Fleeing English Tyranny: The Irish Cross the Atlantic

THE AGE OF JACKSON witnessed not only Indian removal and the expansion of slavery, but also the great migration of immigrants from Erin. The Irish did not want to come to America. But many felt they had no choice.

> Such troubles we know that have often
> Caused stout Irish hearts to roam . . .
> And . . . sons from their homes were drove. . . .
> The hills and the valleys so dear to my heart;
> It grieves me to think that from them I must part.
> Compelled to emigrate far, far o'er the sea.[1]

The British "yoke" had been "enslaving" Ireland. Protestant landlords pushed Catholic peasant farmers from the land, and then the Potato Famine of the 1840s left them desperately hungry.

With bundles on their shoulders, the migrants were "laving dear old Ireland without warnin'" to "shtart for Philadelphia in the mornin'" and cross the "briny ocean." But before they left, they attended an "American wake" — a party hosted by the families. They said their good-byes and mourned what everyone knew would be a permanent separation.

> Sad was the day we said farewell,
> Dear native land, to thee;

> And wander'd forth to find a home,
> Beyond the stormy sea.
> Hard then our fate; fast flow'd the tears,
> We tried to hide in vain,
> At thought of those we left behind,
> And might ne'er see again.[2]

After the "wake," the migrants traveled to Dublin and then to Liverpool, where they boarded crowded ships bound for America. The crossing was traumatic. "The emigrant is shown a berth," *The Times* reported, "a shelf of coarse pinewood, situated in a noisome dungeon, airless and lightless, in which several hundred persons of both sexes and all ages are stowed away on shelves two feet one inch above the other, three feet wide and six feet long, still reeking from the ineradicable stench left by the emigrants of the last voyage." During the nineteenth century, three million Irish crossed the Atlantic.[3]

Pushed from Ireland by economic hardships and famine, the immigrants were pulled to America by the Market Revolution's demand for labor. Yankees regarded the Irishman "as one made to work," reported the Reverend Michael Buckley, a visitor from Ireland. "Where they want labour they will engage Paddy as they would a drayhorse." An Irish worker recalled how he labored "so severely" digging cellars, "up before the Stars and working till darkness," "driven like horses" to be "a slave for the Americans." Working in the mines of Pennsylvania, Irish miners "sucked up" the black dust into their lungs as they dug the "bloody coal."[4]

Irish immigrants provided the labor for the construction of roads and canals for the Market Revolution. Watching them work on the National Road in Pennsylvania, a farmer described them as an "immortal Irish brigade, a thousand strong, with their carts, wheelbarrows, shovels and blasting tools, grading the commons, and climbing the mountainside . . . leaving behind them a roadway good enough for an emperor to travel over." Irish laborers helped to build waterways, including Connecticut's Enfield Canal, Rhode Island's Blackstone Canal, and most importantly, New York's Erie

Canal, described by Reverend Buckley as "one of the grandest pieces of engineering ever seen in the world" and "proof" of "Irish talent." Standing knee-deep in water while cursing swarms of mosquitoes, the workers dug and shovelled earth as they sang:

> When I came to this wonderful rampire, it filled me
> with the greatest surprise,
> To see such a great undertaking, on the like I never
> opened my eye.
> To see a full thousand brave fellows at work among
> mountains so tall,
> To dig through the vallies so level, through rocks for
> to cut a canal.[5]

Irish workers built thousands of miles of rail lines such as the Western and Atlantic Railroad from Atlanta to Chattanooga and the Union Pacific segment of the transcontinental railroad.

More than half of the Irish immigrants were women. This massive migration of women was saluted in a song:

> Oh brave, brave Irish girls,
> We well might call you brave
> Should the least of all your perils
> The Stormy ocean waves.[6]

Irish immigrant women became ubiquitous as maids. In the 1850s, they represented 80 percent of all female household laborers in New York City. In 1900, 54 percent were classified as "servants and waitresses," compared to only 9 percent for Italian female workers. Unlike Italian women who came to America with their husbands or fathers, Irish immigrant women tended to be unmarried and unattached to families. Hence, they were attracted to work offering housing and meals as well as wages. Employment in homes rather than in factories offered a healthier environment and often paid more.

Tens of thousands of Irish immigrant women were employed in factories. Irish women were preponderant in the New England textile mills of Lawrence, Holyoke, Fall River, and other Massachu-

setts towns. In Lowell, the City of Spindles, they represented 58 percent of the total textile workforce. "The gray mills in Manchester [New Hampshire]," remembered Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, "stretched like prisons along the banks of the Merrimac River. Fifty percent of the workers were women. . . . Many lived in the antiquated 'corporation boarding houses,' relics of when the mills were built. Our neighbors, men and women, rushed to the mills before the sun rose on cold winter days and returned after dark. They were poorly dressed and poverty stricken."[7]

In the dusty and noisy mills, the women felt their heads become "empty of sense and their ears . . . deaf." Constantly standing and tying knots, they suffered backaches "until they lost their minds and ran amuck." Far from the rural countryside of Ireland, they had become tenderers of machines, their activities routinized and measured by the clock.

