

Teacher Background: Landlord Assisted Emigration

(Excerpted from “Absentee Landlords” in Edward Laxton, *The Famine Ships, The Irish Exodus to America*, 1846-51, p. 68-76. NY: Henry Holt.)

Landlord emigration is more than a mere catchphrase. In two words it describes the monumental calamity in Ireland as the Famine took hold of the country. Looking at the economics existing on many of the great estates and the simple sums presented by their land agents to the owners of those estates, it cost a landlord half as much in one year to send his tenants abroad than it would cost to keep them at home. A dilemma many sort to overcome by landlord emigration.

Strokestown is a tiny community in County Roscommon, geographically close to the very centre of Ireland, and here a Famine Museum was opened by Mary Robinson, the President of Ireland, to mark the 150th anniversary of the year of 1845 when the Famine began. Strokestown Park House and the surrounding estate, which stretched for 9,000 acres, epitomized the problems Ireland faced as the Famine took hold of the country.

The land at Strokestown was granted to the Mahon family around 1680 by the English King Charles II, in return for their support during the Civil Wars. Fifty years later Thomas Mahon, who had become a Member of Parliament, built the grand house in the Palladian style which can be traced back to the Romans. Even the stables where the museum is sited, had vaulted ceilings and a galleried kitchen which allowed the lady of the house to remain aloft and watch her cooks and servants at work below, without actually standing among them and absorbing the smells.

The estate passed down through generations of elder sons in the family and in July 1800 Maurice Mahon accepted a peerage to become the First Baron Hartland of Strokestown. But the last of the line, grandson of the original Lord Mahon, was declared insane, and when he died in 1845, without any children to follow him, the estate had suffered ten years of neglect. Ownership passed to a cousin Major Denis Mahon whose name became notorious two years later, at the height of the Famine.

Major Mahon was not entirely an absentee landlord, but he spent much of his time in England. Land agents ran the Irish estate for a fee, and at the new owner's command, unfortunately coinciding with the first season's failure of the potato crop, they prepared a plan for evicting tenants. Three years of rent arrears totalled £13,000 and several hundred of Denis Mahon's tenants became emigrants. Willingly or unwillingly, they took their place in the Landlord Emigration sweeping through the grand estates of Ireland.

Two of the ships which carried the majority of Major Mahon's former tenants to Canada were the infamous coffin ships the *Virginus* and the *Naomi*, condemned by Dr. Douglas at Grosse Isle (see page 44-48), and suffered more than 200 deaths at sea with another 200 passengers critically sick with fever on arrival.

The physical condition of the passengers prior to the voyage was held to be partly responsible for so many deaths. Whatever the reasons, not six months after they left Ireland, on Monday, November 2, 1847, Major Mahon was assassinated. He was shot in the chest as he drove his carriage home late in the afternoon to Strokestown Park House, and died instantly. He was not the first landlord to be murdered, but the controversy surrounding the estate clearing rumbled on for many months, with dozens of letters in Irish and English newspapers, and debates in the House of Commons and the House of Lords in London. Catholic priests and bishops were drawn into the row, which lasted until the last of the killers was hanged late in 1848. Whatever the rights and wrongs of 60-year-old Major Mahon's conduct, his death ensured that there were suddenly many more absentee landlords in Ireland, who fled the country in fear of their lives.

The politicians had a field day. Irish organizations agitating for a return to governing the country from Dublin instead of London, sided with the Roscommon peasantry who were accused of conspiring against their landlord. The *Freeman's Journal* wrote:

"The people were said to be displeased at him for two reasons. The first was his refusal to continue the conacre system, the second was his clearing away what he deemed to be the surplus population. He chartered two vessels to America and freighted them with his evicted tenantry. In every other relation of his life Major Mahon was, we believe, much respected."

The newspaper referred to America rather than British North America, or Canada, but at this time the many newspapers engaged in the heated arguments, made no reference to the human tragedy on the voyage. How much, or how little, was known at that time in County Roscommon of the disasters aboard the *Virginus* and *Naomi*?

The poorest of those working the land were squatters without any legal claim whatever to the piece of ground they occupied. In a slightly better position were those working in the conacre system. Although tenants were not granted any rights, under conacre they would benefit from tending a stretch of farmland without any lease for a year at a time, the landlord maintaining and preparing the soil for sowing and taking a rent after the crop was harvested. Popular among the peasantry,

conacre was less so with the landlords who too often found the rents difficult to raise, and after the first season's calamity with the potato, often impossible to collect at all.

Through the accumulation of poor rates paid by the landlords, it was hoped to support the really destitute population in the 130 workhouses originally planned in Ireland. In 1847 some of those had not opened, and some had not been built while others like that in Roscommon, faced bankruptcy. Denis Mahon sat on a local Relief Committee and shortly before his death he argued publicly with the chairman, the local priest Father Michael McDermott. The day before his death the priest attacked Major Mahon from the pulpit.

Another report appeared in the local *Longford Journal*, in the week of the murder, and an excerpt of that was carried by *The Times* in London:

“Major Mahon was a resident landlord and his exertions to alleviate the distress during the last distressing season were equal to any gentleman in the country possessing a similar income. Indeed it may be said that he had none, having to live on other resources, as he got little or no rent for the last 18 months.

