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# "A Tempestuous Voyage at Sea and a Fatiguing One by Land": Ulsterwomen in Philadelphia, 1783-1812

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# "A Tempestuous Voyage at Sea and a Fatiguing One by Land": Ulsterwomen in Philadelphia, 1783-1812

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the lives of women who came from the north of Ireland, the area traditionally known as Ulster, and settled in the city of Philadelphia between the end of the American Revolution and the beginning of the War of 1812, when economic strife and political rebellion within Ireland impelled many to emigrate. In so doing, this work aims to augment the historical record on a group of people and a period of time that have received relatively little attention, as most scholars have heretofore focused on the experiences of male Irish immigrants during either the period of North American colonization or Ireland's Great Famine of the 1840s and 1850s. The research methods utilized include quantitative analysis of data from late-1700s and early-1800s transatlantic passenger lists, newspapers and the intake records of various benevolent societies in Philadelphia. In addition, several case studies based on readings of primary sources, such as letters and journals from the period, are incorporated throughout. The findings of this research undermine the historical notion that the United States was a land of prosperity; many of the women studied put their financial security and even their lives at risk, leaving familiar people and places to engage in a dangerous transatlantic passage and arrive in a city lacking opportunities for women. Thus, the chances they took in leaving Ulster were not often rewarded with comfort, stability, or even subsistence, in Philadelphia.

## **Keywords**

Ireland, Ulster, United States, Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Immigration, Women, Eighteenth Century, Nineteenth Century, History, Daniel K Richter, Richter, Daniel K

## **Disciplines**

Social History | United States History | Women's History

**“A TEMPESTUOUS VOYAGE AT SEA AND A FATIGUING ONE BY LAND”:  
ULSTERWOMEN IN PHILADELPHIA, 1783-1812**

Sarah Riblet

AN HONORS THESIS

in

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Dr. Thomas Max Safley, Honors Seminar Director

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the lives of women who came from the north of Ireland, the area traditionally known as Ulster, and settled in the city of Philadelphia between the end of the American Revolution and the beginning of the War of 1812, when economic strife and political rebellion within Ireland impelled many to emigrate. In so doing, this work aims to augment the historical record on a group of people and a period of time that have received relatively little attention, as most scholars have heretofore focused on the experiences of male Irish immigrants during either the period of North American colonization or Ireland's Great Famine of the 1840s and 1850s. The research methods utilized include quantitative analysis of data from late-1700s and early-1800s transatlantic passenger lists, newspapers and the intake records of various benevolent societies in Philadelphia. In addition, several case studies based on readings of primary sources, such as letters and journals from the period, are incorporated throughout. The findings of this research undermine the historical notion that the United States was a land of prosperity; many of the women studied put their financial security and even their lives at risk, leaving familiar people and places to engage in a dangerous transatlantic passage and arrive in a city lacking opportunities for women. Thus, the chances they took in leaving Ulster were not often rewarded with comfort, stability, or even subsistence, in Philadelphia.

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### Map of Ireland, circa 1800



This map of Ireland, labeled with the names of towns, counties and provinces, was published in *An Atlas to Walker's Geography and Gazetteer* in Dublin in 1797.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *An Atlas to Walker's Geography and Gazetteer* (Dublin, 1797), Eighteenth Century Collections

## Introduction

On December 11, 1811, a young Irish woman named Mary Cumming wrote the letter from which the title of this work is taken. The letter, one of many Cumming would write over the next few years, was sent to her brother James, who was studying law at Trinity College in Dublin at the time. The “tempestuous” and “fatiguing” journey described by Cummings references her specific process of emigrating from her home in the north of Ireland, across the Atlantic Ocean, into the port of New York City, through other American towns and cities such as Philadelphia and Baltimore and her ultimate arrival in Petersburg, Virginia, where she and her husband intended to make their home. But Cumming’s words can just as easily be applied to the similar expeditions made by thousands of Irish women who came, as she did, around the turn of the nineteenth century. What Cumming’s description of “a tempestuous voyage at sea and a fatiguing one by land” gets at is the continually trying nature of the migration from Ireland to America. Many Irish women would find that the challenges of this journey would not be limited to the weeks- or months-long physical process of immigrating, but that the struggle to find comfort or prosperity in American cities like Philadelphia would continue, often unrewarded, for years after they had settled in their new homes.

Discussions of Irish immigration to the United States unsurprisingly center upon the mid- to late-1800s, when potato blights and the resulting Great Famine of 1845 to 1852 forced hundreds of thousands of people to flee Ireland and land on American shores.<sup>1</sup> But the phenomenon of Irish settlement in America was by no means new in

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<sup>1</sup> Hasia R. Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 2; Margaret Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridgets: Irish Immigrant Women in Domestic Service in America, 1840-1930* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 40.

1845; people from the Emerald Isle, most of them Presbyterians from the northern province known as Ulster, had been migrating to North America for over two centuries.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, events on both sides of the Atlantic made emigration very attractive to many Irish people between the end of the American Revolution in 1783 and the beginning of the War of 1812, when violence between the United States and Great Britain stemmed the tide of Irish people migrating to the United States.

First, events in Ireland threatened the Ulster way of life. In 1798, an organization of political reformers and radicals called the Society of United Irishmen led a rebellion aimed at overthrowing British rule in Ireland. This group, founded in 1791 in Belfast, modeled their would-be revolution on those in America and in France.<sup>3</sup> The 1798 fighting between English and Irish, bloody and tumultuous on both sides, extended across Ireland and troubled both republican and nationalist sympathizers. In the wake of this violence and the Irishmen's defeat, many Ulsterpeople, even those who did not necessarily take issue with English colonization, chose to depart permanently from the region's two most developed ports, Derry and Belfast. They sought new homes, which they hoped would provide them with the kind of peace, open lands and opportunities for prosperity that seemed to be quickly disappearing in their own country.

The Ulstermen and -women who came to America after 1783 emigrated with the unprecedented intention of settling in a new country. No longer did an Atlantic crossing mean leaving Ireland for another, albeit more distant, British colony. The ideological

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<sup>2</sup> William D. Griffin, *The Irish in America, 550-1972: A Chronology & Fact Book* (Dobbs Ferry, NY: Oceana Publications, 1973), 2. The 1621 arrival of a "large party of Irish settlers led by Daniel Gookin, a wealthy Quaker merchant from Cork" in Virginia marks the first permanent and intentional Irish settlement in America cited in Griffin's chronology; Lynch-Brennan, 40.

<sup>3</sup> David A. Wilson, *United Irishmen, United States: Immigrant Radicals in the Early Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 29-31.



concern of independence from the United Kingdom no doubt drew some Irish people, but the abundance of land in North America after the Treaty of Paris was likely also attractive to more pragmatic migrants. For those drawn by the prospect of owning their own land, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, which had more land area than the entire island of Ireland but was home to not even a third of Ireland's population, no doubt have seemed like as good a place as any.<sup>4</sup>

Various sources of information encouraged would-be Irish immigrants to sail for the United States. Published accounts of the America's cities and states circulated in well-read Dublin circles. Lengthy newspaper columns across Ireland described US politics and culture. Formulaic ship advertisements, which ran nearly every week in papers such as the *Belfast News-Letter* and the *Londonderry Journal*, touted "bustling" destinations such as New York, Charleston and Philadelphia with the aim of securing as many paying passengers as possible. Most convincing, perhaps, were the letters from family in America back to relatives across Ulster, which told the latter that prosperity could be found in the United States with a little hard work.

It must be pointed out, however, that potential motives for migrating, including access to land and greater political rights, did not apply equally to all those who sailed to Philadelphia from Ulster. Most women, whether they were American- or foreign-born, could not own their own land, and none could vote. What property a woman might have, perhaps through inheritance, did not remain hers should she marry and have it claimed by

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<sup>4</sup> According to US Census data, Pennsylvania's population was 602,365 in 1800. Ireland's, on the other hand, was between three and four million in the year 1790, according to modern estimates. Pennsylvania data: US Census Bureau, "Resident Population and Apportionment of the U.S. House of Representatives, Pennsylvania," accessed April 8, 2013. <http://www.census.gov/dmd/www/resapport/states/pennsylvania.pdf>. Ireland data: Kerby A. Miller, Arnold Schrier, Bruce D. Boling, and David N. Doyle, *Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan: Letters and Memoirs from Colonial and Revolutionary America, 1675-1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 4n.

her new husband under the common law system of coverture.<sup>5</sup> Given these realities, there would not necessarily be the same kinds of rewards in store for women who left all that was familiar in Ireland and tried to reestablish themselves in America as there were for their male peers. And yet these wives, mothers, and occasionally even single, independent women came to seek their fortunes in America. In the passenger lists examined from the years between 1783 and 1812, nearly one third of the immigrating parties coming to Philadelphia included a woman, whether she was travelling by herself or in an extended family group.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike their male counterparts, these women have not been the subjects of much historical scholarship. Previous studies of Irish immigration to North America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has generally focused on either the 100,000 people who left Ulster for America during the colonial years, before the start of the American Revolution in 1775, or the mid-1800s period of the Great Famine.<sup>7</sup> Patrick Griffin's *A People With No Name* is a prime example of research on colonial immigration from Ulster to America, while too many books to name have been published addressing those fleeing Ireland during the Famine. Some general histories of Irish people in North America or Philadelphia include initial chapters on the pre-Famine years, but, as is the case with Dennis Clark's *The Irish in Philadelphia*, these often do not consider the female half of the Irish-American population.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, both John Campbell's 1892 tome on the history of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick and the Hibernian Society for the

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<sup>5</sup> Karin Wulf, *Not All Wives: Women of Colonial Philadelphia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2000), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Raymond D. Adams, *An Alphabetical Index to Ulster Emigration to Philadelphia, 1803-1850* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Patrick Griffin, *The People With No Name: Ireland's Ulster Scots, America's Scots Irish, and the Creation of a British Atlantic World, 1689-1764* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Dennis Clark, *The Irish in Philadelphia: Ten Generations of Urban Experience* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1973).

Relief of Emigrants from Ireland and Maurice Bric's *Ireland, Philadelphia and the Re-invention of America, 1760-1800* historicize the revolutionary "great men" of Irish Philadelphia.<sup>9</sup> Yet, despite the fact that neither of them deal directly with women, both of these works indicate the strongly masculine culture of the Irish-American society in which female immigrants would have found themselves living. Organizations like the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick and the United Irishmen, as their respective names suggest, were male-centric organizations that glorified men, to the exclusion, and perhaps even the detriment, of women.

In recent decades, several historians have produced relevant books and articles examining the status of women in North Atlantic societies during the late 1700s and early 1800s. Mary O'Dowd's *A History of Women in Ireland, 1500-1800*, and the anthology *Women and Paid Work in Ireland, 1500-1930* are particularly useful. Compendia including *Protestant Women's Narratives of the Irish Rebellion of 1798* and *Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan* compile primary sources produced by Irish women on both sides of the Atlantic, and provide secondary descriptions of the contexts in which the original documents were written.

Although some critical details on Ulster-American women's lives can be found in the aforementioned sources, the relative dearth of specific secondary material on this topic has necessitated significant primary source research, although primary sources produced by early republican Irish-American immigrant women are relatively scarce. This should not be surprising, given both lower numbers of immigrants and lower rates of literacy among women in the early-1800s. Accordingly, this study accordingly attempts

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<sup>9</sup> John H. Campbell, *History of the Friendly Sons of Saint Patrick and of the Hibernian Society for the Relief of Emigrants from Ireland* (Philadelphia: Hibernian Society, 1892); Maurice J. Bric, *Ireland, Philadelphia and the Re-invention of America 1760-1800* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008).

to fill in some of the gaps in the historical literature by examining the lives of immigrant women from Ulster before they left Ireland, during their ocean passage and after they had arrived in Philadelphia.

Passenger lists and ships records are one way to access demographic information about these women, particularly those who could not write well enough to record their own stories. Newspaper articles and other published commentary further indicate the status of women in the north of Ireland circa 1800. Moreover, the available personal correspondence of Irish- and Ulsterwomen in early republican Philadelphia does occasionally reflect their feelings as they travelled from a familiar country to a new city. The collections of emigrant letters sent from family and friends in America to the Weir family of Stewartstown, County Tyrone, as well as the letters of one Mary Cumming, who settled in Virginia but wrote to her family of her voyage and first impressions of Philadelphia, often appear in the following pages. Primary sources reproduced in the compendia named above will also occasionally be cited where time or distance has limited my ability to visit archives in person.

In addition to these letters and others, numerous resources available in the city of Philadelphia indicate where in the social order many Ulsterwomen found themselves upon arrival in the early-nineteenth-century city. Most intriguing are the papers of various social aid organizations that assisted women in need, such as the Overseers of the Poor, later the Guardians of the Poor, or the Magdalen Society. The minutes and admissions books of these groups have preserved, albeit not without bias, the individual stories of Irish women who could not or did not write their own.<sup>10</sup> Although it is beyond

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<sup>10</sup> Clare A. Lyons, *Sex among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender & Power in the Age of*

the scope and timeframe of this study to even attempt tracking every Ulsterwoman in Philadelphia, the largest American city of the period, the records of aid organizations and the personal letters of Irish-American women suggest that many found economic prosperity and social mobility just as elusive as they had been for them in Ireland.

To demonstrate this point, the structure of this study will be both thematic and chronological, tracing Ulsterwomen's migration from Ireland across the Atlantic to Philadelphia around 1800. These women's roots in Ireland began with the first people establish a Protestant community in Ulster: Scottish people of middling wealth who emigrated to the north of Ireland in the early 1600s. In the eighteenth century, the burgeoning textile economy in the north of Ireland provided marginal employment opportunities for women while simultaneously creating increased social stratification and economic inequality. Political disquiet and several armed rebellions across Ireland which provided the final straw for many men and women already hoping to find more stable employment in the nascent United States and the city of Philadelphia, where a large Ulster Protestant community had been established during the colonial period.

The journey to America began with smaller migrations within Ulster that saw men and women relocating from the countryside to industrializing towns and cities. When these moves did not result in stable employment, many opted to sail for the United States. From there, would-be emigrants faced the difficult task of choosing to which ship's captain they would pay the immense fare and entrust their lives. The voyage itself was long, dangerous and both physically and emotionally unpleasant.

