

Irish Migrants in New Zealand, 1840–1937: 'The Desired Haven'

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Angela McCarthy has written a useful book about Irish emigration to New Zealand, based upon 253 letters that passed between the two countries over a period just short of a century. This review discusses the author's methodology and findings through the perspective of two analytical tools, Alice's Letters and Shanacoole Exceptionalism.

The book derives from Angela McCarthy's doctoral studies, under the supervision of David Fitzpatrick, whose work on Irish emigrant letters to Australia forms the scholarly background to the present work.⁽¹⁾ Although her book embodies some of the loving detail of a dissertation, one of its strengths is an impressive grasp of the scholarly literature of migration. Fitzpatrick selected 111 letters, and was able to print them in full; Dr McCarthy relies upon apparently well-chosen quotation. Like Fitzpatrick, Angela McCarthy uses letters that travelled in both directions, and claims to have made 'a substantial contribution to the historiography of the Irish in New Zealand by adopting a transnational perspective' (p. 5). Since almost half (118) of the letters originated from Ireland, the focus is necessarily upon networks and connections rather than the Irish experience in New Zealand pure and simple. There are clusters from Ulster and Munster in the 36 sequences, and these reflect concentrations of Irish migration sources. Two thirds of the letters were written by men and just over half by Protestants. Dr McCarthy follows Donald H. Akenson in playing down the practical distinctions between Irish Catholics and Protestants⁽²⁾ although she supplies denominational identifications in an opening chapter of interesting biographical outlines. Since one of the most impressive chapters in the book is called 'The importance of faith', perhaps the religious dimension requires more exploration. As Dr McCarthy notes, it does not always make sense to generalise about 'Protestants', since some groups, such as Unitarians, lacked facilities for worship in the colony. (One correspondent, Sligoman Robert Hughes, appears to have been an enthusiastic Salvationist, to judge from references to the *War Cry* in his correspondence.)

Angela McCarthy supplies an overview of Irish migration to New Zealand and discusses the letters in general, before proceeding to a collage of accounts of the voyage. The compulsive demands of minute doctoral analysis now sometimes jar. Three brothers from Ulster reported their comparative feats of vomiting amidst raging seas. Dr McCarthy comments: 'Seasickness, coupled with the company of friends and a sense of adventure, must also have diverted travellers from the pain of separation' (p. 103). It is many years since I last hung, retching and wretched, over the rail of an Irish Sea ferry, but I still recall that never did my hearth and home seem so alluring as during those eternities of chundering misery.

Dr McCarthy then proceeds to examine how migrants responded to and portrayed their new country and its

working conditions, arguing that they seem to have adjusted more successfully than their compatriots in the United States. Family and social networks are also traced, and Dr McCarthy leans against endorsing Miles Fairburn's 'atomisation' thesis of New Zealand colonial society.⁽³⁾ The emotive word 'home' forms the core of a chapter on relationships, which also looks at return migration. Despite the distance, migrants did sometimes revisit Ireland – but they rarely stayed. Angela McCarthy finds her sample to have been relatively open in discussing courtship (although they were hardly risqué) in comparison with Irish-Australian sources, possibly because surviving letters often passed between young people and parent-child exchanges are under-represented. A useful chapter examines definitions of Irish identity, which was expressed in terms of qualities such as friendliness and susceptibility to alcohol. Only one Irish-language phrase appears in the letters (the hackneyed 'céad míle fáilte') and correspondents showed little interest in politics, Irish or colonial. This confirms one of the most striking lacunae in the emigrant story. The political discourse surrounding Home Rule stressed the successful precedent of colonial self-government within the Empire, but we simply do not find exiles writing home to say that their new home was so well run it ought to form the model for Irish devolution. A final chapter, on religion, has already been mentioned.

In terms of the methodology employed and the sources examined, Dr McCarthy has produced an excellent book, one which applies a much broader literature about the Irish diaspora carefully and sensitively in the New Zealand context.

How, then, might the discussion be widened by the specific tools of *Alice's Letters* and *Shanacoole* Exceptionalism? Alice was neither Irish nor a migrant to New Zealand. A lifelong Cockney and my mother's closest friend, she went to Canada as a war bride. My childhood was enlivened by her ecstatic letters about the exciting world of Winnipeg, which my mother enthusiastically recited. Years later I visited Alice and, with polite exaggeration, thanked her for having aroused my interest in Canada. It was then that she told me of her bitter unhappiness during her early years overseas. Too proud to tell her oldest friend she had made a mistake, she used her letters to put up a front of achievement and success. I have never trusted emigrant letters since.