The honourable gentleman, like many others, quarrelled with the priests in his neighbourhood about the relief of the poor, and although at an expense of £6,000 and £8,000 [US \$30 and \$40,000] he sent upwards of 700 poor people (who appeared thankful and expressed their thanks) to America ... this season he has been from the chapel altars, even on this very last Sunday, reprobated and abused as a tyrant, oppressor of the poor etc., and now we behold the result.

We believe at the present moment letters of thanks to Major Mahon for sending them out, and thanking God that they went out of poverty, could be shown by friends of the emigrants in the neighbourhood of Strokestown. But what signifies it, if they were taken out of poverty and placed beyond the reach of want?”

The Bishop of Elphin was being pressured to discipline the priest, and a Catholic conspiracy was also blamed for the Major's murder. But the Bishop's public reply came in April the following year when he wrote a leading article, also in the *Freeman's Journal*, headlined: “EXTERMINATION BY THOUSANDS! THE STROKESTOWN MASSACRE DEVELOPED”.

By now the news of the typhus and the horrors of Grosse Isle had reached Ireland, and the Bishop wrote a report on the evictions at Strokestown, attacking Denis Mahon and holding him accountable for the deaths of 3,006 men, women, including 84 widows, and children. And the Bishop listed every one of their names:

“We call on all Christian men to examine these proscription lists, worse than those of the Roman tyrants. Perhaps the fact has no parallel in history ... three thousand

men, women and children swept from their homes and firesides, and exposed to almost certain death, simply because one man, acting under British law, willed their expulsion! Except in crowded cities, visited by war or pestilence, we know of no waste of life to be compared with that on Major Mahon's property within the same period of time.

Major Mahon willed the annihilation, the law confirmed it, and the 28 townlands [villages] were reduced to solitude and three thousand, only imagine the number, THREE THOUSAND! driven forth in misery and mourning, one huge mass of penury and suffering, the old and the young, the widow and the orphan, the able-bodied and crippled, fathers, mothers, wives, children, all in one confused and ghastly crowd, for to the seashore to seek a new home beyond the waters, but destined to divide their bodies between the sea and pestilence. Scarce a fragment of those three thousand exiles now survives."

County Roscommon has a curious mixture of land and water. Bordered by the River Shannon, it has many lakes and four huge loughs, a fisherman's paradise. A third of the land is bog, but much of the remainder provides superb grazing for sheep and cattle, with little acreage given over to crops. Undoubtedly, Major Mahon's position as owner of 9,000 acres and landlord to so many hundreds of families, was very strained. A letter from his agent the previous year illustrated his situation very clearly as the first plan to emigrate many of his tenants was laid out. This affected 479 families, a total of 2,444 people living off just 2,105 acres.

Nearly half of all the farms in Ireland were under 5 acres. These Strokestown families being lined up for emigration were of average size, two parents and three children. And they occupied roughly four acres per family. By comparison to millions of others they were fortunate, but there is no material difference between half an acre of rotten potatoes and 4 acres of rotten potatoes.

The agent pointed out that if the potatoes were replaced by oats to provide the staple diet for the tenant population, each family would need 12 acres to grown a crop large enough for them to exist for a year, following a good harvest. "It would seem, if this calculation be correct, the population on this land exceeds what it can support by two-thirds at present, the agent wrote, containing:

"The cost of keeping a pauper in the Roscommon Poor House averages about 2s. 9d. a week [68 cents], that is £7 3s. a year [US \$36]. The cost of emigration to Quebec averages £3 12s [US \$18]. The cost of clearing this surplus population would be £5,865, the cost of supporting them in the workhouse £11,634, so the difference in favour of emigration is £5,769 [US \$28,245].

I think the facts are sufficient without any further remarks of mine, to show the impossibility of collecting poor rates or rents, or of affecting any change in the condition of the people or prevent[ing] any expenditure while the land remains in such small divisions in the hands of paupers, unable to support themselves much less to till it to advantage.”

There were many exchanges of letters between the local agent and Major Mahon who went away for long periods to Manchester, a minimum four-day journey from Roscommon, and London, which was probably a week away. The Major wrote that he could not afford £5,000 and urged the agent to find a cheaper passage out of Sligo or through the port of Liverpool. He argued that he had to borrow money to pay those tenants who wanted to travel independently a small remuneration for their livestock and crops, and he needed to borrow more to pay the fares of others plus the cost of extra food for the voyage -- rice, salt, oatmeal and salted herrings -- to provide one pound of food per day above government ration.

Nearly 1,000 emigrated, costing him £2,400, on the *John Nunn* and the *Erin's Queen* as well as the *Virginus* and *Naomi*. A great many tragically failed to complete the journey and many more died soon after setting foot in Canada. They were dying at home too from typhus and dysentery. Fever sheds had been raised on the estate in the village of Dysart, and in June that year it was reported from there that the amount of mortality averaged four or five every day. Many victims had received some compensation for giving up their land and were then found to be too ill to travel abroad.

The murder of Major Mahon had a dramatic effect, not least on his former neighbouring landlords. Four days after his death 288 acres of prime land and a lovely farmhouse were put up for auction with a reserve of £20,000, said to be half the estimated, true value of the property. The sale was canceled when the highest bid reached only £2,500. Within a matter of weeks four more landlords in Ireland were shot and land agents and rate collectors were being threatened and assaulted. Nearly a full year passed before two men, Patirck Hasty and James Cummins, were tried and publicly hanged for killing Major Denis Mahon.