Landing at Philadelphia was undoubtedly a welcome event after the uncomfortable journey, but things did not often get easier from there for Ulsterwomen. The city was dirty, disease-prone and far more populous than any in the north of Ireland. Furthermore, social connections often determined whether or not a woman would be able to prosper. Women who were not married, or who lost their husbands to one of the fevers that plagued Philadelphia, had to work extremely hard in very strictly limited fields to earn a living. These women, in dire need of financial support, often accrued debts to brothers or male acquaintances. Irishwomen who would or could not work at manual labor and did not have social connections sometimes chose to make their own way, even by illegal means such as prostitution. Others relied upon charity for subsistence. Wherever possible, primary source evidence will be used to relay the stories of individual women who had these experiences.

Several questions surrounding methods and terms are worth addressing before carrying on in further detail. First, it is critical to point out that the modern conception of the island of Ireland, divided into Northern Ireland, a part of the United Kingdom, and the independent Republic of Ireland, had little bearing on the Irish people's consciousness in the late eighteenth century. Northern Ireland as we currently think of it was a creation of the 1922 partition of Ireland after the Irish War of Independence. If turn-of-the-nineteenth-century Irish people were to define themselves in contrast to one another, it would have been along provincial lines. The provinces of Ireland are derived from the pre-Norman territories of four Irish dynasties, and include Ulster in the northeast, Leinster in the southeast, Munster in the southwest and Connacht in the northwest. The provinces today are the same as they were in the late 1700s, and Ulster covers all the

counties of present-day Northern Ireland as well as the now-republican counties of Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan. An Irish man or woman might have been an Ulster- or a “north of Ireland” man or woman, but he or she would not have self-identified as Northern Irish. Furthermore, these identities would likely not have superseded a person’s Irish identity, similar to the way in which a contemporary person living in the United States could have been simultaneously a Pennsylvanian and an American. A woman from Belfast might have considered herself just as Irish as a woman from Cork. Some eighteenth-century Irish people also labeled themselves in ways that seem difficult when considered from the modern perspective, which reflects the violent but ultimately successful struggle for Irish independence in the early twentieth century. Mary Cumming’s writings typify this character. Cumming both pines for Ireland and sympathizes with Britain in the War of 1812. The fact was that, for many Irish people but certainly not all, Irish and English identities were not mutually exclusive while the former was a colony of the latter. For others, Britishness was a yoke to be thrown off in leaving for America. The oft-cited but presently misguided distinction between Protestant, British-identifying Ulsterpeople and Catholic, Irish-identifying people from the areas that would become the Republic of Ireland likewise does not hold up in studying the late 1700s and early 1800s; many Catholics lived in Ulster, and some relocated to the United States.<sup>11</sup> Essentially, it is wise to set aside modern generalizations about what it means to be Irish, British or American when studying Ulsterpeople in this period and consider each case individually.

Historians have also faced challenges in labeling those men and women of Scottish ancestry, or at least Protestant faith, who came to Ireland and populated its

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<sup>11</sup> Marianne Elliot, *The Catholics of Ulster: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

northernmost province. The term Scotch-Irish is largely a creation of American genealogists, not an identifier that members of this group used to reference themselves at the time.<sup>12</sup> “Ulster Scot,” “Ulster Presbyterian,” or simply “Ulsterman” or “Ulsterwoman,” since not all residents of Ulster were, in fact, Protestants, are the terms I will use, as appropriate, for the members of the group this paper addresses.

Regardless of what historians label them, the single women who emigrated from the north of Ireland to the city of Philadelphia shared an immigration experience. They fled Ireland for the promise of a country where they could support themselves and rely on a community of their peers. However, for the majority of these Ulsterwomen, resettlement turned out to be high-risk and low reward; they separated themselves from familiar homes and loved ones and found, at best, a struggle to survive rather than the comfort they had anticipated.

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<sup>12</sup> James Graham Leyburn, *The Scotch-Irish: A Social History* (Chapel Hill; University of North Carolina Press, 1962).



## **Chapter 1: Ireland**

Understanding why women from the north of Ireland immigrated to the United States requires studying what their lives were like in Ulster. The fluctuations of the textile industry in the mid-1700s played a large role in inspiring emigration from Ireland, because they briefly gave Ulsterwomen some of the first paying, outside-of-the-home jobs in their history. However, when these employment opportunities for women started to disappear, some considered resettling in countries like the United States, where various sources asserted that a good living could be made based on hard work. A series of violent rebellions across Ireland, which threatened the lives of innocent civilians, women included, helped turn thoughts of emigrating into action. Women looking to leave Ireland logically selected Philadelphia because it was the United State's largest city and already home to many people of Irish extraction.

Many of the Ulsterpeople who came to the United States at the turn of the nineteenth century descended from men and women who had migrated to Ireland just two centuries earlier, during King James I's Plantation of Ulster. Beginning in 1606, the monarch encouraged English and Scottish Protestants to colonize and subdue the island's native population.<sup>13</sup> The nobles and several London Companies that received James's land grants in turn leased properties to smallholding tenant farmers. The Scottish king's original subjects, particularly non-elite, Presbyterian, Scottish lowlanders, quickly took to this scheme; estimates suggest that at least 40,000 Scottish people settled in Ireland within thirty years of the Plantation project's start.<sup>14</sup> Even after James' death, the short move across the North Channel was a way for Scottish Presbyterians to escape increasing

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<sup>13</sup> Leyburn, xix.

<sup>14</sup> Leyburn, 99.

economic strife, land dispossession and religious persecution. These motives were no doubt heightened during the tumultuous years of the mid-1600s, which saw James' son, Charles I, beheaded in favor of rule by Oliver Cromwell's Puritan Parliament.<sup>15</sup> Upon finding the north of Ireland "hospitable," many of these settlers decided to stay.<sup>16</sup>

Once these men and women had established themselves in Ireland, they shaped a culture that blended influences from their native country as well as their adopted one. As an 1818 description of the "Society and Manners in the North of Ireland" put it, "the two nations were in some degree intermingled; - Irish vivacity enlivened Scotch gravity; - Irish generosity blended with Scotch frugality, and a third character was formed."<sup>17</sup> Nearly every historian of the Ulster Scots describes them as hardworking or pioneering.<sup>18</sup> Of course, these characteristics cannot be said to apply to each Scottish inhabitant of Ulster, but it seems appropriate to presume a certain level of industriousness in those willing to abandon the familiar in the hope of bettering themselves.

Most previous authors have assumed that Ulster Scotsmen created this new culture, yet it is impossible to deny the role of Ulster Scots *women*. They imbued the society with a particular piety that was the mixing of Irish and Scottish culture. Irish traditional beliefs, true or not, held that women were devout figures who inspired men to righteousness.<sup>19</sup> The new, Scottish Ulsterwomen brought their Presbyterian faith to bear

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<sup>15</sup> Leyburn, 99-107.

<sup>16</sup> Leyburn, xiv.

<sup>17</sup> John Gamble, *Views of the Society and Manners in the North of Ireland, in a Series of Letters Written in the Year 1818* (London; Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1819), iii.

<sup>18</sup> Leyburn, passim; George Chambers, *A Tribute to the Principles, Virtues, Habits and Public Usefulness of the Irish and Scotch Early Settlers of Pennsylvania* (Chambersburg, PA; M. A. Foltz, 1871), passim; Campbell, passim.

<sup>19</sup> Mary O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland, 1500-1800* (Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2005), 153.

on that tradition.<sup>20</sup> The most well-to-do became benefactors of the various Presbyterian churches in Ulster, which gave these women considerable power, especially in the periods following the Plantation when practicing Presbyterianism was illegal throughout British-claimed territories.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, Ulster Scots women could be moral leaders in their communities.<sup>22</sup> These positions were especially important in the early years after the migration from Scotland, when a lack of economic stratification meant that Ulster Presbyterian society did not yet have a powerful ruling class.

Socially, the initial groups of Scottish immigrants who came to Ireland had been members of what George Pierson terms a “decapitated society,” meaning that their community was composed primarily of the non-elite classes who had not already achieved prosperity in Scotland.<sup>23</sup> Wealthy, resident landowners were few and far between in the early years after migration to Ulster, as many were in fact absentee landlords still living in Britain. This early settler group also initially lacked representatives from the lower classes of British society; the poor would not have been able to afford even the short passage to Ireland. Thus the middling sort migrants who could afford to relocate to Ulster were “ambitious to improve their lot,” but it would take some time for them to gain wealth and acquire their own lands.<sup>24</sup> Thus there was relatively little range in the class identities of the first Scottish men and women who came as tenants to Ulster. They were farmers and craftspeople looking to better themselves, but their society in the north of Ireland had yet to become stratified.

The coming decades would fundamentally alter that reality. New industries and

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<sup>20</sup> O’Dowd, 169-174.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> O’Dowd, 169-174.

<sup>23</sup> Leyburn, xiv.

<sup>24</sup> Leyburn, xiii.

the opening up of markets in the New World allowed some Scotch-Irish families to rise, while others stagnated or declined.<sup>25</sup> The linen trade in particular had this effect. Ulster Scots linen producers and traders became the elites of their young society, a society that was “decapitated” no more.<sup>26</sup>

The implications of class differentiation for women in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries were no less powerful than they were for men. Most obviously, in a patriarchal society where the notion of marriage as a way to forge economic, political and social alliances lingered, a woman’s social fate was tied to that of her father or husband.<sup>27</sup> Women became elite when their fathers started weaving businesses or when they married a flax merchant. These wives and daughters were the ones who enjoyed the best of Belfast society; the elaborate and expensive dresses that they wore to various parties around Ulster’s capital town were described each week in the pages of the *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*.<sup>28</sup> In order to enjoy comfortable lives, women were tied to the men around them.

Historian Mary O’Dowd points out that a change in this trend occurred around the middle of the eighteenth century. Although she is careful not to overstate her case, O’Dowd argues that this period saw an opening up of roles for Irish women, even those without male support systems.<sup>29</sup> The economic prosperity created in the North of Ireland by industries like linen, as well as changing ideas about female education, meant that some rural women could find paid professions outside of the home.<sup>30</sup> The popular nature

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<sup>25</sup> W. H. Crawford, *The Impact of the Domestic Linen Industry in Ulster* (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 2005), 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> O’Dowd, 9-34.

<sup>28</sup> *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, January 27, 1806, Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI).

<sup>29</sup> O’Dowd, 270.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

of politics allowed women to voice their opinions by participating in demonstrations surrounding the various movements and rebellions of the late-1700s.<sup>31</sup> One example of an Ulsterwoman who seized these opportunities was Mary Ann McCracken, the sister of a prominent United Irishman. McCracken was highly literate, well educated, musically talented, the longtime Honorary Secretary of the Ladies Committee of the Belfast Charitable Society, a proponent of Irish nationalism and an entrepreneur, when she began a successful muslin business with her sister.<sup>32</sup>

Still, McCracken can be viewed as one remarkable exception to the rule, because few Ulsterwomen were able to make much of these opportunities. In rural areas, uneducated women were relied upon as a source of labor to help with farm tasks, but this employment was seasonal.<sup>33</sup> Women could also find year-round work in domestic service, but British or French women and men were preferred for higher-status positions, so that Irish women could only work in the more physically demanding and lower paying roles, as laundry and kitchen maids.<sup>34</sup> In light of these limitations to self-sufficiency, most Irish women “opted for the social security of marriage and economic and legal representation by their husbands or other male relatives.”<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, it only took a few decades for these alternate routes to stability to disappear; financial uncertainty in Ireland meant that even wealthy potential employers were more careful with their money and less likely to spend it on unskilled, female employees. Once these jobs were lost, women of the non-elite could no longer contribute economically to their families, so their

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Mary McNeill, *The Life and Times of Mary Ann McCracken, 1770-1866* (Dublin: Allen Figgis & Co, 1960), 9.

<sup>33</sup> Mary O’Dowd, “Women and Paid Work in Rural Ireland, c.1500-1800” in *Women and Paid Work in Ireland, 1500-1930*, edited by Bernadette Whelan (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 21.

<sup>34</sup> O’Dowd, “Women and Paid Work,” 16-17.

<sup>35</sup> O’Dowd, 270.

status in the home declined as well.<sup>36</sup>

Women without reliable men in their lives were the most harmed by this reversal. Their stories were told in the pages of newspapers, alongside descriptions of well-to-do ladies' party dresses. Some resorted to criminal behavior and risked being subjected to the consequences. "Margaret Flanagan, (a little girl)" was "imprisoned five days" for the crime of stealing shirts, while Margaret Cunningham was transported for seven years after stealing corduroy.<sup>37</sup> Others who took even non-criminal agency in their own lives were cut off. This was the case for Ann Fulton, whose husband took out an advertisement in the *Belfast News-Letter* of July 15, 1803 to say that, because his wife "has eloped from me without any reasonable cause, the Public are hereby cautioned not to credit her on my account, as I will pay not debt she may contract."<sup>38</sup> Fulton was a runaway wife.<sup>39</sup> As with other runaway wives of the period – of which similar newspaper clippings around the Atlantic world indicate there were many – Fulton's side of the story went unreported. What is apparent is that, having made the choice to run off, or "elope," in the terminology of the day, she lost the financial support of her husband, her primary socially accepted means of subsistence. Furthermore, even in her resource-less state, Fulton's contemporaries might have read her husband's advertisement with sympathy for the man and viewed his wife as undeserving of help. In those minds, there were some destitute women, like the "poor industrious widow, whose husband died some time ago, and left her to support six children," one of whom was killed in a Wicklow courthouse fire, were

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, April 15, 1800, PRONI; *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, August 5, 1809, PRONI; *Belfast News-Letter*, April 22, 1800, PRONI.

<sup>38</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, July 15, 1803, PRONI.

<sup>39</sup> For more on "runaway wives and self-divorce" in Philadelphia from this period, see Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*, page 14-58.

worthy of pity and assistance.<sup>40</sup> Ann Fulton was not. We may not know her specific story, but the chances are that her life was a struggle from that point forward.

