

Emigration to America

(adapted from Peter Gray, *The Irish Famine*, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995)

What were conditions like on the emigration ships?

Vere Foster was a British diplomat who became a social reformer. In his journal, he described conditions aboard the American-built emigrant vessel during an 1850 voyage from Liverpool to New York.

November 17. The doctor this evening heaved overboard a great many of the chamber-pots belonging to the female passengers, saying that henceforward he would allow no women to do their business below, but that they should come to the filthy privies on deck. I heard him say, "There are a hundred cases of dysentery in the ship, which will all turn to cholera, and I swear to God that I will not go amongst them; if they want medicine they must come to me." This morning the first mate took it into his head to play the hose upon the passengers in occupation of the waterclosets, drenching them from head to foot; the fourth mate did the same a few mornings ago.

November 21. A violent gale commenced this evening.

November 22. The gale became perfectly terrific; for a few minutes we all expected momentarily to go to the bottom, for the sea, which was foaming and rolling extremely high, burst upon the deck with a great crash, which made us all believe that some part of the vessel was stove in. The wave rushed down into the lower deck, and I certainly expected every moment to go down. Some of the passengers set to praying; the wind blew a perfect hurricane, so that it was quite out of the question to attempt to proceed on our proper course.

November, 25. Another child, making about 12 in all, died of dysentery from want of proper nourishing food, and was thrown into the sea sown up, along with a great stone, in a cloth. No funeral service has yet been performed, the doctor informs me, over any one who had died on board; the Catholics objecting, as he says, to the performance of any such service by a layman.

Questions

- 1- Why did the doctor throw the chamber pots overboard?
- 2- Why was the storm so frightening?
- 3- How were people buried at sea?
- 4- In your opinion, why did people call these "coffin ships"?
- 5- In your opinion, what could have been done to improve conditions on these ships?

Why were Canadian medical facilities overwhelmed by famine emigrants?

The medical superintendent at Grosse Isle and the emigration agent at Quebec describe conditions at the Grosse Isle, Canada, quarantine station in 1847.

Dr. G.M. Douglas: Every vessel bringing Irish passengers (but more especially those from Liverpool and Cork), has lost many by fever and dysentery on the voyage, and has arrived here with numbers of sick. Seventeen vessels have [recently] arrived with Irish passengers; five from Cork, four from Liverpool, and the others from Sligo, Limerick, Belfast, Londonderry and New Ross. The number of passengers with which these vessels left port was 5,607; out of these the large number of 260 died on the passage, and upwards of 700 have been admitted to hospital, or are being treated on board their vessels, waiting vacancies to be landed. The number now under treatment is 695, and there remain on board the ships Aberdeen and Achilles from Liverpool, and the ship Bee from Cork, and Wolfville from Sligo, 164 sick, who receive medical assistance on board, and will be landed as accommodation can be made by turning passengers' sheds into hospitals.

A.C. Buchanan: Out of the 4,000 or 5,000 emigrants that have left [Grosse Isle] since Sunday, at least 2,000 will fall sick somewhere before three weeks are over. They ought to have accommodation for 2,000 sick at least in Montreal or Quebec, as all the Cork and Liverpool passengers are half dead from starvation and want before embarking; and the least bowel complaint, which is sure to come with change of food, finishes them without a struggle. I never saw people so indifferent to life; they would continue in the same berth with a dead person until the seamen or captain dragged out the corpse with boat-hooks. Good God! what evils will befall the cities wherever they alight. Hot weather will increase the evil.

Questions

- 1- Dr. Douglas reports that the ships left port with 5,607 passengers. Of these people, 260 died on board, 695 are being treated at the medical center, and 164 continue to receive medical assistance on board ship. According to these figures, what percentage of the passengers on these ships either died or are severely ill?
- 2- According to Mr. Buchanan, why do people on board fall ill so quickly?
- 3- Why is the emigration agent concerned about what will happen in the future? Mr. Buchanan wrote: "I never saw people so indifferent to life." Why is he making this statement? Do you believe he is justified? Explain your views.

Why did Canadian officials want to limit immigration?

During the famine years, Canada was a British colony. In 1847, the Canadian Parliament appealed to Britain to restrict emigration from Ireland and Great Britain.

We, your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects humbly venture to represent the apprehensions which we entertain, from the unprecedented influx of emigrants from Great Britain and Ireland, in a state of destitution, starvation and disease, unparalleled in the history of the province.

We venture humbly to state, that the arrangements for the reception of the sick at Grosse Isle, the quarantine station, although made on an extensive scale, have proved wholly inadequate to the unexpected emergency; that the entire range of buildings intended for the use of emigrants generally, at the station, have been converted into hospitals, and are still insufficient for the numerous and increasing sick, but the island itself, which is three miles in length and a mile and a half in breadth, has been reported as not sufficiently extensive to receive all those who by the regulation of the health officers are required to perform quarantine; and that the apparently healthy have consequently been forwarded without being subjected to the usual precaution.