As all social historians know, families are not perfect organisms. We are used to thinking of post-Famine Ireland as a country that had to shed people, but by no means everybody left, and not all who did went to the ends of the earth. It is reasonable to suspect that some people who put twelve thousand miles between themselves and their immediate kin may have come from households, not necessarily 'dysfunctional', but certainly containing frictions and jealousies which we need to take aboard. If Alice could not admit her disappointment to her oldest friend, why should we trust missives to perhaps jealous siblings and unloving parents? Angela McCarthy has certainly turned up some sharp conflicts. One migrant so hated his tyrannical father that he not only wished him dead but hoped he would spend the afterlife in a place where he would have no problem lighting his pipe. Another was drawn back to County Limerick by a brother who pleaded with him to come home and carry on the family name, a visit which ended in a fraternal fist fight. A third described his sister as 'prim and precise' and there was 'hell to pay' when she somehow read the letter. Moreover, the principle of the fake cheerfulness in *Alice's Letters* can be inverted, as Dr McCarthy points out, so that exiles might be tempted to poor-mouth themselves to slide out of demands to fund the chain-migration of relatives.

If we cannot always trust the messages that the letters contained, can we place such a burden upon their actual contents that the methodology of this form of emigration history employs? Dr McCarthy draws upon a sample that spans many decades, in which educational standards generally improved. (One of her most fluent and engaging correspondents, Philip Carroll, wrote his letters during a visit to Ireland in the 1920s after thirty years in Auckland, which he decided was his real home.) Basic educational standards raise a conundrum: when such correspondents use phrases such as 'old Ireland' or 'holy Ireland' (which, in fact, they do not seem to have employed very often), were they slipping into empty formulas or should we regard their lack of educational attainment as underlining the sincerity of their mild venture into the poetic? If you are not used to wielding a pen, do you select the word 'home' because it tugs the heartstrings, or because it is short? Similar questions arise when emigrant letter-writers compare the church building at which they

worship with one known to the family in Ireland. Is this an attempt to annex and subdue an alien environment or merely a handy device for painting a word picture? An old friend of mine cherishes a letter I wrote him thirty years ago, in which I described Taranaki as 'like Essex, but with a volcano at Ingatestone'. The phrase captured a mixture of similarity and exotic difference, but its primary significance lay in a common reference point – that it, it conveyed a specific and largely private meaning to the writer and the recipient. The methodology used by Dr McCarthy in studying emigrant letters implicitly assumes a common coinage, so that mosaics may be constructed from a range of letters, as if they are all equal in perception, and none of them coloured by family tensions and local particularisms. Angela McCarthy does this very effectively, but should be warned by Alice's Letters to look deeper?

This brings me to Shanacoole Exceptionalism. Shanacoole is the townland in County Waterford where I have come to live after escaping from the lunacy of British higher education. It is not easy to define townlands to outsiders (and Microsoft's red wavy underlining even doubts their existence). They are neither manors nor parishes and they have no administrative function. Yet there are over 60,000 of them in Ireland, about two to the square mile. If Benedict Anderson is right in defining nations as 'imagined communities', nineteenth-century Ireland was probably more imagined than most, simply because the Catholic majority did not identify with rudimentary state structures and loyalties were ferociously local: to this day, country people know their townland bounds. Was Shanacoole exceptional? I simply do not know, although I am sure Shanacoole people thought it was. Learned monographs on Irish-This and Ireland-and-That hardly ever descend to such building block level.

Shanacoole is 455 acres alongside the Blackwater estuary. In 1841, it contained 332 inhabitants. This dropped to 255 in the Famine decade and, as the basis of Irish farming shifted from tillage to pasture, numbers continued to fall. By 1891, Shanacoole had lost more than half its 1851 population. In 1911, it was down to just 65, twenty percent of its 1841 peak. Today, a few cottages remain as piles of stones at the roadsides, but most of the 57 homes of 1841 have vaporised. Hundreds of people who identified with Shanacoole must have scattered across the globe, lost and silent because the textbooks never mention them. Until now.

It is a chance of about 2,000 to 1 that Angela McCarthy should have located eleven letters from a Shanacoole family. Dr McCarthy reports seven children in the Keane family but, by 1886 when the sequence opens, only six are named. Thirty years earlier, their great-grandfather had farmed 26 acres in Shanacoole, but by the third generation tensions had developed among his multiplying descendants. As Kate Keane observed in 1903, 'we loathe any Keane except Fathers uncle James & his children' (p. 206). Kate was the family's best letter writer and she was also a good hater. Back in 1886, when brother John was giving cause for worry, she declared his girl friend Kate Doyle her 'biggest enemy', adding for good measure '& so are all the Doyles for I cant bear the sight of any of them'. As the Doyles were not enough, she widened her venom: 'Kate Hartnett & sister are my biggest enemies also' (p. 207). I rather like Kate Keane, but I hesitate to regard her as a value-neutral source for ideal family relationships. In fact, she was a bit of a nag, even claiming in 1902 that her sister had never once written to her from New Zealand, when the sequence contains independent evidence that Mary had indeed kept in touch.