Perhaps Ann Fulton's only piece of good fortune is that she remains in the historical record with her life intact. Other women, as was the case around the Atlantic world, were essentially left at the mercy of men. Courts in Monaghan, an Ulster county, tried one William Ruxton "for burglariously entering the house of Joseph Murphy, with intent to carry away Mary Murphy (a girl of only 14 years of age) his niece, with intent to marry her."<sup>41</sup> After Robert Gardiner murdered his own mother in 1806, newspapers described his crime and listed him as wanted. Men tried for the separate events of "feloniously burning the house of Catherine Rooney" and "[murdering] Elizabeth Maginnis" were acquitted, but the crimes still took place at the hands of some persons unknown and unpunished.<sup>42</sup> For Ulsterwomen around the turn of the nineteenth century, violence against them was a possibility, regardless of age and whether they lived in rural counties like Monaghan or large towns like Belfast. This sad truth was unlikely to change no matter where they relocated, but it is not difficult to imagine wanting to escape towns where this violence occurred, even if the hope of avoiding it elsewhere was only slim.

Yet the challenges of life towards the end of the 1700s in Ulster were not limited to women. Rather, the foundering economy of the region had created similar issues making ends meet across the lower echelons of society. The problem became so severe that, in July of 1800, the *Belfast News-Letter* ran an appeal stating that "the distresses of the poor have for many months been very severe."<sup>43</sup> This state of affairs was worth

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<sup>40</sup> *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, August 5, 1809, PRONI.

<sup>41</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, April 15, 1800, PRONI.

<sup>42</sup> *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, August 5, 1809, PRONI.

<sup>43</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, July 1, 1800, PRONI.

noting because the impoverished people in question were upstanding members of society, “whose utmost labours cannot procure a return adequate to their necessities” and who had already appreciated “the benevolence of the rich” with “a becoming spirit of gratitude.”<sup>44</sup> The notice concluded by asserting that “speedy” action needed to be taken “to alleviate the heavy calamity which still continues to press upon” these laboring poor.<sup>45</sup>

The recurring language referring to poor citizens as “laboring” and “grateful” indicates the seriousness with which the problem was viewed. These were not just the lazy dregs of society occupying their inevitable and self-assigned place at the bottom of the social order. Rather, worthy and hardworking people could no longer hold onto their middling status. It was the duty of the more fortunate to alleviate suffering through charity. Perhaps it even put ideas into the heads of middling sort people that Ulster might not be a secure place to stay; if good people could end up relying on the help of Subscribers of the Public Kitchen for food, it might have seemed wise to try to avoid that fate by finding a new home.

By the late-eighteenth century, these social justice issues, as well as increasing friction between the majority-Catholic people of Ireland and the Presbyterian and Anglican minorities, convinced some politically minded men that charity was not enough. They created a new political organization called the United Irishmen to face these challenges. The group was founded in Belfast in 1791, and it made calls for Catholic emancipation as well as almost complete political autonomy for Ireland itself.<sup>46</sup> Both of these objectives were relatively radical in Ireland, especially in Ulster, where

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> David A. Wilson, *United Irishmen, United States: Immigrant Radicals in the Early Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 29-31.



many Protestant people of English and Scottish descent feared giving power to Irish Catholics and losing their connection to Great Britain. The Irishmen's first disappointment came when the Irish House of Commons rejected their efforts toward Catholic emancipation, manifested in Irish House of Commons member Sir Hercules Langrishe's 1792 Bill for the Relief of the Roman Catholics.<sup>47</sup> When their attempts at peacefully overthrowing British rule in Irish Parliament were likewise rebuffed by the members of the Irish Parliament themselves, the leaders of the United Irishmen, including the most famous of their number, Theobald Wolfe Tone, organized an armed rebellion to achieve that end in the summer of 1798.<sup>48</sup> The organized fighting, bloody and tumultuous for both the Irish and English men involved, centered on Dublin but extended into the southeastern province of Ireland, known as Leinster. Battles and skirmishes also occurred further north, even extending into Ulster, and were equally brutal whether or not the episodes were planned.<sup>49</sup> Women were often witnesses to these battles between rebels and the regime, because much of the fighting took place in and around homes, where the law required families to quarter British soldiers.<sup>50</sup>

For Ulsterwomen, these experiences were no doubt traumatic and certainly put their lives at risk, although both sides in the conflict had been given explicit orders not to direct any violence at the "fair sex." But conflict also gave women the chance to play politics and wield some authority over men.<sup>51</sup> In April of 1800, more than a year after the rebellion had been put down, the *Belfast News-Letter* printed the following item from

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<sup>47</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, February 21 - 24, 1792, PRONI.

<sup>48</sup> Nancy J. Curtin, *The United Irishmen: Popular Politics in Ulster and Dublin, 1791-1798* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), passim.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> John D. Beatty, *Protestant Women's Narratives of the Irish Rebellion of 1798* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2001), 11.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

Wicklow, a county south of Dublin that was a hotbed for the revolutionary violence of 1798:

#### TRIALS AT WICKLOW

The assizes of Wicklow held before the Right Hon. Lord Chief Baron Yelverton, ended on the 2d April, at which the following persons were tried:

Martin Kelly, and Miles Byrne were indicted, for that they on the 19th day of January 1798, at Ballyellis in the county of Wicklow, did traiterously kill and murder George Butler, by giving him a stab of a pike, of which he died.

Bridget Dolan being called on as a witness on the part of the crown, in the most clear and satisfactory manner, proved, that after the battle of Ballyellis in the county of Wicklow, which happened on the 19th day of June 1798, the deceased endeavouring to make his escape, was pursued by the prisoners Kelly and Byrne, one of whom gave him (the deceased) a stab in the heart with a pike, while the other desperately cut and wounded him in the head with a sword.<sup>52</sup>

The very fact that Dolan attested to this brutal crime as a witness “on the part of the crown” may indicate her own loyalist sympathies with regards to the conflict. By testifying for or against the rebels, women could strike metaphorical blows for either side even as their male counterparts insisted they were outside of the political realm.<sup>53</sup>

Alternatively, Dolan could have been acting out of fear over the repercussions of not speaking in favor of British authority. As the account of the trial suggested, captured rebels, as well as many civilians, faced brutal treatment at the hands of an anxious British ruling class once the rebellion was put down.<sup>54</sup> The representatives of these elite men in the British Parliament passed the 1800 Acts of Union, which were aimed at curbing dissent by formally bringing Ireland under English control as part of the United Kingdom. The Acts, which went into effect on January 1, 1801, abolished the independent Irish Parliament, further repressing nationalist hope of an independent

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<sup>52</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, April 15, 1800, PRONI.

<sup>53</sup> Beatty, 9-10.

<sup>54</sup> Bric, 214.

Ireland.<sup>55</sup> Once this regime was in place, British authorities stifled another attempted revolution even more quickly in 1803.<sup>56</sup>

Given this chain of events, it is easy to see why backers of the rebellion might have sought to leave Ireland. If caught, male rebels were likely to be executed, as was the case with Mary Ann McCracken's brother, United Irishman Henry Joy McCracken.<sup>57</sup> However, it was not only United Irishmen and their supporters' physical lives that were at risk should they be brought to trial; it was also apparent that increased autonomy for Ireland and expanded legal rights were going to be denied to Catholics under the new Acts of Union. Their opinions would be stifled, particularly without an independent Irish Parliament. There was thus little hope for progress in their home country.

Scores of Ulsterpeople, even those who did not necessarily take issue with English colonization, chose to depart permanently from the region's two most developed port cities, Derry and Belfast. Many of their motivations for doing so were addressed in the 1798 account of Anne Jocelyn, the Countess Dowager of Roden. Lady Roden's home was at Tollymore Park in County Down.<sup>58</sup> While she never witnessed any battles firsthand, her writing demonstrated the anxiety that gripped many Irish people who feared that they would be trapped on the island and caught up in continued brutality regardless of which side they were on. "This day begun those dreadful scenes in and about Dublin..." Lady Roden wrote on May 23 of 1798. "[W]e appeared from that report to be between two fires, which would soon destroy us."<sup>59</sup> The fear implicit in Lady Roden's comment about "two fires" was that the battles, which had started in Dublin to

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<sup>55</sup> Wilson, 34.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>57</sup> McNeill, 186.

<sup>58</sup> Beatty, 232.

<sup>59</sup> Beatty, 232-233.

the south, would inspire further warfare in Ulster, leaving families like the Rodens stranded at their country properties in between. Even after this initial report of impending destruction proved to be false, “these threatenings continued.”<sup>60</sup> Eventually, rebel activity did commence in Ulster, so Lady Roden hastily made her way to the relative safety of Belfast, whence she planned to flee Ireland entirely to rented properties in Scotland. Families not eager to be caught up in the fighting felt that “if an exceedingly large force came upon the town, they might seize the boats, and leave us no means of escaping.”<sup>61</sup> Thus they needed to get out while they still could.

For people who shared Lady Roden’s sentiments without access to her types of resources, a temporary removal every time violence occurred was not feasible. Many men and women, who wanted to avoid falling victim to the devastation that likely seemed to be perpetual in Ireland after the 1798 and 1803 rebellions, felt they would need to resettle somewhere off the island. Accordingly, they sought new homes that could provide them with the kind of peace, open lands and opportunities for prosperity that were quickly disappearing in their own country.

In light of these economic, religious, and political struggles, as well as the sheer danger to life represented by living on a small island subject to recurring violent rebellions, many would-be immigrants looked to the wider, English-speaking world to find new homes. The United States were by no means the only option for immigration; Irish individuals and families went to Canada and England in droves as well, and some with loyalist sympathies even left the colonies-cum-states to do so after defeat in the

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<sup>60</sup> Beatty, 233.

<sup>61</sup> Beatty, 232-239.

American Revolution.<sup>62</sup> Still, America was particularly enticing to determined Ulster Scots migrants who were looking to settle in a no-longer-British country.

To fully understand why requires returning again to the North Atlantic sphere of the early-1600s Plantation of Ulster period. At the same time that James I was encouraging his English and Scottish subjects to colonize Ireland in his name, he was also pressing the most adventurous among them to set out for America. Of course, after several failed attempts, it was difficult to consider the latter mission anything less than supremely dangerous, far more so than voyages of the late-1700s. But because early modern Europeans held on to the conviction that North America contained vast riches, some apparently felt that with great risk would come great reward. The distant continent was viewed as the place to make one's fortune.<sup>63</sup>

Thus for some of those original Scots who moved to Ulster during its Plantation period, the ones who were not satisfied with what they found in Ireland, America seemed the next new frontier to test. The first documented departure from Ulster took place in 1636. The party, led by two ministers from County Down, failed to reach American shores, but, as Francis Carroll puts it, "the lure of America had been planted in Ulster."<sup>64</sup> By the beginning of the period studied in this paper, almost half a million Ulster Scots had made their ways to the territories that would become the United States.<sup>65</sup> Thus, by 1783, the U.S. was a tried-and-true option for those leaving the North of Ireland.

But many more reasons influenced Ulsterpeople to choose North America as their new home. As historian Francis Carroll observes, "the American colonies provided a

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<sup>62</sup> *Irish Women and Irish Migration*, ed. Patrick O'Sullivan (London: Leicester University Press, 1995).

<sup>63</sup> Francis M. Carroll, *The American Presence in Ulster: A Diplomatic History, 1796-1996* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2005), 3.

<sup>64</sup> Carroll, 4.

<sup>65</sup> Carroll, vii.

vision of a place where small farmers' ownership of land was possible, economic improvement seemed obtainable, and restrictions of religious denominations were almost nonexistent."<sup>66</sup> Each of these motivations had been valid for decades before American independence, but events at the end of the eighteenth century often served to heighten their appeal. Irish people interested in owning property would have known from reading their newspapers that the 1783 peace Treaty of Paris officially granted all lands south of Canada, north of Spanish Florida and east of the Mississippi River to the new United States. The same men and women could have read in 1803 that these already-expansive territories were effectively doubled by Jefferson's purchase of Louisiana from France. A bit more research, perhaps into published descriptions of the states that circulated around 1790s and 1800s Ireland, would have revealed that, as it was mapped in 1800, Pennsylvania alone had an area over 10,000 square miles greater than that of the entire island of Ireland. When potential migrants looking to own land coupled that consideration with the fact that the state had an approximate population of at least two million fewer people than Ireland, it no doubt seemed that property would be theirs for the taking.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, newspaper reports from the Pennsylvania frontier in 1786 indicated that settlers were already dispatching with the Native American inhabitants of the western half of the state, so would-be Scotch-Irish-American landowners needed only get there before too many of their peers arrived.<sup>68</sup>

As far as economic improvement was concerned, many Ulster families had long

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<sup>66</sup> Carroll, page 5.

<sup>67</sup> US Census Bureau, "Resident Population and Apportionment of the U.S. House of Representatives, Pennsylvania," accessed April 8, 2013. <http://www.census.gov/dmd/www/resapport/states/pennsylvania.pdf>. Ireland data: Kerby A. Miller, Arnold Schrier, Bruce D. Boling, and David N. Doyle, *Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan: Letters and Memoirs from Colonial and Revolutionary America, 1675-1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 4.

<sup>68</sup> *Londonderry Journal*, December 19, 1786, PRONI.

been hearing from relatives already settled in the colonies-turned-states that “the young men of Ireland who wish to be free and happy should leave it and come here as quick as possible,” because “there is no place in the world where a man meets so rich a reward for good conduct and industry as in America.”<sup>69</sup> Every ship that sailed out of an Ulster port declared that it was leaving for one or more of the many “flourishing cities in America,” of which Philadelphia was the largest until about 1820.<sup>70</sup> Many of the great and prosperous men of early American history, whose exploits were detailed in dispatches from New York and Philadelphia, had themselves come from the north of Ireland. The Quaker William Penn himself, although by no means lower class in his origin, had founded his American colony after a few years in exile in Ireland.<sup>71</sup>

Penn’s mandate of religious tolerance, and the fact that Pennsylvania upheld this ideal even after its founder’s death, confirms the validity of the third motivation for relocation from Ireland. Whereas Presbyterian Ulster Scots and other Protestant dissenters could never be entirely comfortable existing in their Anglican-controlled homeland, there had been an active, tolerated Presbyterian congregation openly operating in Philadelphia since the late seventeenth century. The ability to freely practice their religion was no doubt one of the many reasons for one observer to note that “the Ulster Presbyterians were all Americans ‘in their hearts.’”<sup>72</sup>

Especially after 1783, when the Revolutionary War ended and the United States gained official recognition as its own nation, separate from Britain, there were clear political reasons why some felt it was the right place to move. Not only did the American

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<sup>69</sup> John Dunlap to William Weir, Letter dated May 12, 1785, PRONI.