We feel bound to declare that while we believe that this House and the people of the province are most desirous to welcome to the colony all those of their fellow-subjects who may think it proper to emigrate from the parent country to settle amongst them, we are convinced that a continued emigration of a similar character to that which is now taking place, is calculated to produce a most injurious effect upon our prosperity, unless conducted upon some more systematic principle.

We beseech the interference of your Majesty under the affliction with which this land has been visited, and is still further threatened, not to permit the helpless, the starving, the sick and diseased, unequal and unfit as they are to face the hardships of a settler's life, to embark for these shores, which if they reach, in too many instances only to find a grave.

We humbly pray your Majesty that measures may be adopted by your Majesty's Government, that emigrant ships may be large and airy, that ample space may be allotted to the emigrants, and that larger allowance of better food than is now furnished, with sufficient medical attendance, shall be always provided on board.

Questions

- 1- Why are Canadian officials concerned about the large number of new immigrants from Ireland and Great Britain?
- 2- Is their primary concern for the new immigrants? Explain your answer.

How did Irish emigrants describe their arrival in America?

Sir Robert Gore Booth was a landlord in County Sligo who had some of his tenant farmers transported to America. These letters were written home by a group that arrived in New Brunswick, Canada in 1847.

A) Bryan Clancy and his sister, St. John, New Brunswick, November 17, 1847

Dear mother and brother,

I take the favourable opportunity of writing these few lines to you hoping to find you are all in as good health. We were very uneasy for ever coming to this country for we were in a bad state of health. During the voyage there was a very bad fever aboard. Peppy took the fever on the Ship and was taken to the cabin by the Captain's wife and was there from a week we were on sea till we come to quarantine. Then all the passengers that did not pass the doctor was sent to the Island and she was kept by the Captain's wife on the ship. Peppy was relapsed again and sent to Hospital and remained there nine or ten days but thank be to God we got over all the disorders.

I was at work at a dollar per day, but the place got very bad and no regard for new passengers nor even a nights lodging could be found. I met with Andy Kerrigan and he took me with him to his house and remained there for a month boarding.

Mary took a very bad fever and was despaired of both by priest and doctor. As soon as she got well, Andy took the same disease. I am sorry to relate that poor Biddy Clancy and Catherine McGowan died in Hospital and a great many of our friends.

I often wished to be at home again bad and all as we were. We often wished we never seen St. John. We are sorry for that we cannot send any relief to you. Any new passengers except they have friends before them are in distress. It's very hard to get work here except them that are in steady employment.

The government are about to send all the passengers that were sent out here by Lord Palmerston and Sir Robert home again because they are sure that all of them that did not perish surely will this winter. I am very glad that Catherine did not come to this place for a great deal of our neighbours died here.

B) Catherine Hennagan, St. John, New Brunswick, February, 15 1848

Dear Father & Mother,

I take the present opportunity of letting you know that I am in good health, hoping this will find you and all friends the same. I wrote you shortly after I came here but received no answer which makes me very uneasy until I hear from you and how you are. We had a pretty favourable passage. We cast anchor at Partridge Island

after 5 weeks passage. There were 4 deaths on the passage but the second day after we arrived here and after the doctor came on board the sickness commenced. We were then put on the Island for 3 weeks and the end of which time my dear Little Biddy died. Thank God I got safe off and continue to enjoy good health since. Pen could not write the distress of the Irish passengers which arrived here through sickness, death and distress of every kind. The Irish I know have suffered much and is still suffering but the situation of them here even the survivors at that awful time was lamentable in the extreme. There are thousands of them buried in the Island and those who could not go to the States are in the poorhouse or begging through the streets of St. John. If you would wish to come here I would like you was here as I think times will mend here after some time and dear father I will soon send you some help. No more at present, but I remain your affectionate daughter till death.

C) Eoin Boyle Augusta, Maine, December 13, 1847

Dear Mother,

I write these few lines to you hoping to find you in good health. We were four weeks at sea. God favoured me I never was one day sick. The very night that I landed I got sick and kept the bed for two weeks and after that I fell in to good employment at four shilling per day British money. My sister Elon was employed the day after we landed in St John, New Brunswick. My Sister Margret left St John and went to Boston which I was very sorry that I did not get to see her. Elon went after her to Boston and I got no account from them. I am working at present in the State of Maine on Real Road. The rate of wages all this wummer was four shilling per day British. The wages during the winter is three shilling per day. I am getting along well here and getting good health. This is a good country for strong bodied men and very good place for girls. Good smart girls have 6s. shilling per week and their Board.

Questions

1- In your opinion, which of these three emigrants had the most difficult time?

Explain your answer.

2- Based on these letters, what is life like for Irish emigrants who arrive in America?

3- Imagine you were a family member in Ireland who received one of these letters.

Write a response.