> When I set out for Lowell,
> Some factory for to find,
> I left my native country
> And all my friends behind.
>
> But now I am in Lowell,
> And summon'd by the bell,
> I think less of the factory
> Than of my native dell.
>
> The factory bell begins to ring
> And we must all obey,
> And to our old employment go,
> Or else be turned away.
>
> Come all ye weary factory girls,
> I'll have you understand,
> I'm going to leave the factory
> And return to my native land.

The "factory girls" also worked in dangerous conditions. On January 10, 1860, a terrible tragedy occurred at Lowell's Pemberton

Mill. A building suddenly collapsed, trapping nine hundred workers, mostly Irish women; then a fire broke out, adding to the terror and destruction. One hundred and sixteen women were seriously hurt while eighty-eight were killed. The list of victims included many daughters of Erin.[8]

Still, for many Irish women, America was a land of opportunity. "My dear Father," a daughter wrote from New York in 1850, "I must only say this is a good place and a good country. . . . [A]ny man or woman without a family are fools that would not venture and come to this plentyful Country where no man or woman ever hungered or ever will and where you will not be seen naked. . . ." Similarly, in the same year, Margaret McCarthy wrote home to her family, imploring, "Come you all Together Couragiously [sic] and bid adieu to that lovely land of our Birth" where there was so much misery, oppression, and degradation. She enclosed twenty dollars, urging her father to clear away from "that place all together and the Sooner the Better."[9]

For these women, America represented not only jobs and wages but also economic self-sufficiency — freedom from dependency on fathers or husbands. "I am getting along splendid and likes my work . . . it seems like a new life," one of them wrote to her younger sister in Ireland. "I will soon have a trade and be more independint. . . . You know it was always what I wanted so I have reached my highest ambition." Thomas McCann wrote home about his sister: "Maggie is well and likes this Country. She would not go back to old Ireland for any money." What Maggie especially valued was the "independence" she had found in America.[10]

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"How Can I Call This My Home?": Lee Chew

There were no "Chinese laundrymen" in China; they became washers of clothes in America. Why? Lee Chew gave an explanation in this "lifelet," published in the Independent *magazine in the early twentieth century. After living for decades in his adopted country, he still felt he could not call America his home.*

THE VILLAGE WHERE I was born is situated in the province of Canton. . . . When I was ten years of age I worked on my father's farm, digging, hoeing, manuring, gathering and carrying the crop. We had no horses, as nobody under the rank of an official is allowed to have a horse in China, and horses do not work on farms there, which is the reason why the roads there are so bad. The people cannot use roads as they are used here, and so they do not make them.

I worked on my father's farm till I was about sixteen years of age, when a man of our tribe came back from America and took ground as large as four city blocks and made a paradise of it. He put a large stone wall around and led some streams through and built a palace and summer house and about twenty other structures, with beautiful bridges over the streams and walks and roads. Trees and flowers, singing birds, water fowl and curious animals were within the walls.

The man had gone away from our village a poor boy. Now he returned with unlimited wealth, which he had obtained in the country of the American wizards. After many amazing adventures he had become a merchant in a city called Mott Street, so it was said.

When his palace and grounds were completed he gave a dinner

to all the people who assembled to be his guests. One hundred pigs roasted whole were served on the tables, with chickens, ducks, geese and such an abundance of dainties that our villagers even now lick their fingers when they think of it. He had the best actors from Hong Kong performing, and every musician for miles around was playing and singing. At night the blaze of the lanterns could be seen for many miles.

Having made his wealth among the barbarians this man had faithfully returned to pour it out among his tribesmen, and he is living in our village now very happy, and a pillar of strength to the poor.

The wealth of this man filled my mind with the idea that I, too, would like to go to the country of the wizards and gain some of their wealth, and after a long time my father consented, and gave me his blessing, and my mother took leave of me with tears, while my grandfather laid his hand upon my head and told me to remember and live up to the admonitions of the Sages, to avoid gambling, bad women and men of evil minds, and so to govern my conduct that when I died my ancestors might rejoice to welcome me as a guest on high.

