



Seventh Famine Memorial Anniversary
3 September 2006

Memorial Address
Dr Jennifer Harrison
University of Queensland

‘It’s a long way from Clare to here’

Dr Harrison’s lecture focussed on an account of the social history of the orphan girls in the Moreton Bay district. An extract from her speech follows:

About two hundred of the girls became residents at the embryonic settlement of Moreton Bay, home at that time to less than 2300 residents. Libby Connors’ research emphasised the lack of people: ‘In 1851, the total white female population of Brisbane-town numbered only 1053,’ making the Irish orphans a significant proportion of the total.

At the time of the arrival of the Earl Grey girls, August to November 1848, the employers in the Brisbane and Ipswich districts made an unprecedented effort to give these young girls some stability. The most senior official was the Police Magistrate of Moreton Bay from 1843 to 1859. Captain John Wickham had an illustrious career serving under Phillip Parker King, then Robert Fitzroy on the famous Beagle voyage with Charles Darwin, and John Lort Stokes. Later he navigated the waters along the Queensland coast with Owen Stanley in the *Rattlesnake*. Wickham and his wife, one of the daughters of Hannibal Macarthur, were allotted Georgina Mulholland for six months. She was a twenty-two year old English-born girl sent from the Belfast Workhouse. Georgina, one of the alleged prostitutes, was, as Wickham later wrote to Francis Merewether, ‘turned ... away for improper conduct’. This apparently did not prove much of a hindrance to the lass from Woolwich as within a few months, on 19 February 1849, she married George Wells of South Brisbane. On the same day, Mary Jane Wallace, a twenty-year old arrival from Lagan Village in County Down, and one of Georgina’s fellow travellers on the *Earl Grey*, married another South Brisbane man, Thomas Debman.

Other families who undertook to employ the girls included a group who were trustees of the Brisbane Hospital with Wickham. These were Dr Ballou, John Richardson, George Le Breton and William Pickering, the last two being among the prominent Catholic families of Brisbane.

Then grocer, Richard Coley, took Eliza McCanally into his household while well established merchant brothers, George and John Harris, engaged Jane McCrudden as well as Jane McLachlan who also married in February 1849. Cordial and soft drink manufacturer Connelly of South Brisbane took one girl. Patrick Mayne, the North Brisbane butcher, sponsored Bridget Byrnes of Kilbecanty, Galway, while fellow meat purveyor George Edmonstone employed Maria Blundell of Dublin in his house and his brother-in-law William Cairncross, a bread and biscuit baker and confectioner, employed Eliza McCracken. Surveyor James Warner took in Annie Foster until she married on New Year’s Day 1849. All in all, nearly all names on the local electoral role responded to the call, an outstanding example of community involvement.

Another group who became very involved with the orphan girls were members of the police establishment. This was not a very large group as indicated in 1860 by Donegal-born Governor George Bowen just after he assumed his role in the new colony when he wrote home to a friend indicating that he was sovereign of a town with 14 public houses, 13 churches and 12 policemen. Chief Constable Samuel Sneyd employed *Thomas Arbuthnot*

passenger Ellen Casey of Listowel, Kerry. Constable James Tredenick, former soldier, married Elizabeth Brennan (*Earl Grey*) on 12 May 1849. Eliza was another who had worked for her first three months in the colony for hospital trustee, William Pickering. Constable Michael Connor, based at Ipswich, married Margaret Ford a *Maria* voyager early in 1852 while his co-worker, John Booth, wed Elizabeth Hickey, who had arrived on the *Lady Peel*.

Many of the women who were engaged did not last long with their employers. Quite apart from the business men who took their servants to court, it became obvious that a number of the young Hibernians experienced difficulties in settling into their new surroundings. Among the young women engaged to assist in their homes, it was found that many were not reliable, particularly as so many of these settlers in the northern colony of Moreton Bay had families with young children whose behaviour and language they were strictly monitoring. As one newspaper later reported: 'Surveyor Rawnsley's wife, also the wife of Surveyor Warner, perhaps cooked their own chops far more often than was necessary because of their indulgence of a certain idiosyncratic dislike to peaches and cream in the countenance of those whose duty it was to call them 'Ma'am'.

Parties who wished to dispense with the contracts they had signed, even though most were only for three or six months, found it difficult to do so legally. When some of the girls did appear before the courts, often charged with absconding or improper conduct, the ruling was handed down that the master could not give a discharge without the sanction of the Guardians Board in Sydney. As a result many of the girls were ordered to return to their employment with the inevitable result that many ran away again. On occasions, decisions were taken locally as the only postal contact with Port Jackson still was by coastal steamer and at windy times of the year some return journeys could take up to a month. Early marriages may have been a satisfactory solution for both masters and servants.

Further problems may have developed because of a deliberate policy of transferring some of the known troublemakers from southern districts to the northern establishment. For example, another *Thomas Arbuthnot* lass, Margaret Raymond, was an eighteen-year old from Listowel, Kerry (daughter of William and Honora, both dead). Originally she had been allocated to John Beit in Sydney on 2 May 1850 who soon requested to be relieved of her because he considered she was insane, so she was sent to Moreton Bay to the employment of a Mr G. Watson. By 4 August 1852 Margaret had married Patrick Ambrose and they had five children before Pat died in 1860, after which time she married David Kynoch and had three more offspring.

But these women were not isolated for long. Direct immigration to Moreton Bay had commenced only in 1848 with the arrival of the *Artemisia* which contained only nine Irish settlers and next to none had come on the three non-government ships brought out by Dr John Dunmore Lang in 1849. When the *Emigrant* arrived on 9 August 1850, forty more single Irish servant girls were added to the numbers in the Moreton Bay district. During 1851-52 a further two hundred arrived on the *Duchess of Northumberland*, the *Maria Soames*, the *Meridian* and the *Rajah Go Paul*.

Further, the pastoral care extended by the two Roman Catholic priests looking after Brisbane and Ipswich (Father James Hanly from Moore Town, County Tipperary and Father Eugene Luckie from Crossmaglen, County Armagh) contributed much more to their well-being than simply conducting regular church services, marriages and baptisms. By November 1848 the foundation had been laid for a stone building which became St Stephen's church in Brisbane. St Mary's in Ipswich was not far behind and at the same time catholic schools were subsidised in each town.

At the end of the day, migration was a difficult experience even for the strongest adventurer who chose to move around the world. For young Irish girls often unwillingly

going to a frontier district with next to no family support, the journey was even more daunting. Many indulged in high spirits and alcohol in order to cope. Others chose early marriages. It really was a long, long way from Clare, Antrim, Cork and Mayo to Brisbane-town. So, it is fitting that 158 years later, we acknowledge, accept and delight in, their very spirited and substantial contributions to our homeland.