**The Irish and Australia**

Sometimes, in wandering among the tombstones of an old English country churchyard on the south coast overlooking the English Channel, one comes across the headstone of a Royal Naval veteran who sailed the South Seas with Captain Cook, who discovered Australia. It is worth remembering that the voyages of Captain Cook were contemporary with the War of American Independence -- King George, and his equally incompetent ministers, such as Lord George Germain, the Secretary of War, contributed greatly to the loss of the American Colonies, which had become a dumping ground over the years for British convicts until 1776. Cook discovered New South Wales in 1770, finding a continent occupied by a small native population of aborigines, which even today numbers only 200, 000. It was conveniently ripe for white settlement, and, in 1783, the British Secretary of State decided to switch the transportation of convicts from America to New South Wales. The first convict expedition, 750 in number, set sail for Australia in 1787, under the command of Captain Phillip of the Royal Navy, who was to act as the first Governor. In January, 1788, the marines guarding the prisoners became the first free settlers in Botany Bay. This site was then abandoned in favour of Port Jackson, and in honour of Lord Sydney, the British Home Secretary, the new settlement of Sydney was named, and set up as a military state.

By 1790 Europe was in the turmoil of the French Revolution, and in 1798 Ireland had risen in one of its periodic revolts, which was viciously put down by the redcoats, assisted by Hessian mercenaries. Broadly speaking, the Ireland of those days could be seen as an English garrison, run from Dublin Castle. The peasantry of Ireland was at the mercy of a largely debauched, drunken and dissolute landlord class which had the power to be judge, jury and executioner -- or transporter -- of any of its tenants, be they political thinkers or anyone who stepped out of line in any way. The allpowerful magistrate class sentenced hundreds of people -- men and women -- without trial to transportation in convict ships to Botany Bay. They were often sentenced for life, their "crimes" unnamed, and seldom, if ever, written down.

The first English prisoners had landed in 1788, and in 1791, Irish prisoners started to arrive, thus forging the first Irish-Australian links. Ireland was then a nation up in arms and in desperate political turmoil, and the first prison ships contained many simple country folk, driven in desperation to political "crimes. " For many it became, under military goading, a choice of transportation for life, or hanging by the neck or even suicide. The convict ships themselves were not much better than the old Negro slave ships, as frequently the convicts were kept in irons throughout a horrendous six-month voyage, during which they suffered hunger, thirst, the lash and harassment from their captains and crews. In those days flogging was a normal form of discipline in both the British Navy and the British Army, and brutality was the only way in which the officers could effectively govern and control the lower-deck and lesser orders. It was not until as late as 1886 that the flogging of soldiers was abolished in the British Army, and then only because of a case in which a man was flogged to death, and the British Army doctors tried to cover it up by saying that the soldier had died of pneumonia! Not all the Irish convicts were poor folk or agricultural labourers, for, after the rebellion of 1798, Presbyterian ministers and professional men, such as doctors, were among the more educated revolutionaries to be transported. Many of the early political prisoners were Presbyterian ministers from County Derry, County Down and County Antrim. Very soon, Irish convicts formed a large percentage of the prisoner population in Australia, and the authorities were greatly concerned at their numbers, their escape attempts, their standard of intelligence, and the fact that Catholic priests as well as Presbyterian ministers were among the arrivals. For the military authorities' answer to most problems was violence-either shooting recalcitrant prisoners, flogging them into submission, or allowing them to die of overwork and under-nourishment. The bewildered convicts, separated from their home and country, their wives and families, and ignorant of their ultimate fate, all too often tried to escape. The authorities, desperate to control the colony, regularly executed "trouble makers" by hanging them publicly, and any escaped convicts who were unlucky enough to be recaptured were certain to face a flogging before the hangman's noose. Flogging could mean two or three hundred lashes, which left a man's back cut open to the bone, and the flesh of his buttocks and legs reduced to pulp, everything short of actually being flogged to death being permitted . . . . Frequently a doctor was present to see just how far the torture could be allowed to go. Throughout the nineteenth century, convict ships regularly set sail from Cork to Sydney. Many of those transported were Catholics who found, on arrival in their penal settlements, that the Church of Rome was not recognised, and they were obliged to attend state religious services of the Protestant faith. Although there were priests among the early convicts, they were not allowed to perform their religious duties and it was not until 1803 that the first Catholic priest was permitted to celebrate mass on Sundays for Catholic convicts, in a peculiar official climate where "no Pope~' was the order of the day. Appropriately enough, on the site of the house in Sydney where the first Catholic service was held, there now stands the Catholic Church of Saint Patrick.

Not all early Irish settlers in Australia were there for political reasons and one of the most famous exemptions was Robert O'Hara Burke. He was born in St. Clearb, in Country Galway, in 1820, the son of a British Army officer. He was educated in Belgium, joined the Austrian Army, and attained the rank of Captain. He later returned to Ireland and joined the Royal Irish Constabulary. Restless, like many an Irishman, he emigrated to Australia, and became an Inspector of Police in the state of Victoria. When the state decided to explore the continent he was chosen to lead one of the first expeditions because of his military and commanding background.