Kate's sharp tongue may help to explain why her two sisters, Bridget and Mary, preferred the other end of the world. Kate was no doubt telling the truth when she wrote 'I thought my heart would break' when the two girls left for New Zealand (p. 77), but there is equally little doubt that she was mobilising emotion in support of demands for practical help. 'I havent as much clothes as would bring me to mass', she pleaded, asking 'for something to clothe me' so that she could dress decently enough to go job-hunting (p. 140). Kate also wanted help for their unemployed brother John, who weighed in himself with blunt demands and scarcely veiled accusations of desertion. He hoped Mary would pay his way to New Zealand. 'If not you ought to send me to America or else buy tools and work at home' (p. 71). John acknowledged that he had passed through a bad patch, but that was absent Mary's fault too: 'I squandered & raked about for many a week & month from place to place through means of ye forgetting us here at home as ye did' (p. 232). The drink had driven John 'nearly out of my mind' but he and his two brothers had joined the temperance society in the local village of

Clashmore, a place so tiny that today it boasts only four pubs.

We can sympathise with Kate, left at home to struggle against poverty while her sisters made new lives down under. Their mother was sick, and Kate laid on thick Mary's obligation to pay her medical bills as well: 'it is time for you to think of her now if you will ever think & I hope you wont be so false hearted as not to do so.' (p. 82) We do not know whether the sisters in New Zealand responded. As recent migrants, perhaps they lacked spare cash. Kate's tone suggests they might have had grievances of their own. Certainly they did not go out of their way to share their new lives with the folks back at Shanacoole. In November 1884, Bridget married a fellow exile, Michael Harty. Mary, who attended the Dunedin wedding, apparently reported the groom's name. In June 1886 (not very rapidly), Kate wanted to know where he came from, 'for there are many heartys around here' (p. 177). It seems Bridget was keeping quiet that her husband was from Kerry, for even now Waterford people look upon Kerry men as only half civilised. Dr McCarthy suggests that 'his Irishness must have met with approval', but it is just as likely that Kate disapproved of Bridget's decision to lead her own life rather than bankroll her siblings. It is worth noting that it was sixteen years before the next surviving letter, an account of their father's funeral.

This is not to suggest that the Keane family was 'dysfunctional'. They were probably fairly typical and as normal as you would find in rural Ireland. In later years, their long-distance relationships became more harmonious. Kate moved to London where she married and mellowed, noting to her own surprise that many of her English friends were Protestants. By 1910, John was in Chicago, although American life had driven another brother, Jim, back to the drink. When war came, Kate worried about Mary's son, Ernie, who was in the army, even though she had never met him. And, however much she perhaps resented her sister's demands, Mary kept at least some of Kate's letters.

Regrouping the Keane correspondence lifts the veil on bygone Shanacoole. But, more important, it raises questions about the way in which such material should be used. Kate Keane's demands upon her emigrant sisters may indeed reflect conventional attitudes to family obligations, but the way they were expressed tells much about Kate herself, and possibly helps explain why Mary and Bridget headed for a distant hemisphere. In short, can the evidence of emigrant correspondence be assessed without taking more account of the dynamics and tensions in the specific relationships that generated each batch of letters? With the Ireland-New Zealand connection now comprehensively examined in Angela McCarthy's book, there are surely now sufficient examples of this form of emigration study to stand back and think afresh about the material. Alice's Letters should warn us that an element of deconstruction may be required to establish whether correspondents were telling the whole truth. The proclamation of Shanacoole Exceptionalism may imply that Kate Keane was unique in wielding her censorious pen, but somehow I doubt it. One point does stand out from this book: Angela McCarthy herself possesses the appreciation of the literature and the knowledge of the sources needed to provide such a reappraisal. It should prove an intellectually valuable sequel to a highly commendable monograph.

Notes

1. David Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of Consolation: Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia* (Cork, 1994).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Donald Harman Akenson, *Small Differences: Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants, 1815–1922: an International Perspective* (Montreal and Kingston, and Dublin, 1988).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Miles Fairburn, *The Ideal Society and its Enemies: the Foundations of Modern New Zealand Society 1850–1900* (Auckland, 1989).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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