My father gave me $100, and I went to Hong Kong with five other boys from our place and we got steerage passage on a steamer, paying $50 each. Everything was new to me. All my life I had been used to sleeping on a board bed with a wooden pillow, and I found the steamer's bunk very uncomfortable, because it was so soft. The food was different from that which I had been used to, and I did not like it at all. I was afraid of the stews, for the thought of what they might be made of by the wicked wizards of the ship made me ill. Of the great power of these people I saw many signs. The engines that moved the ship were wonderful monsters, strong enough to lift mountains. When I got to San Francisco, which was before the passage of the Exclusion act, I was half starved, because I was afraid to eat the provisions of the barbarians, but a few days' living in the Chinese quarter made me happy again. A man got me work as a house servant in an American family, and

my start was the same as that of almost all the Chinese in this country.

The Chinese laundryman does not learn his trade in China; there are no laundries in China. The women there do the washing in tubs and have no washboards or flat irons. All the Chinese laundrymen here were taught in the first place by American women just as I was taught.

When I went to work for that American family I could not speak a word of English, and I did not know anything about housework. The family consisted of husband, wife and two children. They were very good to me and paid me $3.50 a week, of which I could save $3.

I did not know how to do anything, and I did not understand what the lady said to me, but she showed me how to cook, wash, iron, sweep, dust, make beds, wash dishes, clean windows, paint and brass, polish the knives and forks, etc., by doing the things herself and then overseeing my efforts to imitate her. She would take my hands and show them how to do things. She and her husband and children laughed at me a great deal, but it was all good natured. I was not confined to the house in the way servants are confined here, but when my work was done in the morning I was allowed to go out till lunch time. People in California are more generous than they are here.

In six months I had learned how to do the work of our house quite well, and I was getting $5 a week and board, and putting away about $4.25 a week. I had also learned some English, and by going to a Sunday school I learned more English and something about Jesus, who was a great Sage, and whose precepts are like those of Kong-foo-tsze.

It was twenty years ago when I came to this country, and I worked for two years as a servant, getting at the last $35 a month. I sent money home to comfort my parents, but though I dressed well and lived well and had pleasure, going quite often to the Chinese theater and to dinner parties in Chinatown, I saved $50 in the first six months, $90 in the second, $120 in the third and $150

in the fourth. So I had $410 at the end of two years, and I was now ready to start in business.

When I first opened a laundry it was in company with a partner, who had been in the business for some years. We went to a town about 500 miles inland, where a railroad was building. We got a board shanty and worked for the men employed by the railroads. Our rent cost us $10 a month and food nearly $5 a week each, for all food was dear and we wanted the best of everything — we lived principally on rice, chickens, ducks and pork, and did our own cooking. The Chinese take naturally to cooking. It cost us about $50 for our furniture and apparatus, and we made close upon $60 a week, which we divided between us. We had to put up with many insults and some frauds, as men would come in and claim parcels that did not belong to them, saying they had lost their tickets, and would fight if they did not get what they asked for. Sometimes we were taken before Magistrates and fined for losing shirts that we had never seen. On the other hand, we were making money, and even after sending home $3 a week I was able to save about $15. When the railroad construction gang moved on we went with them. The men were rough and prejudiced against us, but not more so than in the big Eastern cities. It is only lately in New York that the Chinese have been able to discontinue putting wire screens in front of their windows, and at the present time the street boys are still breaking the windows of Chinese laundries all over the city, while the police seem to think it a joke.

We were three years with the railroad, and then went to the mines, where we made plenty of money in gold dust, but had a hard time, for many of the miners were wild men who carried revolvers and after drinking would come into our place to shoot and steal shirts, for which we had to pay. One of these men hit his head hard against a flat iron and all the miners came and broke up our laundry, chasing us out of town. They were going to hang us. We lost all our property and $365 in money, which members of the mob must have found.

Luckily most of our money was in the hands of Chinese bankers in San Francisco. I drew $500 and went East to Chicago, where I

had a laundry for three years, during which I increased my capital to $2,500. After that I was four years in Detroit. I went home to China in 1897, but returned in 1898, and began a laundry business in Buffalo. But Chinese laundry business now is not as good as it was ten years ago. American cheap labor in the steam laundries has hurt it. So I determined to become a general merchant, and with this idea I came to New York and opened a shop in the Chinese quarter, keeping silks, teas, porcelain, clothes, shoes, hats and Chinese provisions, which include shark's fins and nuts, lily bulbs and lily flowers, lychee nuts and other Chinese dainties, but do not include rats, because it would be too expensive to import them. The rat which is eaten by the Chinese is a field animal which lives on rice, grain and sugar cane. Its flesh is delicious. Many Americans who have tasted shark's fin and bird's nest soup and tiger lily flowers and bulbs are firm friends of Chinese cookery. If they could enjoy one of our fine rats they would go to China to live, so as to get some more.

American people eat ground hogs, which are very like these Chinese rats and they also eat many sorts of food that our people would not touch. Those that have dined with us know that we understand how to live well.