<sup>70</sup> Londonderry Journal, PRONI.

<sup>71</sup> Clark, 5-6.

<sup>72</sup> Carroll, 9.

Revolution inspire the 1798 Rebellion, but it also provided a place where Irish revolutionaries could seek refuge or be exiled.<sup>73</sup> Wolfe Tone himself was sent to Philadelphia in 1795; the city where the Continental Congress had declared independence was no doubt a fitting place for the leader to plan his own impending rebellion.<sup>74</sup> The newly liberated United States was an easy place for even the less well-known advocates of Irish independence to feel at home, presuming that they “brought with them a bitterness towards Britain... that fit in surprisingly well with the existing divisions in American politics.”<sup>75</sup> Early Republican politics, characterized by the Federalist and Republican parties, made room for new Americans who still harbored lingering attachments and resentments to Britain, respectively.

Regardless of which way Ulster-Americans leaned, the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights included liberties, such as protection from unlawful search and seizure, as well as freedom of religion, speech and assembly, that would have been particularly appealing not only to anti-British radicals but also to a majority of Presbyterian Ulstermen and women, marked as dissenters in their homeland where only Anglicans could be assured of such liberties. By 1790, the US government had also established laws, which provided for the naturalization of immigrants, including clear guidelines and a residency requirement of only two years (extended to five years by the Naturalization Act of 1795).<sup>76</sup> Any Irish immigrant “man of a good moral character” could accordingly feel secure in his access these rights after settling in one place in the United States for a few

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<sup>73</sup> Carroll, 15.

<sup>74</sup> Bric, 220.

<sup>75</sup> Carroll, 19.

<sup>76</sup> “United States Congress, ‘An act to establish an uniform Rule of Naturalization’ (March 26, 1790)” and “United States Congress, ‘An act to establish an uniform rule of Naturalization; and to repeal the act heretofore passed on that subject’ (January 29, 1795),” Indian University, accessed April 19, 2013. <http://www.indiana.edu/~kdhist/H105-documents-web/week08/naturalization1790.html>.



years.<sup>77</sup> The Pennsylvania Constitution of 1790 likewise afforded many freedoms not available to Presbyterians in Anglican-controlled Ireland; Pennsylvanians had access to public education, universal suffrage for male taxpayers, and long-established freedom of religion.<sup>78</sup> And even before they chose to emigrate, many inhabitants of the north of Ireland, both women and men, were aware of these differences.

The fact of the matter was that America was not *terra incognita* for the inhabitants of the North of Ireland. Many men and women in Ulster who elected to immigrate to Philadelphia knew something about where they were going from the newspapers and family letters they read as well as the stream of ideas that flowed both ways across the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>79</sup> In January of 1786, the inhabitants of Londonderry read about the election of Benjamin Franklin as the President of the Pennsylvania Legislature, fifteen years after the same man had paid a visit to Ireland.<sup>80</sup> The fact that the *Londonderry Journal* printed several columns of text describing the proceedings of the Pennsylvania Assembly during that election season demonstrated the interest of its readership in knowing and understanding contemporary events in the United States. Descriptions of the colonies and states, written by prominent Americans such as Benjamin Rush also circulated around Ulster society. Alongside depictions of the vast natural resources of the country, visitors and recent migrants described its cities, and Philadelphia was “thought to be the handsomest.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> “Constitution of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania – 1790,” Duquesne University, accessed April 8, 2012. <http://www.duq.edu/academics/schools/law/pa-constitution/texts-of-the-constitution/1790>.

<sup>79</sup> David A. Wilson and Mark G. Spencer, eds, *Ulster Presbyterians in the Atlantic World: Religion, Politics and Identity*, (Dublin: Four Courts, 2006), 10.

<sup>80</sup> *Londonderry Journal*, January 1786, PRONI.

<sup>81</sup> Mary Cumming to Margaret Cumming, letter dated November 25, 1811, in Mary Cumming, *Letters Home to Lisburn from America 1811-1815*, ed. Jimmy Irvine (Coleraine, Northern Ireland: Impact-Amergin, 1982).

Yet perhaps the chief reason why so many Ulster migrants selected the United States, and Pennsylvania and Philadelphia in particular, prior to the War of 1812, was much more straightforward than economic, political or religious self-interest. Instead the draw may simply have been the network of their friends, relatives and countrymen and women that had been developing in those places for nearly two hundred years. Connections between Ulsterpeople in America allowed not only for basic, daily benefits like the rapid dissemination of news from the other side of the Atlantic, but also, ideally, for the profound advantage of having a tacitly agreed-upon safety net, much like the one provided by the Public Kitchens in Belfast.<sup>82</sup> As the seventeenth century turned into the eighteenth, then the nineteenth, and more and more people came from Ulster to the former colonies, these webs grew and stretched further across the eastern half of the continent.

Still, historian James Graham Leyburn, after examining these trends, asserts that “later comers, however, did not seek out Scotch-Irish communities in their country of adoption; they went instead to whatever places economic opportunity offered the best chance for making a home.”<sup>83</sup> I question this notion. Ulstermen and their wives could perhaps afford to settle unworried about the lack of countrymen nearby, at least so long as they had a trade to support themselves. But the scores of Ulsterwomen who made their way to North America, whether they were single or with their children, likely did not have the luxury of disregarding ready-made communities that could be relied upon to support them in times of crisis. This lesson no doubt traced its origins to the decline in economic independence that women had experienced in Ireland during the mid- to late-

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<sup>82</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, July 1, 1800, PRONI.

<sup>83</sup> Leyburn, 317.

1700s.<sup>84</sup> Ulsterwomen may thus have been drawn to Philadelphia because the city had been home, since 1771, to the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick and the related Hibernian Society for the Relief of Emigrants from Ireland, a benevolent association that aimed to assist Irish-Americans who found themselves in dire economic straights in their new country.<sup>85</sup> These women, mostly from non-elite rural backgrounds, had been fooled before by the myth of prosperity in their home country; they weren't about to put themselves at risk of re-improvement and experiencing the same disappointments in a place without institutions to assist them. Thus Philadelphia was their choice.

In many ways, the hardest part was still to come. Once Ulster Scots had made the decision to leave the land that had been home to them for centuries, getting to America was easier said than done. The journey to Philadelphia took immigrants from rural homes to bustling Irish port cities and onto ships to cross the Atlantic Ocean, and each step in the process was fraught with varying degrees of danger and the constant risk of complications and delays.

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<sup>84</sup> O'Dowd, 270-271.

<sup>85</sup> Campbell, *passim*.

## **Chapter Two: The Atlantic**

Once Ulster men and women had made the challenging decision to depart for the United States, leaving behind extended families and a familiar land, they were faced with a harrowing transatlantic voyage.<sup>86</sup> Historians of Irish migration rarely study this journey, despite an abundance of primary sources, including journals, letters and newspaper accounts, that relate travels from rural homes to busy ports, feelings of safety under the watchful eyes of good captains and mortal danger at the hands of bad ones, as well as the mesmerizing beauty of the sea and the sheer terror of being at its mercy, cut off from familiar land and people. The records of Irish men and women suggest that the Atlantic crossing itself was not merely a forgettable interlude between old home and new nation, but a formidable challenge to face in the process of relocation.

The first stages of the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century journey from Ulster to America began with more modest migrations across Ireland. For those leaving the northern Irish countryside, getting to the United States involved first setting off for an unfamiliar port city in their own land. The practice of recording passengers' home addresses, taken up voluntarily by only a few captains of transatlantic voyages in the period, provides some insight into where Ulster emigrants came from. Of the 445 recorded "families" who travelled to Philadelphia between 1800 and 1811, ranging from single young men to relatively elderly parents migrating with several of their grown children and grandchildren, most traced their origins to rural townlands.<sup>87</sup> These people made their way on foot or by horse and cart to the ports from which their ships for America would sail.

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<sup>86</sup> Leyburn, xix.

<sup>87</sup> Adams, *passim*.

There was also a large minority of the migrant population who came not from the most rural parts of their home country but who had settled prior to leaving Ireland in larger towns around Ulster. Relatively few who were leaving listed the largest cities as their homes. Rather, burgeoning inland towns contributed numbers of passengers disproportionate to their relative size. Omagh, in County Tyrone, was the home of 16 passengers, while Strabane, in the same county, had 13 representatives on the rolls for Philadelphia. 12 people left Enniskillen in County Fermanagh in as many years. By comparison, only 15 passengers left homes in Londonderry, despite the fact that most ships whose passengers were catalogued sailed from that bustling port.<sup>88</sup>

Perhaps the people who came from these inland towns had moved to them in preparation for their emigration. More likely, Ulster's growing landowning class and industrializing textile industries had influenced them to relocate from more rural homes to places like Omagh, Strabane and Enniskillen.<sup>89</sup> In Omagh particularly, the population increased "not only on account of the linen and other manufactures there carried on, but also by reason of the people here, as almost everywhere, being driven from their farms into towns by monopolizing farmers."<sup>90</sup> Most Ulsterpeople likely did not realize when they left the countryside that employment opportunities in these larger towns would not support their numbers. Fewer might have suspected that the resulting unemployment would drive them to emigrate to the United States. Regardless, the initial shift from rural homesteads to town and city life may have ended up easing the transition from the north of Ireland to American cities like Philadelphia.

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Crawford, *passim*.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 83.

The increasing frequency of migration from urban areas in one country to urban areas in another was not unique to Irish immigrants, nor was it the only trend emerging in transatlantic migration during the turn of the eighteenth century. Options for taking passage to the United States were also expanding. In previous decades, would-be colonists travelled as individuals or in small family groups by reserving berths on merchants' ships otherwise intended only to carry cargo. As the passenger lists for the Port of Philadelphia illustrate, this mode of transport had not died out in the time period studied here. Several ships still came into Philadelphia each year filled with Irish linen or wool but also listing one or two men, and occasionally women, as cabin passengers with trunks and bedding.<sup>91</sup>

Even more new Irish-Americans annually were arriving on ships seemingly intended for the sole purpose of carrying immigrants. Ships like the *Edward* or the *Sally*, each capable of carrying 400 tons or more, ferried dozens of passengers in accommodations of varying comfort across the Atlantic.<sup>92</sup> And ferrying it was; many of these ships returned with the same captain to repeat their journey to and from Ulster ports each year. For the owners of these ships, encouraging emigration had become a business, as the profits previously made from transporting consumer goods were replaced by the regular fares paid by a steady stream of passengers. For the emigrating customers themselves, the cost of a voyage, listed on the manifest of the *Edward* in May of 1805 as 15 guineas per person for a cabin berth, ten guineas for one berth in steerage and eight guineas a piece for a place between decks, could equal a small fortune.<sup>93</sup> At these rates, a

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<sup>91</sup> "Passenger Lists to Philadelphia, 1800-1812," microfilm collection, National Archives at Philadelphia.

<sup>92</sup> British Library, "Passenger Lists to North America," Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI).

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

single woman who had been employed in Ireland as a laundry maid, as some passengers were listed, would need to spend more than a year's wages, estimated at 5-6 guineas in 1780, to reach Philadelphia by herself and staying in the cheapest accommodations on board.<sup>94</sup> In order to keep her family intact on the journey to the United States, a widow with three children would have to sacrifice a decade's worth of her spinner's wages, approximately three pounds per year.<sup>95</sup> When emigrants had to choose which captain they would pay such a large and dear sum for their passage, the decision was a serious one. The choice was further complicated by the sheer abundance of options.

The number of ships advertised as leaving from Londonderry for Philadelphia in the former city's *Journal* in the years 1783 to 1812 ranged from a high of 14 in 1792 to a low of two in 1804, with no records available for 1789, 1797, 1810 and 1811. The average number of advertised departing ships in that period was a little over seven annually.<sup>96</sup> Given that these figures apply to only those ships publicized in one port, it is not unreasonable to assume that would-be migrants had many more possibilities for gaining passage to America.

For some Ulster people needing to find better living conditions in America generally, and in Philadelphia particularly, a speedy departure seems to have been more valuable than direct travel to any one intended destination. Samuel Brown, a merchant who had settled in Philadelphia after leaving his extended family in Belfast, wrote to his brother David on Christmas Day, 1815 of David's son William's "wish to come to this

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<sup>94</sup> O'Dowd, "Women and Paid Work," 17.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, 23. One guinea was worth slightly more than a pound.

<sup>96</sup> *Londonderry Journal*, microfilm collection, PRONI.

country.”<sup>97</sup> In William’s case, the opportunity to find prosperity working in partnership with another uncle, James, compelled him to consider migration. Samuel’s counsel to William, which read “if he comes let him come in the first ship either for New York, Baltimore or this city,” indicated the importance of fleeing depressed conditions in Ireland as soon as possible over the convenience of sailing directly to his intended city.<sup>98</sup> A year later, when economic conditions in America proved little better than those in Belfast and William’s “father so much depended on him in the business,” Samuel praised his nephew’s decision to remain in Ireland.<sup>99</sup> Still, his initial insistence that William take “the first ship” attests to some Ulstermen’s desire to find their fortunes in a new country as quickly as possible.

Other Ulstermen and women, those with the luxury of time to select ships expressly destined for Philadelphia, nonetheless faced a difficult decision. After reading the testimony of several late-1700s documents, it does not seem an exaggeration to state that choosing a vessel could be tantamount to opting between life and death. The voyage across the Atlantic was not one to be taken lightly, and those leaving Ireland likely spent some time selecting which of the several ships departing from Belfast, Londonderry, Newry and other Ulster ports each summer would carry them.<sup>100</sup>

The most fortunate of migrants had experienced friends and relatives already settled in the United States to whom they could turn for advice. Samuel Brown was far from the only Ulster-American to send travel instructions to family members still in Ireland. His brother James suggested in a letter written home that, if his sister was

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<sup>97</sup> Samuel Brown to David Brown, letter dated December 25, 1815, from Emigrant Letters Collection, 1793-1838. D3688/F. PRONI. Belfast, Northern Ireland.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> Samuel Brown to David Brown, letter dated December 30, 1816, PRONI.

