

## **'Rags and boughs': Daughters of the Great Irish Famine in Australia**

On 16 December 1848, fifteen-year-old Catherine McNeill from Roscommon was one of 234 girls to board the *Digby*, the fifth ship of the Earl Grey Scheme to ferry its live cargo of Irish orphan girls to Australia at the height of the Great Irish Famine. Departing one of Ireland's worst-hit counties – which would lose one third of its people during the five-year national disaster – that journey would condemn at least three generations of Catherine's family to destitution and cyclical incarceration in their new country.

### ***Hostile conditions for the Irish orphan immigrants***

Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, the British colonial authorities had been making concerted efforts to address the enormous gender imbalance in Australia, principally through assisted emigration schemes. Emigrants faced a gruelling voyage of more than three months on crowded, disease-laden ships to reach the new colony and there were additional challenges for women, particularly if unaccompanied. On top of the difficult journey, harsh conditions in the colony and its largely penal profile had proven attractive only to the most desperate of women.

The Irish famine presented the British government with a unique opportunity to simultaneously advance two political objectives—disposing of a proportion of the fifty-five thousand children imposing on the public exchequer in Irish workhouses and putting them to 'good use' in the colony as domestic servants and to aid rapid population growth. Between 1848 and 1850, under the 'Earl Grey Scheme' (named after the Secretary of State for the

Colonies), 4,175 Irish orphan girls aged between fourteen and nineteen were drafted from workhouses throughout Ireland and shipped to Australia.

Travelling alone—having lost her parents, Pat and Betty—Catherine McNeill was recorded on the *Digby* ship's indent as an illiterate 'housemaid' in 'good bodily health' and of 'good probable usefulness'. The mariner's report showed that 'typhous fever' had swept through the ship, claiming the lives of sixteen-year-old C Duggan and seventeen-year-old Mary Ferguson before it docked in Sydney on 4 April 1849.

By the time Catherine landed in Australia, public sentiment—fuelled by inflammatory press coverage—had turned against the young female importees. Circumstances in Ireland having contributed to their lack of education and work skills, the orphan girls were judged to be unsuitably qualified for domestic service. One year later, *The Argus* newspaper reported:

'such degraded beings as the majority of the female orphans have been found ... brings a melancholy increase to the vice and lewdness that is now to be seen rampant in every part of our town ... we have received no good servants for the wealthier classes in the towns, no efficient farm servants for the rural population, no virtuous and industrious young women, fit wives for the labouring part of the community'.

Local hostility led to the scheme's cancellation the same year.

Like other Irish immigrants, the famine orphan girls sought the comfort and support of connections from their home country. This resulted in their clustering in larger towns and cities, limiting their employment prospects. Domestic positions were poorly paid and opened these young women to both physical and sexual abuse by their employers. Many of the

poorest Irish famine immigrants were eventually forced into petty crime and prostitution for survival—making them particularly susceptible to arrest and removal of their children to institutions, a fate that would befall Catherine McNeill and her daughters. The overrepresentation of Irish women in goals at this time provides ample evidence of their difficulties.

### ***New links between Irish famine immigrants and interned daughters***

Research into the Newcastle Industrial School and Reformatory for Girls in New South Wales, where 193 girls aged between four and sixteen years were interned from 1867 to 1871—being undertaken for a thesis in progress on ‘The second-wave impact in Australia of the Great Irish Famine’—has revealed a striking prevalence of Irish girls in the institution. This investigation for the first time, shows a substantial cohort of girls at Newcastle linked to Irish famine immigration, and a significant cluster who were daughters of the Earl Grey Irish famine orphans sent to Australia.

More than half of all the Newcastle inmates were either Irish-born themselves, or one or both of their parents were born in Ireland. Well over a quarter of the inmates were from Irish families who had arrived in Australia during famine-affected years. Perhaps the most compelling finding is that almost one in ten of all inmates—and *eight out of ten* inmates from Irish famine-years arrival families—were daughters of Earl Grey famine orphans.

The majority of Newcastle inmates were sent there under a court order having been arrested for vagrancy, prostitution and/or petty crime. The girls were sentenced to a minimum of twelve months in the institution, many experiencing repeated incarcerations in other facilities,

and many ensnared in involuntary apprenticeships as domestic help for lengthy periods afterwards.