The ordinary laundry shop is generally divided into three rooms. In front is the room where the customers are received, behind that a bedroom and in the back the work shop, which is also the dining room and kitchen. The stove and cooking utensils are the same as those of the Americans.

Work in a laundry begins early on Monday morning — about seven o'clock. There are generally two men, one of whom washes while the other does the ironing. The man who irons does not start in till Tuesday, as the clothes are not ready for him to begin till that time. So he has Sundays and Mondays as holidays. The man who does the washing finishes up on Friday night, and so he has Saturday and Sunday. Each works only five days a week, but those are long days — from seven o'clock in the morning till midnight. . . .

The reason why so many Chinese go into the laundry business

quarrels that they might discuss it from stall to stall; people who had relatives in the famous land went around reading their letters."[3]

These new immigrants settled in the Lower East Side of New York City. In this vibrant immigrant community, pushcarts lined the streets, and a cacophony of Yiddish voices, "a continual roar," rose from the crowds. Everywhere there were peddlers. Carrying packs or pushing carts, they knocked on doors and cajoled housewives to buy their goods. Streams of people flowed down the streets. "Suspenders, collah buttons, 'lastic, matches, hankeches — please, lady, buy," peddlers shouted. "Bandannas and tin cups at two cents, peaches at a cent a quart, damaged eggs for a song, hats for a quarter, and spectacles warranted to suit the eye . . . for thirty-five cents." In this colony, Jews resided and worked "within that small compass, meeting only people of their own nationality." One immigrant recalled that living in the Lower East Side was as though "we were still in our village in Russia."[4]

But the Lower East Side was also different in a significant way. It was the center of the garment industry. Sewing factories filled the neighborhood, like a huge, spreading industrial beehive. On the Second Avenue elevated train, a passenger could ride half a mile through the sweater district. "Every open window of the big tenements, that [stood] like a continuous brick wall on both sides of the way, [gave] you a glimpse of one of these shops. . . . Men and women bending over their machines or ironing clothes at the window, half-naked. . . . Morning, noon, or night, it [made] no difference." From block after block of sweatshops came the "whir of a thousand sewing-machines, worked at high pressure from the earliest dawn till mind and muscle [gave] out together." Family members, from the youngest to the oldest, labored in "qualmy rooms, where meals [were] cooked and clothing washed and dried besides, the livelong day."[5]

In the sweatshops, the work was physically punishing. The section system gave the bosses power to set the pace of their workers, who sat in long rows with their "bodies bent over the machines." Each person completed an assigned task and then passed his or her

part of the garment to the next worker on the line, while the foreman nagged everyone to hurry. "Most of them smoke cigarettes while they work," observed a contemporary; "beer and cheap whiskey are brought in several times a day by a peddler. Some sing Yiddish songs — while they race. The women chat and laugh sometimes — while they race." But many women were forced to work silently. "We were like slaves. You couldn't pick your head up. You couldn't talk. We used to go to the bathroom. The forelady used to go after us, we shouldn't stay too long."[6]

The immigrants worked in disciplined, harsh, and also unsafe conditions. "We are so crowded together that there is not an inch of space," one woman complained. "The machines are so close together that there is no way to escape in case of immergansie [sic]."[7]

An emergency did happen on March 26, 1911, when a fire suddenly exploded at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company. Eight hundred workers, mostly young women, were trapped in the burning building. "A stream of fire tore up through the elevator shaft and stairways to the upper floors. Fire instantly appeared at all windows, and tongues of flames crept higher and higher along the walls to where little groups of terrified girls, workers, stood in confusion." Screaming, struggling, they jumped from windows, some from the ninth floor, their bodies smashing on the sidewalks. Unable to escape, 146 young workers — mostly Jewish and Italian — died in the smoke and heat of the inferno. The deaths of the many young people stirred great grief. Fifty thousand mourners marched in a mass memorial parade in memory of their dead daughters.[8]

Facing such exploitations and dangers, the workers struggled to transform the circumstances of their labors and lives. After 1909, waves of strikes swept through the Lower East Side, as Jewish workers organized into unions, demanding higher wages and better working conditions. By 1920, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union had 100,000 dues-paying members, and 170,000 workers belonged to the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America.

In their struggles, the workers had created a broadly based radical Jewish consciousness. "Until now there had been no more than a large scattering of Jewish immigrant workers who would sometimes cohere for a fierce outbreak and then crumble into isolated persons," Irving Howe noted. "The Jewish community in the United States was not really a Jewish community," remarked leftist Paul Novick, "it was just something in fermentation until the labor movement came along." The "uprisings" of this era sharpened a shared sense of becoming Jewish American.[9]