<sup>100</sup> *Londonderry Journal*, microfilm collection, PRONI.



determined to come to the United States, she should prepare herself immediately to travel with a Captain Coan, who was “a very intimate friend of [James’]” from his new home in Philadelphia.<sup>101</sup> Samuel similarly endorsed one Captain Campbell, saying that he “commands one of the finest ships from this port and is a credit to his country.... His family and ours has been intimate this twelve years and like our family he has no pride or ostentation about him and any attention you may show him will be to me a favour.”<sup>102</sup> Such personal recommendations likely went a long way, because a captain’s reputation could be as much of a draw to potential passengers as the condition of his vessel.

If an Ulsterman or woman was the first in his or her acquaintance to undertake the journey to America, he or she wasn’t necessarily without resources for selecting a ship in which to travel. Conditions were most favorable for sailing across the Atlantic during the spring and summer months, and, from as early as February to as late as October, the front pages of port city newspapers across the North of Ireland were filled with advertisements for ships sailing for American ports. In *Gordon’s Newry Chronicle*, the *Londonderry Journal*, the *Belfast News-Letter* and the *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, these advertisements took on a standard form; a few weeks before a ship’s scheduled departure, its owners would announce which “bustling city in America” was its destination, extoll the virtues of its captain, and proclaim the sumptuousness of its accommodations.<sup>103</sup> The most elaborate advertisements included former passengers’ signed testimonies to the veracity of owner’s claims. Over 80 passengers who had taken their passage to Philadelphia on board the brig *Rachel* in the summer 1792 published a piece in *Gordon’s*

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<sup>101</sup> James Brown to David Brown, letter dated December 30, 1818, PRONI

<sup>102</sup> Samuel Brown to David Brown, letter dated December 25, 1815, PRONI.

<sup>103</sup> *Gordon’s Newry Chronicle*, *Londonderry Journal*, *Belfast News-Letter* and *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, print and microfilm collection, PRONI.

*Newry Chronicle* ostensibly addressed to the ship's captain, Thomas Suter. In this short column, which ran directly under an advertisement for the *Rachel*'s next voyage, the passengers, all of whom listed were male, offered "sincere and hearty thanks for [Suter's] kind and sincere treatment during our passage, as also for having laid in a sufficient quantity of water and provisions of the best quality, and having afforded such as required it medicine of all sorts."<sup>104</sup> The ship-owning publishers of these and other reports like it no doubt printed them in attempts to attract more passengers.

But the extent to which these testimonials were persuasive should not be overstated. They were hardly unique; a positive endorsement accompanied almost every ship advertisement printed in the pages of these newspapers. Occasionally, as was the case in a September 1792 issue of *Gordon's Newry Chronicle*, competing ship owners even tried to undercut each others' printed endorsements. In that instance, the owners of the *Joseph* published a long description stating that their ship was a "much larger vessel, and of course will be more comfortable for the passengers than the Brig *Friendship*," which was being advertised in the adjacent column.<sup>105</sup> These men also made a point to note that the captain of their ship, a man named William Forrest, had sailed with passengers in the *Friendship* the previous year.<sup>106</sup> But the owners of the *Friendship* also came out swinging, arguing in their advertisement that the smaller size of their ship allowed it to complete its transatlantic journey faster.<sup>107</sup> Reading exchanges such as these no doubt left readers conflicted about their travel options. Furthermore, the fact that

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<sup>104</sup> *Gordon's Newry Chronicle*, issue dated Monday September 17<sup>th</sup> to Thursday September 20<sup>th</sup>, 1792, microfilm collection, PRONI.

<sup>105</sup> *Gordon's Newry Chronicle*, issue dated Thursday April 18 to Monday April 22, 1793, microfilm collection, PRONI.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

owners needed to publish assurances that “every individual arrived in perfect health and spirits..., having a great sufficiency of provisions during the voyage,” demonstrated a need to quell anxiety among emigrants that they would not be well looked after on board *all* ships.<sup>108</sup> Men and women leaving Ireland could not take a safe voyage for granted. Rather, they had to use what little information was at their disposal to make educated choices about which owners, ships and captains they could trust with their lives.

Selecting the wrong ship with the wrong captain could have disastrous consequences. Travellers’ concerns were valid, because, “as emigration from Ireland to the United States of America [had] become so frequent..., some complaints [had been made] against captains who [had] carried passengers from several parts of Ireland.”<sup>109</sup> Some captains believed themselves to be above the law; upon hearing that another ship’s master had tricked a would-be emigrant, one such captain vowed to smuggle that passenger on board his ship despite the fact that “the quota of passengers which the law allowed were on board.”<sup>110</sup> Though this gesture may have seemed noble on the part of the captain, the ““damned laws”” establishing quotas to which he and his peers were bound existed for a reason.<sup>111</sup> Ideally, they protected passengers by limiting ship’s weight.

When these “damned laws” were not adhered to, and likely even in some cases where they were, problems endangering lives of passengers could arise before ships had even reached the Atlantic. This was the case with the ship *Rachel* in 1799. As the *Londonderry Journal* reported, the ship and her Captain, Edward Dodsworth, had “met

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<sup>108</sup> *Gordon’s Newry Chronicle*, issue dated Monday September 17<sup>th</sup> to Thursday September 20<sup>th</sup>, 1792, microfilm collection, PRONI.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Hugh Campbell, "The Journal of Hugh Campbell," ed. George R. Brooks, *The Bulletin*, Missouri Historical Society, volume 23.3 (April 1967), 247.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

with an accident in this river.”<sup>112</sup> Understandably, this event “intimidated several of the passengers going out in said vessel,” who demanded that “her bottom be examined and repaired.”<sup>113</sup> The ship’s owner, Londonderry merchant James Wilson, agreed that his ship should “be thoroughly overhauled and repaired with all possible expedition” in order that it “be completely repaired and fit to proceed to sea on or before the 20th of September.”<sup>114</sup> It is not difficult to imagine that the *Rachel*’s passengers would have been left shaken by these experiences; perhaps they would have even been unwilling to continue if not for the resulting loss of their fare money.<sup>115</sup> The possibility that this may even have been the same ship whose passengers had written such a glowing review in the *Newry Chronicle* years before helps highlight the wear put on ships by repeated voyages, the importance of having a good captain and the sheer unpredictability of the sea journey itself.

Still, the unlucky travelers on the *Rachel* were in some small sense fortunate in that their troubles occurred in circumstances where they still had the ability to demand that something be done about them. Sometimes nothing could be done to ensure the survival of Ulster immigrants who faced unfavorable weather or disease while at sea and had sailed without a competent captain. Margaret Duncan, an Ulsterwoman who settled in Philadelphia prior to the American Revolution, wrote letters to her remaining family in Stewartstown, County Tyrone describing two such sad cases. In one instance with which Duncan was intimately familiar, her son David was on a voyage during which “the [fever] soon seized one of them” and, despite the fact that “David [made] a slave of

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<sup>112</sup> *Londonderry Journal*, issue dated October 1, 1799, microfilm collection, PRONI.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> British Library, “Passenger Lists to North America,” PRONI.

himself to attend them and give them plenty of water and everything else, every person of them agrees too that then he was seized himself and narrowly got off with his life..., seven in all died.”<sup>116</sup> The close quarters of a ship and the inability to escape or seek medical treatment elsewhere made the transatlantic voyage a brush with death, not only in David Duncan’s experience but also in that of many others, some of whom would never arrive in Philadelphia.

A letter of Duncan’s dated a year later explained another event that made the Ulster-American community “lament [for] the great danger that is in the way of our countrymen in comeing here, [a] great part of it oweing to bad captains.”<sup>117</sup> In this instance, “a ship was wrecked and several hundreds lost” on unspecified “capes,” presumably somewhere near the perilous mouth of the Delaware Bay, a location which otherwise may have happily marked the approaching end of travel for passengers on the route from Ireland to Philadelphia.<sup>118</sup> Here, even more than in the previously detailed case of illness on board, “the captain was greatly blamed.”<sup>119</sup> Perhaps the captain in question was at fault for not consulting with one of the Delaware’s pilots, men whose expertise was always required to assist ships coming into the city.<sup>120</sup> The accident addressed in Duncan’s letter would not have been the first time a foolhardy captain went without a pilot’s assistance and wrecked his vessel on the Bay’s numerous, and difficult-to-navigate, shallows. Still, Duncan asserted that justice was never served because “the few that was saved did not come forward to make proper prooffe against [their

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<sup>116</sup> Margaret Duncan to William Weir, letter dated December 1774, PRONI.

<sup>117</sup> Margaret Duncan to William Weir, letter dated December 1775, PRONI.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Simon Finger, “A Flag of Defyance at the Masthead”: The Delaware River Pilots and the Sinews of Philadelphia’s Atlantic World in the Eighteenth Century,” in *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, volume 8, number 2 (Spring 2010), 387.

captain].”<sup>121</sup> Thus it became clear that the stakes for passengers were very high in selecting their captain, as these men sometimes had less to lose than their human cargo.

Even for those passengers whose lives were not put at risk by their journey, the voyage could be far from pleasant. To understand the realities of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century transatlantic crossing, we may turn to two very different contemporary accounts, those of Hugh Campbell and Mary Cumming. Campbell was born on January 1, 1797 to a relatively well-to-do family in Country Tyrone.<sup>122</sup> After immigrating to the United States in 1818, Campbell worked in the mercantile trade around the country before ultimately settling in Philadelphia around 1843.<sup>123</sup> His extremely detailed “Journal” of the transatlantic crossing was written in North Carolina in 1819 and sent back to relatives in Ulster.<sup>124</sup> Cumming also came from a reasonably prosperous background; her father was a Presbyterian minister in Lisburn, a town southwest of Belfast, straddling Counties Antrim and Down.<sup>125</sup> Cumming married a cotton merchant named William, whose business necessitated their temporary immigration to the United States in 1811.<sup>126</sup> Cumming described the trip and her years in America in numerous letters to her sister Margaret in Lisburn, whom Mary was never able to see again after her arrival in this country.<sup>127</sup> Campbell and Cumming were both cabin passengers, but their descriptions can nevertheless give us insight into some experiences shared, regardless of class, by all those who undertook the journey to America.

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Campbell, 241.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 242.

<sup>125</sup> Jimmy Irvine, “Introduction” in Mary Cumming, *Letters Home to Lisburn from America 1811-1815* (Coleraine, Northern Ireland: Impact-Amergin, 1982).

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

The first universal challenge of the voyage was the emotional upheaval of leaving Ireland. Cumming wrote of her depressed spirits as her ship sailed out of Warrenpoint, County Down, and she watched her family “walking along the shore till I could see [their] figures no more.”<sup>128</sup> This experience of loss at leaving one’s home was undoubtedly a deeply painful personal phenomenon for many passengers, although some took it as an opportunity to build camaraderie below decks. As Campbell observed while waiting to depart Londonderry, “the greater number of our steerage passengers (in order to drive away the sorrow which a separation from their native land produced) entered into the greatest extravagance in dancing, drinking, singing etc,” even as “some of the more sober and aged, gave themselves up to the deepest melancholy.”<sup>129</sup>

Once the voyage was truly underway, some passengers, most of whom had presumably never been at sea before, were overwhelmed by the multitude of discomforts faced on an ocean expedition. Initially, even as around her “the females were all sick, some of them crying,” Cumming did not feel the effects of seasickness.<sup>130</sup> Once the ship set out from one final land stop in Liverpool, however, she recounted, “I may say I never had one day’s good health since that time.... I was confined to my bed for three weeks – the longest ones I have ever spent. The sickness was most dreadful.”<sup>131</sup>

The self-proclaimed “adventurer” Campbell rarely admitted to feeling personally ill, and then only as a result of the unvaried diet, but he did remark on the ill-health of his fellow passengers, pointing out some of the other less-than-commodious circumstances

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid, letter dated August 30th, 1811.

<sup>129</sup> Campbell, 243.

<sup>130</sup> Cumming, letter dated August 30th, 1811.

<sup>131</sup> Cumming, letter dated approximately November 8th, 1811.

on board.<sup>132</sup> He repeatedly expressed his good fortune in having a cabin berth, and his sympathy for steerage passengers whose journeys were even less comfortable than his own.<sup>133</sup> Their accommodation was cramped, which only served to make steerage passengers “compare their many privations and dangers with the security and ease they left behind. It makes them conscious of being cast loose from the secure anchorage of settled life and cast adrift upon a doubtful world.”<sup>134</sup> The food was passable, but Campbell asserted that he could not have existed on it for any longer than the duration of the crossing.<sup>135</sup> Perhaps his most miserable experience was that of a storm in which “the sea rose into tremendous waves and the vessel rolled in the most awful manner through them” so that “during the night every moveable in the Ship was put in motion. The kegs full of water for immediate use and the buckets full of all kinds of *filth* were hurled in the greatest confusion through the steerage to the great offence of our smelling organs.”<sup>136</sup> Indeed, during the commotion, “the more timid passengers thought... That [they] were on the brink of Eternity.”<sup>137</sup>

But passengers’ feeling of being cut off for such a long duration from the events playing out on land so far away from them may have been equally miserable. The increasing desire to land on *terra firma* and hear news of family and friends made every day on the ship that much more unbearable. During the weeks at sea, Ulstermen and women longed for information on the families they had left behind. The only source of such information would have been other ships that passed sporadically. Even then, the

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<sup>132</sup> Campbell, page 251.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Campbell, 250.

<sup>135</sup> Campbell, 251.

<sup>136</sup> Campbell, 250.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.



majority of these vessels would have been travelling the opposite direction, from North America to Europe. Occasionally, smaller and faster ships would pass larger ones headed for the United States. This experience was no doubt demoralizing for the passengers languishing on the slower ship, even if it meant that they might be able to hear of goings-on in Ulster. Along these lines, Campbell lamented “our vessel from her form and age proved to be a very slow sailer and discouraged us considerably.”<sup>138</sup>

In the years approaching the War of 1812, meeting another ship, particularly one of British origin, may not have been a welcome sight. Rather, seeing an English ship would have struck fear into the hearts of emigrating Ulstermen, who were at risk of impressment so long as they continued to be subjects of the English crown.<sup>139</sup> Wrongful impressment was also a concern for American citizens. The information vacuum on board ship may have also meant that some who left Ulster in the spring of 1812 arrived in Philadelphia weeks later to find themselves resident in a nation at war with their homeland.<sup>140</sup> The sheer joy of emerging from the ship would have been tempered with sadness, fear and confusion, especially if these passengers had received assurances from relatives in the United States “that we will not have war, ” as Mary Cumming wrote to her sister less than two months before the declaration of hostilities on June 18, 1812.<sup>141</sup> If Irish-Americans felt any lingering attachment to Britain, as Cumming herself did, the war and resulting limits to transatlantic correspondence would only serve to remove them further from that which they held dear.