Original copies of letters between the school authorities and the Colonial Secretary document brutalities sustained by the inmates at the school—including being dragged by the hair, locked in solitary confinement on restricted bread and water rations ('low diet'), being verbally abused and humiliated, and subjected to a 'virgin' test (a physical examination by a male doctor performed on girls as young as six years old—a practice which later came under scrutiny). Children as young as ten years old were allowed to be placed in solitary confinement for up to two weeks at a time.

Not surprisingly, the more spirited girls rebelled, reports of their 'scandalous' escape attempts and disturbances making the national headlines. An official investigation led to the abrupt closure of the school in 1871 and the inmates' transfer to Bileola Industrial School for Girls on Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour.

### **'A deplorable picture of a family in the bush'**

The story of Catherine McNeill and her family encompasses many factors which had so sabotaged the successful transplantation of Irish famine-affected women to Australia. Within months of her arrival in Australia, fifteen-year-old Catherine had married James Rudd—a man thirty years her senior—in Berrima, 131 kilometres south west of Sydney. She and her husband registered the births of six children before James died in 1867.

On 1 September 1868, *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported Catherine's arrest in Cooma market square with her daughter (also named Catherine). Police attending the campsite where the family was living found 'a miserably constructed shelter composed of rags and boughs' – they arrested Eliza aged 14, Catherine aged 12 and James aged 10 years. The children were charged with 'living and wandering about in company with their mother, Catherine Rudd, a vagrant and reputed prostitute'. Eliza and Catherine junior were sent to Newcastle Industrial School for Girls and James to an industrial school for boys aboard the 'Vernon' ship anchored in Sydney Harbour.

In his 'Vernon' admission record dated 6 September 1868, Catherine's son, James revealed the family's tragic change of circumstances. According to James, their father had been running teams of cattle up and down to Sydney prior to his death:

'My Father's name was Thomas Rudd – he had teams on the road between Sydney and Cooma. ... We lived in a tent just out of Cooma. Men from Cooma used to come to the tent and give my mother money. My two sisters and I were taken by the police.'

Given the family's dire circumstances, it is beyond doubt that, like so many of her compatriots, Catherine had made the pragmatic decision to sell her body in order to feed her children.

Catherine was remitted to Goulburn Gaol for three months. It is unlikely she was ever reunited with her children as she died in 1874, aged forty-one. Her unfortunate legacy would further subjugate her daughters, carrying forward into the next generation. When Catherine died, her daughter Eliza—who had been apprenticed from Newcastle school and absconded—had been recaptured and once more detained.

Catherine junior made the headlines again when—eighteen months after her apprenticeship from the Newcastle school to a remote cattle station 485 kilometres northwest of Sydney—*The Armidale Express* reported she had been charged with concealing the birth of her illegitimate daughter in her servant's quarters. *The Sydney Morning Herald* detailed that:

'a newly born infant was found in a box at the residence of a Mr. Rodgers. ... There were no marks of violence found on the body, consequently it was buried by the police. The mother of the infant, whose name is Kate Rudd, is one of the Biloela girls, and was well recommended. Everyone in the house was very kind to her, and tried to encourage the unfortunate to do right. ... The cause of the girl's trouble is far away from here. He is a person with whom she was acquainted in Sydney.'

Catherine's circumstances, her distance from Sydney and her time served in the apprenticeship tend to controvert the reported paternity story, opening the possibility of abuse by her employer. She was remanded for trial and was eventually acquitted. She went on to marry several times and give birth to two boys and five girls, few surviving their first year. Her baby daughter, Charlotte, was admitted with Catherine junior to Armidale Gaol in 1884, when she was recorded as 'a 27-year-old Catholic laundress' following her arraignment on a 'drunk and disorderly' charge.

### ***Conclusion***

The Irish famine orphan immigrants to Australia endured severe discrimination due to their poor, Irish and Catholic origins—resulting in destitution and repeated imprisonment for some, with repercussions which extended across generations. For these girls, their tragic legacy extended to their daughters who were also extremely vulnerable to repeated arrests

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and incarcerations—their removal from their families effected by legislation driven by colonial policy. The story of Catherine Rudd (nee O'Neill) and her family is one small chapter in a greater history of hardships endured by Irish female famine immigrants and their daughters in Australia.

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### **Further reading**

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