,000 worth of supplies. County Clare native Jason Ryan, who helped to organize the drive, said that the collection became so big that the Arizona National Guard sent two 53-foot trucks and 22 soldiers to help distribute the huge donation of food, water, medical supplies, and other essential products.

So, we see that at times of the greatest suffering and despair, ordinary people step up and react with compassion and generosity. "Ní neart go cur le chéile" is an old Irish proverb that I have been thinking about a lot lately. "There is no strength without unity." America adopted a similar motto as early as 1776 when Congress proposed designs for the national seal. John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and Eugène Pierre Du Simitière worked on several designs, none of which were accepted until 1786. The only thing the men did agree on was the motto: "E pluribus unum - out of many, one." We are going to have to come together, work together, for each other, so that we can survive these times. As I wrote in the April newsletter, "Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine - In the shelter of each other, the people live." That has never been more true, and we need to be reminded of it.

To those of you who became members or donated last month, we thank you sincerely for your support and really appreciate it, especially as we know there are so many deserving causes out there at this time. Your sponsorship makes all the difference to us here while our doors are closed. If you would like to become a member or donate to the museum, the links are below! Stay safe everyone and hopefully we will all come through this together.

[Become a Member](#) [Donate to the Museum](#)

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## Reopening Plans.

Social distancing only works  
if we all participate.  
And slowing down or preventing  
the spread of the virus  
will save lives.



We all are responsible for protecting

GENEAPALOOZA

BY ESTO FRIGUS



we all are responsible for protecting those at higher risk.



We anticipate that the Museum will reopen by early July, as we are part of the Phase Four plans. In accordance with the Governor's recommendations, everyone will have to wear a mask to enter the building - please be aware that the museum can not provide you with one. We will probably have to limit the numbers of people who can attend events, and we will practice social distancing in the museum exhibit space. The museum's policy will be displayed at the entrance.

Our resident genealogist, Lisa Walsh Dougherty will be back in our library for consultations on **Wednesday July 29th. You must contact Lisa at [lisagene@nycap.rr.com](mailto:lisagene@nycap.rr.com) for an appointment**, so that we are complying with recommended numbers and social distancing.

We are currently building a replica thatched cottage and a room in a tenement apartment in the Museum and we need a few items to decorate them! If anyone has an old iron crane that hung over the fire, or a large pot or kettle, would you please consider donating to the Museum? We also need a narrow table, a "settle bench" and a large old sink, as well as statues or pictures of Mary or the Sacred Heart and other items that would have been on display in Irish or Irish American homes in the 19th century. Big and all as our new home is, the space is actually filling up fast, so I will not be able to accept every item! But if you could please email us at [info@irish-us.org](mailto:info@irish-us.org) or call us, we would be delighted to get some items to display in the cottage or apartment.

In an effort to stay connected while apart, please check our Facebook page, Twitter, or Instagram for events. We are currently sharing several online events from the Irish Arts Center in New York, Culture Ireland and Other Voices in Dublin, the Dublin City Ramblers, Derek Warfield and the Young Wolfe Tones, and the Irish Famine Voices Roadshow, among many. We also share music performances from our local friends - Irish Don Kelly, Triskele (and Jenn and Sharon), Rick Bedrosian, and Mike DeAngelis, so there is plenty of content online. Everyday on our Facebook page, we share an "On This Day" in history story too, and keep an eye out for our #MusuemMonday videos about items in our collection.

### A Moment of Respite.



Derek Mahon is widely regarded as one of the most talented and innovative Irish poets of the late 20th century. Affiliated with the generation of young poets who rose to prominence in the 1960s and 1970s, Mahon is best known for illuminating the ordinary aspects of daily life through his skillfully crafted verse. Often working in received forms, Mahon's lucid, sculpted lines incorporate both classical allusion and contemporary life. Critics have compared his poetry to that of such masters as W.H. Auden, the poet and classical scholar Louis MacNeice, and Samuel Beckett. A voluntary exile from his native Belfast, Mahon explores themes of isolation, loneliness, and alienation in his poetry. After studying French at Trinity College, Dublin, Mahon spent a year in France at the Sorbonne; he subsequently lived and worked in cities across the United States and Canada before moving to London to become a journalist.

Mahon experienced something of a late flowering, publishing four collections in just five years in the 2000s. These books, have received a series of accolades and commendations: *Harbour Lights* (2006), winner of the Irish Times Poetry Now Award; *Somewhere the Wave* (2007); and *Life on Earth* (2008), which won another Irish Times Poetry Now Award and was shortlisted for the prestigious Griffin Poetry Prize. Mahon's *An Autumn Wind* (2010) was praised by Paul Batchelor in the *Guardian* for its sophistication, technical prowess and willingness to address contemporary themes, including environmental degradation. Batchelor maintained that the book "confirms the triumphant late flowering that began with *Harbour Lights* and continued in *Life on Earth*. This body of work forms one of the most significant developments in poetry this century."

There is no doubt that this period of isolation and shutdown is difficult. We are a sociable people and it is difficult to remain apart. I am finding great comfort in re-reading some favorite books, and listening to music (you need a break from the news every now and then!) And we are lucky that Irish writers have provided us with inspired moments which seem to speak to us directly. The poem below admits that hardship and mortality are a part of life, but reassures us that the beauty of the world has a power of its own. It's not trying to dodge reality or sugarcoat existence, but just reminds us that there is beauty all around us. Even its title is reassuring!

#### Everything Is Going to Be All Right

How should I not be glad to contemplate  
the clouds clearing beyond the dormer window  
and a high tide reflected on the ceiling?

There will be dying, there will be dying,  
but there is no need to go into that.

The poems flow from the hand unbidden  
and the hidden source is the watchful heart.

The sun rises in spite of everything  
and the far cities are beautiful and bright.

I lie here in a riot of sunlight  
watching the day break and the clouds flying.

Everything is going to be all right.