Still, some aspects of the journey served to redeem it slightly. Campbell seemed

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<sup>138</sup> Campbell, 247.

<sup>139</sup> “Passenger Lists to Philadelphia, 1800-1812,” microfilm collection, National Archives at Philadelphia.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Cumming, letter dated August 30th, 1811.

to delight in the resourcefulness he saw in the passengers and crew around him. He appreciated the crew for being “numerous and well accustomed to a seafaring life..., which [was] a thing of no little importance to emigrants unacquainted with sailing.”<sup>142</sup> He wrote in admiration of the fact that his peers, inexperienced at sea as they may have been, were not helpless when left to their own devices. Rather, they made themselves “comfortable during our voyage.”<sup>143</sup> Displaying an impressive sense of organization, in addition to a commitment to the gender-segregated social order of the period,

a *commodore* or *president* was elected – berths were laid out for passengers and the males were very properly separated from females. We engaged a cook to keep on a fire and attend the sickly and aged passengers.... Each passenger agreed to pay him one shilling for his trouble. The ship was regularly washed out by the passengers once a week and swept every day to preserve cleanliness.<sup>144</sup>

Life carried on for these passengers despite the fact that they were leaving behind all the physical markers of the world they had inhabited.

Some, including Cumming, also enjoyed finding beauty in the unfamiliar seascapes around their ships. She “was very much delighted looking at the sun setting, which is a glorious object at sea..., for a great length of way waves appeared ringed with burnished gold, the sky was so clear and the air so pure and reviving.”<sup>145</sup> Furthermore, the hardships of the voyage made the arrival that much more joyous. Upon hearing that land had been sighted, Campbell “[questioned] whether Columbus felt a more delicious throng of sensations when he first discovered the New World than we did at this moment.”<sup>146</sup> For the weary voyager and his peers, “the very name of America carried a

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<sup>142</sup> Campbell, 249.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Cumming, letter dated 8th November 1811.

<sup>146</sup> Campbell, 256.

volume of associations in themselves indescribable.”<sup>147</sup>

When Campbell and Cummings were able to take in America with their own eyes, the vision was similarly beyond description. Reflecting upon the moment in which she caught her first glimpse of New York, Cummings wrote to Margaret, “in my life I never was so enchanted with the view of the shore and the harbour coming up. I can give you no idea of the beauty of the American woods at this season of the year.”<sup>148</sup> The excitement of soon disembarking on this new and alluring continent prevented Campbell and his fellows from sleeping much on the night of September 5, 1818: the last night they spent anchored at sea near Sandy Hook, New Jersey.<sup>149</sup> Upon arrival, Cummings declared that “it would be impossible almost to conceive the delight I felt when again I set my foot on land, I never in all my life felt so truly grateful to Providence.”<sup>150</sup> God had preserved them on their quest for the New World.

Those Ulster Scots who were bound for Philadelphia no doubt experienced much the same emotions on sailing up the Delaware, where sight “of the long line of fine ships as you approach the city [was] very grand indeed” and “the view of the Pennsylvanian shore on one side and Jersey on the other was beautiful beyond description.”<sup>151</sup> The renowned city spread out before them, a metropolis on a scale for which no northern Irish town had prepared them.<sup>152</sup> For some, the exhilaration of embarking on a new life in a

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Cumming, letter dated 8th November 1811.

<sup>149</sup> Campbell, 256.

<sup>150</sup> Cumming, letter dated November 8<sup>th</sup>, 1811.

<sup>151</sup> Cumming, letter dated November 25<sup>th</sup>, 1811.

<sup>152</sup> By 1800, the city of Philadelphia, including the Northern Liberties and Southwark, was home to nearly 70,000 people, over three times greater than the number of inhabitants in Belfast, Ulster’s largest city, and seven times the population of Londonderry/Derry, the most popular port of embarkation for Northern Irish emigrants to North America. Philadelphia statistics from Billy G. Smith, “A Flaneur in Philly: Class, Gender, Race & All that Jazz,” Presented to the McNeil Center For Early American Studies Seminar Series, November 8, 2013, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 6; Belfast and

new nation mixed with fears that they would shortly be setting foot “on a land of strangers... perhaps destitute of both friends and money.”<sup>153</sup> The months and years ahead would reveal whether Philadelphia was to be the better home that they sought, or merely one more stop on a long and difficult voyage, another frontier for the centuries-old Ulster Scot struggle to subsist.

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Londonderry/Derry statistics from Tim Lambert, “A Brief History of Belfast,” <http://www.localhistories.org/belfast.html> and Tim Lambert, “A Brief History of Derry,” <http://www.localhistories.org/derry.html>.

<sup>153</sup> Campbell, 257.

### **Chapter Three: Philadelphia**

From the moment single Irish women stepped off the ships that had carried them to Philadelphia, they were likely to be overwhelmed by what confronted them. This city was a far cry from the cities in Ulster, and the challenge to take it all in would be the first of many they faced in building a life there. The women who were most able to support themselves in the early republican city were those with husbands to support them. Unmarried women, or those who quickly lost their husbands to one of the many diseases that decimated the population, had to work extremely hard at often physically demanding tasks that did little to advance their reputation. Those who could or would not do so sometimes opted to support themselves by abandoning social mores and becoming prostitutes. The places of last resort were charitable institutions like the Philadelphia almshouse, where a disproportionate number of Irish-American women eventually found themselves, living out a cycle of destitution that bore little resemblance to the good fortune they had hoped to find in the United States.

By 1800, the city of Philadelphia, including the Northern Liberties and Southwark, was home to nearly 70,000 people, which was, at the time, over three times the number of inhabitants in Belfast, Ulster's largest city, and seven times the population of Londonderry/Derry, the most popular port of embarkation for Northern Irish emigrants to North America.<sup>154</sup> The Philadelphia dockyard was one of the most bustling areas in the United States' largest city, and the immigrants' relief at escaping the close confines of their vessels might have been short-lived when faced with the unprecedented crush of sailors, stevedores and merchants that greeted them as they clambered down the

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<sup>154</sup> Smith, 6; Lambert, "A Brief History of Belfast"; Lambert, "A Brief History of Derry."

gangplank.<sup>155</sup> Even the most well-written article in the *Belfast News-Letter* could not convey to readers the multitude of people in this metropolis as they tried to imagine themselves in the foreign city.

If they weren't entirely overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of men and women living around them, the physical layout of the city would have been a source of amazement to people coming from Ulster. Few cities in early modern Europe were constructed on a grid, but, in 1682, William Penn had mandated just such an arrangement for his nascent city. Over a century later, Philadelphians had deviated significantly from the "greene countrie towne" with all its streets at right angles and a garden for every home that their founder had envisioned, but what they had created was still a marvel in newly-arrived Ulsterpeople's eyes. Even an imperfect grid was impressive not only to people recently removed from the Irish countryside but also to former denizens of Belfast and Londonderry/Derry, two cities having been constructed largely in accordance with the restraints of their natural surroundings. Hugh Campbell, perhaps reflecting a sense of wonder at the city that lay before him in 1818, wrote, "Philadelphia is universally acknowledged to be one of the most regularly situated & built cities in the U States."<sup>156</sup> His detailed description went on to note that "the principal street (Market Street) runs through the center of the city from the river Delaware to the Schuylkill, another street intersects this about the center at right angles and all the streets running parallel to this & The two Rivers are named numerically, the numbers commencing with those which leg nearest the rivers with the addition of their situation with respect to market street."<sup>157</sup> Although he felt that the "public buildings" were "not very imposing in their

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<sup>155</sup>[http://www.census.gov/history/www/through\\_the\\_decades/fast\\_facts/1800\\_fast\\_facts.html](http://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/fast_facts/1800_fast_facts.html)

<sup>156</sup> Hugh Campbell, "The Journal of Hugh Campbell," 266.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

appearance,” Campbell did attest to their “numerous[ness],” an indication of Philadelphia’s much larger population than that of any town with which he had been previously acquainted.<sup>158</sup>

In truth, Campbell may have been emphasizing the positive rather than recording the city as it actually was. By the 1790s, Philadelphia was a far cry from William Penn’s 1682 plan. Entrepreneurial landowners had divided the large plots into smaller and smaller alleys, each filled with tightly packed rowhomes, the buildings themselves jammed with as many people as could fit. The most crowded areas of the city, the entirety of which extended for about ten blocks west of the Delaware, had a population density of 93,000 residents per square mile.<sup>159</sup> The likely negative impression of confusion and overcrowding had practical downsides as well, since devastating fevers spread quickly through the chaotic city. Irish immigrants would have been familiar with that reality, as Ulster newspapers often printed accounts of epidemics that were sweeping the United States.

So Philadelphia might have been an astounding, even frightening, new home for Ulstermen and women. But would it also be a place to find stability and prosperity after their families’ migrations from Scotland to Ireland and from Ireland to America? For many, the answer was “no” before they had even arrived. Some who sailed to Philadelphia were bound for other cities along the Atlantic seaboard and had simply taken the first ship from Ulster. Like Mary Cumming, they moved on in smaller ships and coaches to cities like New York, Boston, Baltimore and Charleston. Even greater numbers of those Irish people who arrived in Philadelphia were farmers looking for land,

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Smith, 6.

a commodity much more widely available on the frontiers of Pennsylvania, Ohio, and elsewhere than in the Philadelphian hinterland. Families for whom this was the case moved west, away from the city. Many other individuals who left the city almost as soon as they had arrived did so because they had been claimed as indentured servants. Their new masters often employed these men and women on farms in the rural counties of Pennsylvania and New Jersey that surrounded Philadelphia.<sup>160</sup>

The people who chose to stay in Philadelphia had been reading newspaper articles, published descriptions and letters from relatives that extolled the virtues of the North American continent and its preeminent city for decades. If these accounts were to be believed, it was a country of vast natural and man-made resources, and Philadelphia was a boomtown where an Irishman could make his “fortune” if he had the courage to cross the Atlantic and seek it.<sup>161</sup> Only once these brave men and women had arrived in this foreign city would they know if those promises were true. For some Ulster immigrants, Philadelphia, indeed, fostered success, but for others, particularly women not already of high social standing or connected to male family members in the city, prosperity remained elusive.

As historians Kerby Miller, Arnold Schrier, Bruce Boling, and David Doyle point out, it was rare for a woman to achieve economic independence in late 1700s and early 1800s America, as was also the case in Ireland.<sup>162</sup> A woman’s social standing was generally conferred by the men around her; in most instances, the prosperity, or lack thereof, of fathers, husbands and brothers determined the prosperity of their daughters,

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<sup>160</sup> David Dobson, *Irish Emigrants in North America, Part Four* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2000), passim.

<sup>161</sup> Leyburn, 4.

<sup>162</sup> Miller et al, 350.



wives and sisters. For an example of this, we need only return to Mary Cumming, the daughter of a prominent Lisburn preacher who married a successful tobacco merchant before the latter's business brought the young couple to a well-staffed and picturesque home in Petersburg, Virginia.<sup>163</sup>

This was the reality for north of Ireland women in Philadelphia, too. Jane Smith, Margaret Duncan, and Elizabeth Weir were all connected to the Weir family from Stewartstown, County Tyrone. The Weirs were well-off thanks to their burgeoning trade in Ulster linens and woollens.<sup>164</sup> This enterprise, whether or not it was conducted directly through Philadelphia, would have put the family and those linked to it in the upper echelons of Philadelphia society, because the city was a main point of export for the flax that Ulstermen and -women required to produce linen, but which they could not grow on a large enough scale in their relatively small territory.<sup>165</sup> That close relations, including Jane Smith, a Weir sister, and Elizabeth Weir, a niece of the family, settled comfortably in their new city is thus not surprising. Margaret Duncan's situation, however, seems to have been at least as fortunate, despite the fact that she does not appear to have been a blood relative of the Weirs.<sup>166</sup> Duncan's letters in and of themselves indicate her prosperity by demonstrating that she was educated enough to be literate. Furthermore, there are at least two surviving records which suggest that this woman may have been an economic force in her own right: a 1771 map of landownership in Philadelphia and the 1790 census.

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<sup>163</sup> Cumming, 5; Miller et al, 362.

<sup>164</sup> Public Records Office of Northern Ireland. "Introduction: Weir Papers." [http://www.proni.gov.uk/introduction\\_-\\_weir\\_papers\\_d1140.pdf](http://www.proni.gov.uk/introduction_-_weir_papers_d1140.pdf).

<sup>165</sup> Passenger Lists to Philadelphia, 1800-1882, National Archives

<sup>166</sup> In her letters, Duncan addresses William Weir as "Sir" or her "worthy friend." This suggests that, unlike Weir or Smith, who wrote to their "dear uncle" and "dear brother," respectively, Duncan was not herself a member of the Weir family. Margaret Duncan letters, Weir Family Papers, PRONI; Elizabeth Weir letters, Weir Family Papers, PRONI; Jane Smith letters, Weir Family Papers, PRONI.

The 1771 landownership map shows four small properties in the Philadelphia District of Southwark owned by a widow named Margaret Duncan.<sup>167</sup> The plots abut not only the Walnut Grove estate of Joseph Wharton, but also land owned by George Clymer, a future signer of both the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution.<sup>168</sup> Nearly 20 years later the new nation's first census recorded a Margaret Duncan living somewhere on the east side of a street between South Water Street and Chestnut Street. The census taker noted that this Margaret Duncan was a merchant and the head of her household, which included two children and one slave.<sup>169</sup> If these three Margaret Duncans were one in the same (as the dates ranging from 1774 to 1786 on her letters to William Weir suggest they could be), the woman from Tyrone had continued to run in exalted circles even after immigrating to America.