Many intrepid explorers worked at opening up the interior of the great continent, and all suffered from the immense drought and tropical heat. The Robert 0'Hara Burke expedition was no exception. Financed by the state and by popular appeal, the expedition purchased camels, horses and supplies, and picked the men who were to attempt the crossing of the unknown continent from Victoria in the south to the Gulf of Carpentaria in the north, some fifteen degrees south of the equator. Leaving Melbourne, Burke and his team of experts set out to be the first white men to cross the vast continent from south to north. The expedition left in August 1860, and a month later reached Menindee on the River Darling. Already the camel expert had left the party, in high dudgeon at the attitude of the impetuous Irish leader of the expedition, who had rashly decided to push on into the unknown, uncharted outback. Not waiting for the main support of his expedition, Burke and two companions with their horses and camels and several months' supplies, headed north for Eyre Creek in Queensland. Crossing the Tropic of Capricorn they reached the Cloncurry and the Flinders rivers, and they viewed the northern seas before starting on their return journey. Four months into the new year they missed the back up party at Cooper's Creek. Again the impatient Burke decided to press on and complete the remainder of the return journey by a different route. By May their last camel was dead and they were near starvation in the wilderness. By the end of June the deputy leader of the expedition was dead; Burke died later of starvation, and only John King survived.

Although this remarkable journey was technically a failure, the citizens of Melbourne were deeply moved by the gallantry of the captain from Galway, and erected a monument to his heroic memory. The monument features statues of Burke and his companion, William Wills. His ill-fated and badly managed foray into the unknown inspired many to follow his exploratory zeal and open up the interior of Australia. In the time of Robert 0'Hara Burke and his companions, such pioneer expeditions of exploration knew little or nothing of the existence or whereabouts or customs of the native aboriginal inhabitants of the outback. Burke's party, on their outward journey, was given sustenance by them on one occasion, when they were lost and without food. The expedition's sole survivor, Irishman John King, owed his life to the natives who took care of him for several months, feeding him on native plants unknown to white men. Today, the once uncharted and unknown outback is a tourist attraction with air-conditioned coaches travelling to see the rock cuttings and drawings of the Australian aboriginals, who carefully preserve their sacred rocks and caves and mysterious folklore -- their places as holy to them as any Christian holy shrine is to us. Nevertheless, all too little is known of the folklore and worship of the original native inhabitants. For the first Irish settlers in Australia, it must have been an extraordinary change to see kangaroo, wallabies, emus, the black swan, the duck-billed platypus and a thousand different species of fish -- a sharp contrast to the Emerald Isle.

The last chapter of Irish convicts in Australia was written in the adventures of the old whaling ship, The Catalpa. She was purchased by American Fenians and, flying the flag of the United States, succeeded in rescuing six Fenians -- Thomas Darragh, Martin Hogan, Michael Harrington, Thomas Hasset, Robert Cranston and James Wilson -- from Fremantle in April, 1876. The freed prisoners were released in New York in August, having successfully evaded capture by the British naval cutter, The Georgette.

The exciting stories of the adventures of the Irish convict political prisoners in Australia would make a dozen epic, action-packed movies! The average Australian with Irish roots today is generally aware that about half of the population has some link with Ireland, and that while only a small percentage of the original convict population were there for political "crimes, " the majority of ordinary convicts were being punished for offences which simply reflected the appalling defects of the landlord system which kept ordinary Irish people in hunger and in poverty. Many prisoners, who served their sentences as servants to their masters, became landowners in due course. In the late 1800s, the rush to get rid of as many poor and hungry people as possible resulted in assisted passage schemes taking more than 100, 000 emigrants of Irish origin to the new colony, where they worked to repay the cost of their fares. Of these assisted emigrants, the majority came from Cork and Kerry, with counties Clare and Tipperary well to the fore, followed by many Presbyterians from the province of Ulster. Naturally, women were in short supply, and in the new wave of emigration, wives often came out free. The famous Caroline Chisolm devoted her life to encouraging girls to come out and marry in Australia, and she was particularly successful in attracting Irish girls as ideal wives for farmers.

Irish names keep appearing in the limelight of Australia's literary and public life. From Armagh came Victor James Daley, reckoned by many to be one of the leading poets of Australia by virtue of two volumes of his verse published there while he was a journalist. He died in Sydney in 1905. A contemporary of the poet was Sir Frederick Mathew Darley, a native of Wicklow, who became a lawyer in New South Wales, a member of the legislature, and chief justice in 1886. Before his death in 1910, he had reached the rank of Governor. From Elphin, in County Roscommon, came Roderick Flanagan who founded The Sydney Chroanicle and edited The Empire as well as being the author of The History of New South Wales, the province where he died in 1861. If you look at the map of North Western Australia today, you can see the first gold-mining area of Kimberley. It was discovered by the Irish geologist and surveyor, Edward Townley Hardman, who was born in the town of Drogheda in County Louth, in 1845, and who has a range of mountains named after him in Kimberley. One of Hardman's contemporaries was William Edward Hearn, born in Belturbet in the County of Cavan. Educated at the College of the Holy and Undivided Trinity in Dublin, he became professor of Greek at Queen's University, Galway, and emigrated to Australia to become Dean of the University of Melbourne, where he was also a member of the legislative council of Victoria between 1845 and 1870. Well known for his political and academic works, he died in Melbourne in 1888.

As with Irish emigration to the United States of America and to England, it was the custom for brothers and sisters, once established, to send for other members of their families, and frequently those families came from the same counties in Ireland -- thus certain townships and cities had heavy concentrations of Mayo people, or people from Clare or Kerry, or what have you. Sydney was a magnet for Irish emigrants, both convicts and free citizens. Free Irish emigrants, in the beginning, naturally drew on Irish convict labour for the development of their holdings and businesses. Booroowa, south of Sydney, became a second Tipperary. The biggest concentration of Irish descent today is to be found in the eastern states of Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and, of course, Tasmania. Western Australia comes second on the list, while South Australia has relatively few. Clare men figured prominently in the gold rush, and many an Australian today can boast of a grandfather from a town such as Ennis, County Clare.