Another Irish woman with favorable connections who managed to keep herself afloat in early republican Philadelphia was Margaret Carey Murphy, later Margaret Carey Murphy Burke. Murphy was the Dublin-born sister of Mathew Carey, a Philadelphia publisher and one of early Irish-America's most prominent figures.<sup>170</sup> The relationship between brother and sister was complicated, but Burke's letters to Carey illustrated some viable strategies available to widows trying to subsist in 1700s and 1800s Philadelphia.<sup>171</sup> Murphy and her husband John had come to the city in 1794, a decade after Mathew had fled Ireland under accusations of sedition.<sup>172</sup> The couple quickly turned a profit after establishing themselves as proprietors of a tavern, but John died in the yellow fever

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<sup>167</sup> University of Pennsylvania Archives. "Landownership in 1771." *Mapping West Philadelphia*. <http://www.archives.upenn.edu/WestPhila1777/view-parcel.php?pid=3542&popup=1>.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> 1790 Census, Ancestry.com.

<sup>170</sup> Miller, 349-362.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Miller, 351.

epidemic of 1798, leaving Margaret to support herself and her remaining children, many of whom did not survive infancy.<sup>173</sup> At the age of only 26, Murphy joined the roughly 10 percent of Philadelphia women who were widows.<sup>174</sup> Unlike many of her transplanted countrywomen, however, Murphy could rely on some measure of support from her brother and held on to her husband's tavern: one source of employment deemed appropriate for widows, who kept 15 percent of the city's inns and taverns by 1800.<sup>175</sup>

In running her "Leopard" tavern, Murphy navigated the complex societal expectations that surrounded a woman in business and demonstrated significant pragmatism and financial sense while doing so. Rather than assuming responsibility for her largely male clientele all on her own, a situation in which she might receive inappropriate attentions and damage to her reputation, she hired a man to run the tavern day to day.<sup>176</sup> Murphy barred card players from her tavern for several sound reasons. As she explained in a letter to Mathew, "I have this night to abolish card-playing which will rid the house of a vast deal of trouble..." she wrote to Mathew, "If not so profitable," the reformed tavern will be "more comfortable, for hou[ses] where cards are not permitted are more peaceable than where they are."<sup>177</sup> These lines further reflected Murphy's understanding that, as a single woman in charge of her own business, the company she kept implied something about herself to others members of her social sphere.

The young widow Murphy followed another potential path that she no doubt hoped would help her "to advance in the world" when she married her second husband,

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<sup>173</sup> Miller, 352.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Miller, 353

<sup>176</sup> Miller, 354.

<sup>177</sup> Margaret Carey Murphy to Mathew Carey [no date], Lea and Febiger Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

James Burke, an Irish sea captain. No longer having the need to earn her own living, the new Mrs. Burke almost immediately relinquished control of the *Leopard*.<sup>178</sup> Unfortunately, the dream of economic and social prominence, which perhaps fueled Margaret Carey Murphy's decision to become Margaret Carey Murphy Burke, did not prove viable. For the few years that James Burke remained alive, he was often at sea, leaving his wife continuing to struggle to support their six children by relying, in large part, on more loans from her brother.<sup>179</sup> Her solution, which proved to be only temporary, was to establish on another business that was acceptable for women of her time: opening a boarding school for young ladies.<sup>180</sup> But this venture, which Murphy Burke claimed she had taken up more for "the thought of pleasing" her husband than for her "personal emolument," did not enjoy even the moderate success of her tavern, and the school apparently closed.<sup>181</sup> Despite this fact, by 1805, she and her husband were able to obtain a permanent residence at 151 Mulberry Street, likely a sign that they had achieved some prosperity since the school's failure.<sup>182</sup>

Even this period of economic stability was short-lived in the boom-and-bust cycle of Murphy Burke's life. Her husband died the next year, and the financial struggles that followed saw the twice-widowed thirty-five-year-old's departure from the city of Philadelphia.<sup>183</sup> Perhaps, as places outside the home slowly became the preferred loci for work in the nineteenth century, she was a victim of the resulting decline in American

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<sup>178</sup> Miller, 355-356.

<sup>179</sup> Miller, 356.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> Margaret Carey Murphy Burke to Mathew Carey [no date], Lea and Febiger Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>182</sup> Miller, 357.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

employment opportunities for widowed and single women.<sup>184</sup> Maybe increasing anti-Catholic sentiment drove her out of her adopted city. Regardless, Murphy Burke moved first to the countryside around Philadelphia before leaving for Baltimore, where she sought loans from her brother and the support of a Maryland church.<sup>185</sup> Still, when Murphy Burke died in 1852, she had managed to amass an estate of \$7,000, most of which was given to Catholic charities in Baltimore.<sup>186</sup> Her life had illustrated the challenges faced by unmarried Irish immigrant women in Philadelphia. Even with connections to notable male members of society, financial stability could be fleeting for such women, if it could be attained at all.

Another woman with at least a tenuous connection to Mathew Carey who fared significantly less well than Murphy Burke was Mary Dunn. Little information remains on Dunn in the historical record beyond a letter written to Carey seeking funds. The latter's capacity as a founding member and secretary of the Hibernian Society for the Relief of Emigrants from Ireland meant that he often received such letters from Irish Philadelphians who had fallen on hard times.<sup>187</sup> Dunn's letter is unusual in that it came from a woman and was written not in the supplicant's own hand but on her behalf by one "Charles O Hagan."<sup>188</sup> The tale that O'Hagan, or Hagan, as subsequent city records suggest he may have also been called, told of Dunn began with asserting that the woman was "the daughter of respectable parents in the County of Londonderry N: of Ireland of middling Circumstances."<sup>189</sup> The letter went on to stat that a family connection in the

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Miller, 357-362.

<sup>186</sup> Miller, 362.

<sup>187</sup> John Campbell, *History of the Friendly Sons*, 149; Miller et al, passim.

<sup>188</sup> Charles O'Hagan to Mathew Carey, letter dated February 5, 1796, Lea and Febiger Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

United States had compelled her to leave Ireland and come to Philadelphia. The brother of “the bearer,” as O’Hagan referred to Dunn, “wrote for [her] to keep house for him, thro’ which She unfortunately prepared & and came over abt two years ago.”<sup>190</sup> Many Ulsterwomen between the Revolution and the War of 1812 likely found themselves in similar situations: emigrating at the request of husbands or brothers, perhaps against their own inclinations. If O’Hagan’s narrative is to be believed, Dunn arrived in Philadelphia and “to her double mortification found that [her brother] cod not receive her agreeable to his encouragemt, & her expectations.”<sup>191</sup> Dunn had been unaware, the letter made it seem, that her brother, who was supposedly a doctor, had been “doing very well till about 3 years ago he broke loose and led since a dissipated life.”<sup>192</sup> As suggested, some doubts have been cast on the veracity of Dunn and O’Hagan’s story, because no records have been found of a doctor bearing the last name Dunn in turn-of-the-nineteenth-century Philadelphia.<sup>193</sup>

Regardless, the dubious nature of Dunn’s story does not alter the fact that she was an Irish woman, apparently without viable male contacts, struggling to support herself in the City of Brotherly Love. Upon discovering her brother’s inability to provide her with suitable living arrangements, “she was forced in her languishing state to go to Service.”<sup>194</sup> As for many middling- and lower-sort Irish women preceded and followed her, one of Dunn’s few options to provide for herself was to seek employment as a

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Miller, 302.

<sup>194</sup> Miller, 301.

servant. She was one of the early “Irish Bridgets” who would come to symbolize female immigrant servitude in nineteenth-century urban America.<sup>195</sup>

Ultimately, Dunn believed that she was not cut out for service. Her health, which O’Hagan wrote had always been “tender,” meant that her work as a servant was able to “afford her barely a sustenance of nature” and that Dunn remained “confined to her bed another part of the time.”<sup>196</sup> Presumably Carey was to understand from these lines that Dunn’s ill health prevented her from earning a full wage as a servant. What little exertion Dunn did manage while in service left her “at length... no longer capable to use any more efforts of Industry &c.”<sup>197</sup> Thus she had little hope of finding employment that would continue to support her in Philadelphia. Accordingly, Dunn made a seemingly drastic and unorthodox request of Carey; she had “no other alternative but to return home, if she co[ul]d,” and desired that “a private collection could be raised to pay her passage,” since the Hibernian Society would not “assist any to return.”<sup>198</sup> Dunn, in the words she dictated to O’Hagan, may not have been the only “forlorn, healthless” Ulsterwoman, “oppressed in spirits and destitute of means to Support herself,” who wanted nothing more than to recross the Atlantic and go back to her home and family on “the first Vessel for the North of Ireland.”<sup>199</sup>

Although Dunn died without returning to Ireland seven months after O’Hagan wrote on her behalf, her desperate condition was not the worst fate experienced among Irish women in the early republican city. Indeed, if readers take O’Hagan’s letter as wholly accurate, he would have taken up Dunn’s care if he hadn’t himself been

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<sup>195</sup> Lynch-Brennan, *passim*.

<sup>196</sup> O’Hagan.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*

“struggling with wind & Tide, endeavoring to pay a great rent &c. and support a family.”<sup>200</sup> If O’Hagan’s sentiments were genuine, Dunn was not completely without emotional support in Philadelphia. Even if they were not genuine, and O’Hagan and Dunn had not really enjoyed any acquaintance before he petitioned Carey for her, Dunn cannot have been utterly impoverished, because she would have had to pay O’Hagan for his services as a scrivener, as he was listed in the Philadelphia directory.<sup>201</sup> Either way, Mary Dunn was not entirely destitute of at least one beneficial resource, whether it was truly neighborly goodwill or money.

For some women without any resources or socially superior male associates, one illicit source of income remained: prostitution. Finding employment in Philadelphia’s sexual marketplace had long been a viable way for unattached women to support themselves.<sup>202</sup> Historian Clare Lyons asserts that, during the entire colonial period, sex commerce had been a part of Philadelphia life. No doubt some struggling Irish women began to ply this trade when they first arrived in the city. Women driven by economic necessity could turn at least a small profit by selling themselves, and the potential legal risks were few, as Philadelphia authorities had long tacitly sanctioned prostitution.<sup>203</sup> Lyons writes, citing a case in which a brawl outside a brothel led to the death of a constable, that “it was only when sex commerce led to other crimes that the community took notice.”<sup>204</sup> Because this profession was simultaneously illegal and rarely prosecuted, reliable records indicating the number and experiences of Ulsterwomen who engaged in it

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Miller, 302. The directory listing for the man presumed to be Charles O’Hagan is, in fact, given under the alternate surname Hagan.

<sup>202</sup> Lyons, *passim*.

<sup>203</sup> Lyons, 108.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.



have not been uncovered. What records we do have of Irish prostitutes, and their peers generally, come from the years after the War of Independence had been won.

After independence, the authorities cracked down on illicit, sexually transgressive behavior. This reflected an elite desire to consolidate power in the newly established nation; sexually liberated women represented a threat to the prevailing male hierarchy.<sup>205</sup> In Philadelphia, this repressive impulse took the shape of a charitable institution, as was so often the case in the Quaker City. The members of the Magdalen Society of Philadelphia, established in 1800, believed their organization's purpose was "relieving and reclaiming unhappy females who have Swerv'd from the paths of virtue."<sup>206</sup> Essentially, their aim was to reform "fallen women" and put them back in socially acceptable roles.<sup>207</sup> These women, termed "Magdalens" in remembrance of the Bible's most famous saved prostitute, not only sought help themselves but were sometimes discovered by the Society's board members in the city's almshouse and its jail.<sup>208</sup> Initially, the Magdalen Society provided assistance, often monetary, to women who continued to live in their communities. In 1807, however, the Society opened a secluded asylum on the outskirts of the city so that they would more easily be able to "replace the habits of vice with those of industry and chastity through a program of regimented living and religious instruction."<sup>209</sup> Separating the Magdalens from the people and places that had spurred their descent into sin would allow the women to more easily repent.

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<sup>205</sup> Lyons, *passim*.

<sup>206</sup> Lyons, 325.

<sup>207</sup> Minutes of the Board of the Magdalen Society of Philadelphia, HSP.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>209</sup> Lyons, 325.

Between 1807 and 1820, 138 women were admitted to the asylum.<sup>210</sup> From 1807-1814, just over eight percent of this number were women from Ireland.<sup>211</sup> None had come to Philadelphia in the hope of becoming an American prostitute. Rather, they had sailed across the Atlantic with parents, husbands, or alone, intending to work as indentured servants.<sup>212</sup> In the years since each woman had arrived, she had been “seduced” or “led astray,” or events beyond her control had so reduced her standing in society or financial condition that she chose prostitution.<sup>213</sup> Sophia Smith’s husband had died, forcing her to take up residence in a boarding house where her account says she was first employed for sex.<sup>214</sup> Before she was twelve years old, Susan Robeson had been bound out for service by her parents and apparently lured into prostitution by “a Spaniard,” with whom she separated after 7 years of living together the deaths of her children.<sup>215</sup> A “person of note” had seduced Elizabeth Pickens, a former indentured servant who had come to the United States from Ireland after both her parents had died, before he abandoned her with his child.<sup>216</sup> These three, as well as Margaret Boyle, Bridget Williams, Catharine Williams, Catharine Barry and Rosanna Overn, all women noted to be Irish, entered the asylum before 1820.<sup>217</sup> The Society’s minutes included their individual stories with increasing brevity as the group took on more and more Magdalens from all over the city, but they also included a description of where each one ended up with her treatment.<sup>218</sup> The Society’s goal was to prepare each former prostitute to reenter the licensed workforce as

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<sup>210</sup> Lyons, 326

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Minutes of the Board of the Magdalen Society of Philadelphia, HSP.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid, Volume 1 (1800-1810), page 120-121

<sup>215</sup> Ibid, Volume 1 (1800-1810), page 146

<sup>216</sup> Ibid, Volume 1 (1800-1810), pages 151-152

<sup>217</sup> Minutes of the Board of the Magdalen Society of Philadelphia, HSP, Volume I (1800-1810) and Volume II (1810-1818).

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

a servant, preferably for a Christian family who lived outside of Philadelphia, away from the corrupting influences of the city that had led their Magdalen astray in the first place.<sup>219</sup>

Of the eight Irish Magdalens, however, only three achieved this goal. Bridget Williams, Catharine Williams, and Catharine Barry were all “bound of for service,” and only Catharine was noted to have remained in the city “with a reputable family.”<sup>220</sup> Sophia Smith’s fate as a Magdalen was not recorded after 1808, but on the 17 of December in that year, she had returned to the asylum after being sent to the almshouse hospital, where she was treated for, and allegedly cured of, “rheumatic pains in her head.”<sup>221</sup> Perhaps these four women had truly taken the lessons the Society was teaching to heart. Maybe they did feel the shame and desire to better themselves that Board members believed they should. Alternately, they may have just been good actresses looking to get out of the asylum by convincing their overseers that they had been rehabilitated.

On the opposite end of the spectrum were the women who did not appear to members of Society to have appreciated and appropriately utilized the opportunity for repentance. The worst case of an Irishwoman who defied the Society’s wishes in the asylum’s early years was that of Elizabeth Pickens, or Magdalen Number 20. She was expelled from the asylum on August 10, 1809, because she “became so ungovernable and indecent that she was subject to reproof,” but did not take it to heart.<sup>222</sup> In ignoring the Board’s reprimand, not only was Pickens flouting the instructions of social betters, who

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<sup>219</sup> Lyons, 326.

<sup>220</sup> Minutes of the Board of the Magdalen Society of Philadelphia, HSP, Volume II (1810-1818).

<sup>221</sup> Ibid, Volume I (1800-1810).

<sup>222</sup> Volume I (1800-1810).

felt that they were graciously offering help to her, but she was also endangering the salvation of her fellow Magdalens. She had to go.

The three other Irish Magdalens each eloped from the asylum in different circumstances. The Board reflected on these fugitives with varying degrees of indifference and indignation. Rosanna Overn, the last of the women listed here to run off did so in 1817, but this instance was little lamented, according in the pages of the minute book because she was already, like Pickens, “on the verge of being dismissed for involvement in a breach of rules.”<sup>223</sup> Here again, women who did not respect the authority of the Society were no longer considered worthy of their assistance. The perceived division between the worthy poor and the unworthy poor that existed in Ulster typified Philadelphia charity as much as it did Irish philanthropy.<sup>224</sup> Little effort was made to stop or relocate the unworthy Magdalens who escaped the usually locked asylum building and gained freedom by climbing the fence that surrounded it.<sup>225</sup>

It was likely in this manner that Margaret Boyle eloped without much fanfare in July of 1810, but perhaps this came as little shock to the members of the Board. After all, its members had made several visits to Boyle a month earlier, while she was living her “disorderly life,” in efforts to convince her to enter the asylum.<sup>226</sup> Perhaps her eventual willingness to enter the asylum had been not been a result of the Society members’ condemnatory attempts at persuasion, but her shrewd way of obtaining a warm meal or an indoor resting place.

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<sup>223</sup> Volume II (1810-1818).

<sup>224</sup> For the earlier discussion of varying degrees of “worthiness” perceived in addressing poverty in Ireland, see Chapter One.

<sup>225</sup> Lyons, 328.

<sup>226</sup> Volume 2 (1810-1818), page 13.

The most unfortunate case of elopement was that of Susan Robeson, the second Irish woman to fall under the care of the Magdalen Society. Two months after she had arrived at the asylum in April 1809, Robeson “appeared disturbed and deranged in the mind” and ran away.<sup>227</sup> If Robeson had really gone mad, no amount of penance could ensure her a stable position at even the lowest levels of her society. Her reasons for eloping may not have been based on any sound logic, and her life would be a struggle from there on out.

The other runaway Magdalens may have made the choice to get out from under the Society’s watchful eye for several reasons. Those who eloped within days of arriving likely chafed at the idea of having their lives so intimately controlled by a judgmental group of wealthy, and usually male, strangers. Perhaps they had never intended to be “reformed”; like many prostitutes of their period, they might not have been ashamed of their profession but instead viewed a stint in the asylum as a way to ensure a roof over their heads for a few months of a difficult year.<sup>228</sup> Staying in the asylum for a while might have been a convenient way of transitioning from prison back out into society. Maybe some of the women really felt that they had been rehabilitated and were ready to rejoin their communities without waiting for the official say-so.<sup>229</sup> Another possibility, since most Magdalens who eloped did so after at least a few weeks or months in the asylum, was that they simply realized the life of service for which the Society was preparing them offered less freedom than continuing in prostitution, even if the latter option meant a life of ill repute. Certainly servitude was not a path cut out for all Irish women of the lower sort, as the numerous cases of fugitive female indentured servants in the period

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<sup>227</sup> Volume 1 (1800-1810).

<sup>228</sup> Lyons, 330-331.

<sup>229</sup> Lyons, 328.

suggest.<sup>230</sup> For whatever reasons, Irish Magdalens in particular, who seem to have eloped more often than their American-born peers, found living in the asylum undesirable.<sup>231</sup>

In fact, those prostitutes who even allowed themselves to be placed under the care of the Society were the minority. Most continued, unabashed, in their sexual “trade” and “resisted or ignored reformers’ efforts to redeem them.”<sup>232</sup> To accept the help of the Magdalen Society would have been for Philadelphia prostitutes of the 1800s to “internalize” the vision of themselves as weak, naïve, and misguided women who had allowed themselves to be seduced.<sup>233</sup> But most of the at least 312 women that 1790-1814 arrest records indicate were engaged in prostitution seem to have felt that, in choosing to work in brothels, they were simply being savvy businesspeople in one of the few ways it was even possible, if not legal, for women to do so.<sup>234</sup> Despite the public condemnation they may have endured, American prostitutes were determined to assert their agency. Mary Ann Stevenson, a Philadelphia prostitute, wrote to her brother in 1827, assuring him that “however disagreeable my present life may be to those who once had authority over me that it is perfectly agreeable to me... , I claim my privilege in acting according to my own inclinations.”<sup>235</sup> Stevenson declared that she was “perfectly happy and contented” in her unorthodox life, and, furthermore, that she would “sooner... beg [her] bread in the street than stoop to such a humiliating condition” as accepting her brother’s help in “rescuing” her from her profession.<sup>236</sup> Perhaps this is how some of the runaway Irish Magdalens had felt about becoming the objects of charity, but it may also have been

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<sup>230</sup> David Dobson, *Irish Emigrants in North America*, passim.

<sup>231</sup> Lyons, 328.

<sup>232</sup> Lyons, 330.

<sup>233</sup> Lyons, 331.

<sup>234</sup> Lyons, 334.

<sup>235</sup> Mary Ann Stevenson to Henry Stevenson, August 12<sup>th</sup>, 1827, as quoted in Lyons, page 331.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

the sentiments of even more of the city's Irish prostitutes, who did not seek the help of any reform organization.

To struggling Irish women who became prostitutes, prostitution may have seemed like the lesser of two evils when compared to the efforts of the city's Overseers of the Poor, renamed the Guardians of the Poor in 1788. This organization ran several programs aimed at alleviating the suffering of Philadelphia's financially insecure residents throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including distributing firewood in the winter, opening a temporary quarantine asylum during the yellow fever epidemic of 1803 and operating the city's almshouse.<sup>237</sup> Between the years of 1783 and 1812, hundreds of Irishmen and women went in and out of that almshouse, all brought there by an inability to remain financially secure in their city without assistance. The experiences of each individual were no doubt different in their particulars, but it seems reasonable to conclude, even from the scant details contained in the ledger of almshouse admissions and discharges, that being a resident of that place was never a happy condition. This may have been particularly true for the steady stream of women who came in and stayed, usually briefly, from year to year. For the years from 1800 to 1805 alone, over 130 women who entered the almshouse were given the label "Irishwoman".<sup>238</sup> Forty of these women came from Southwark, the district that, besides being home to the aforementioned Margaret Duncan, was the particular and perennial home of impoverished Irish immigrants.<sup>239</sup> The numbers of women who came into the almshouse and were recorded as Irish reveal something about the inequity of prosperity in the Irish-American

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<sup>237</sup> Charles Lawrence, *History of the Philadelphia Almshouses and Hospitals from the Beginning of the Eighteenth to the Ending of the Nineteenth Centuries*. Philadelphia: Charles Lawrence, 1905. *Open Library*. <https://archive.org/stream/historyofphilad00lawr#page/n5/mode/2up>.

<sup>238</sup> Guardians of the Poor, "Almshouse Admissions and Discharges," City Archives of Philadelphia.

<sup>239</sup> Miller et al, 287.

community. Family groups headed by women made up just under 14 percent of those listed on ships manifests from 1801 to 1811. However, women headed 35 percent of family groups who found themselves in the Philadelphia almshouse between 1800 and 1805. Although these numbers are based on very limited records, they suggest that Irish women had a significantly more difficult time supporting themselves and their families than their male counterparts.

In many cases, these brief stays under the care of the Guardians did little to improve these Irishwomen's situations, as some appeared to return to the almshouse after being discharged. One Mary Golden, presumably the same person each time although her listed residence alternated between Southwark and the City, went in and out of the almshouse three times in four years.<sup>240</sup> Elizabeth Kirvan and her children were discharged in June of 1803 only to return in October of the next year with Mr. Kirvan in tow.<sup>241</sup> This pattern suggests that, while the few weeks or months that most clients were allowed to stay in the almshouse may have provided a roof over their heads and some food in their stomachs, they did not ensure their ability to regain economic stability once the time for discharge came around. Women in the almshouse were taught to spin and could make a small amount of money in doing so, but these skills were, in fact, becoming quickly outmoded in their industrializing city. Female residents were essentially being encouraged to pursue obsolete employment once they left the almshouse.

That said, both Golden and Kirvan were perhaps fortunate to be sent away after their respective final visits to the almshouse noted in the ledger covering the years up until 1805. Other Irishwomen would enter the same house of refuge only to meet death in

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<sup>240</sup> Guardians of the Poor, "Almshouse Admissions and Discharges," City Archives of Philadelphia.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.



its confines; a widow by the name of Mary Stakes died in the almshouse on September 16, 1803, just one day after she had been admitted.<sup>242</sup> During the several yellow fever and influenza epidemics that terrorized the city in the late 1700s and early 1800s, such deaths in the asylum were far from rare.<sup>243</sup> It is likely that, for the most destitute of the Guardians' charges, dying in the almshouse was preferable to dying in the streets, but certainly no Ulsterwoman set out across the Atlantic with the dream of dying or watching their children die in a poorhouse.

Death in poverty may have been the worst thing Irish women in Philadelphia faced, but the challenges of living in their new city were many. As soon as these women arrived, they needed to adjust to an overwhelming city filled with people, poverty and illness. Some women, particularly those who had male family members or acquaintances they could turn to for financial support, were certainly able to make a comfortable life in Philadelphia. But women without men, or whose male connections abandoned them or succumbed to disease, faced many difficult choices; some of the few options available to them were exhausting themselves working for low pay, accruing debt from whatever men would credit them, relying on charity or entering socially stigmatized fields such as prostitution. Regardless of the options their individual made, Ulsterwomen who had arrived safely in Philadelphia were little able to breathe a sigh of relief. Many would continue to experience trying times and fail to find the prosperity they had dreamed of in the United States.

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Lawrence.

## **Conclusion**

The Irish people who came to North America between 1783 and 1812 were a distinct group. Certainly they were following in the footsteps of thousands of their countrymen and -women who had migrated to the continent in the previous century and a half of its English colonization. But after 1783, those people who came from Ulster to America knew that they were immigrating to a new nation, not a colony like the island on which they and their ancestors had been living. The nascent United States was not an unfamiliar place; personal letters, newspaper accounts and published descriptions had been detailing that land's religion, climate, politics, society and economy for decades before American independence.

Many factors drew Ulsterpeople the United States generally and Philadelphia particularly. There was the seeming abundance of living space and employment in a burgeoning city that was the epicenter of an expansive nation, in comparison to the limits on both across the relatively small island of Ireland. Philadelphia was particularly touted for its revolutionary political rights and religious freedoms. The city also ostensibly provided a social safety net composed of a long-established northern Irish community and several charitable organizations, some newly founded with the express purpose of assisting disadvantaged immigrants.

Events in Ireland also drove those who could afford it to emigrate. The early 1790s saw the dramatic reduction of Irish political autonomy, and the year 1798 witnessed a violent rebellion across the entire island. Even though there were express prohibitions from both sides against engaging women in the conflict, Ulster women did witness the destruction and feared for their and their families' safety. For those who had

been considering resettling in the United States, this instability may have been the catalyst that turned thought into action. Another failed nationalist rebellion in 1803 might have made Ireland seem like a place of endemic unrest; certainly a life in Philadelphia, even with the city's crowds and the perennial threat of fever, would be better than fearing violent death at home.

Even after the difficult decision to emigrate had been made, the journey across the Atlantic presented perhaps greater challenges, challenges that were physical as well as emotional. First, many would-be emigrants had to travel from rural homes across the north of Ireland to the port cities whence ships would carry them to the United States. This first leg of the journey often required rapid adaptation to a new, urban way of life. Once ships set sail, immigrants faced the combined discomforts of overcrowding and isolation from the world outside their vessel. The weeks- to months-long voyage further tested passengers' very ability to survive; illnesses manifested while out at sea killed men and women, as did the occasional sinking of vessels, sometimes within sight of the longed-for American shore. Surely, they may have thought, any experience on land must be preferable to this. Something better must await them after the hardships of the voyage, something like the prosperity and opportunity that letters and books had detailed.

There are some Irish women whose biographies indicate that stability could be found in their new homes. Mary Cumming settled in Petersburg, Virginia, where she took delight in her fine home and oversaw her slaves (without ever describing them as such). But she had come from and married into two well-to-do Ulster families while still in Ireland; hers was hardly a story of new-found success in America. Furthermore, Cumming and her husband's prosperity in the United States came with some significant

tradeoffs, including her painful separation from Ireland and her beloved family and premature death without ever seeing either again.

Many Irish women in Philadelphia fared much worse than Cumming, who at least was able to die in comfort. Some, like Margaret Carey Murphy Burke, struggled to maintain their livelihoods and cycled quickly through periods of success abruptly followed by periods of privation. And, of course, there were others who simply existed in poverty from the moment they emerged from the steerage berths, for which they had paid dearly, onto the city's crowded docks. Their American lives, which had started as cherished imaginings in Ireland, ended with illness, and sometimes death, in crowded almshouses.

In short, immigrating to the city of Philadelphia was not a way of ensuring economic and social stability for many Ulsterwomen, who came with hopes that it would be just that. Instead, those many women found that reputable employment opportunities for single or widowed women in Philadelphia were few and far between and that the safety net they had presumed would protect them only worked in very limited, and often insufficient ways, leaving them suffering from disease and destitution in the City of Brotherly Love.

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