

I Was Only Nineteen*

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I would like to express my sincere thanks to the committee for inviting me to speak at the 18th Annual Gathering at the Irish Famine Monument at Sydney's Hyde Park Barracks. When I look at the list of distinguished men and women who have previously addressed this gathering I feel honoured having been asked to speak today.

Like most of you I have been coming to these events for many years. Previously, I have come as a spectator and a supporter of this worthy event, attending in solidarity with the descendants of the more than 4000 Irish famine orphans. These were girls and young women who between 1848 and 1850 were recruited from workhouses run by the local Poor Law Unions in famine-ravaged Ireland and sent to Australia under a scheme attributed to the Secretary of State for the Colonies Earl Grey.

But, by a quirk of serendipity, with which those among you who are family historians will be familiar, I discovered only late last year that I too am a descendant of an Irish famine orphan, one whose name is engraved on the glass panelling of the monument. So, perhaps it was more than curiosity and solidarity that drew me to this place each year. I will leave it to the aficionados of the X-files to advance that thesis.

My talk today will concentrate on the past. Given that I am an historian, you would expect no less. As they say, 'History is just one thing after another'. However, I would first like to commend the committee for having transcended beyond recollecting the past to supporting programs to assist today's refugees.

The Irish famine orphans, in which all of us here have a particular interest, were themselves refugees, albeit economic refugees, a term which our political leaders today use disparagingly, as if this country was not settled for the past 230 years largely by that category of people. To be uprooted from your home country by force of circumstance, whether it be persecution or the prospect of starvation, and transported to a strange and foreign land can be a deeply traumatic experience. The fact that the refugee is thereby enabled to survive is unarguably a good thing. But that obvious benefit does not eliminate the emotional damage which the forced displacement causes. Knowing of the difficulties which the Irish famine orphans experienced in coming to Australia, it is commendable that the committee has translated that understanding of the plight of 19th-century Irish refugees into empathy for today's refugees and into practical programs of assistance.

Today I will be speaking about Rose (also known as Rosanna) Flemming, formerly an inmate of the workhouse at Athy in County Kildare, who on 3 July 1849 arrived at Port Jackson on the *Lady Peel*.¹ Rosanna was my great-great grandmother on the female line: my maternal grandmother's maternal grandmother.

Looking back at the list of previous speakers and the subjects of their addresses, odd as it might sound, I am only the second descendant of a famine orphan to address this

¹ New South Wales, Australia, Assisted Immigrant Passenger Lists, 1828-1896 for *Lady Peel* 4 July 1849. In the various sources her first name is shown as Rosanna, Rosannah, Rose and Rose Anne with her surname spelt Flemming and Fleming.

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gathering and the first descendant of a famine orphan who landed in Sydney and was accommodated in this magnificent building, the Hyde Park Barracks.²

The title of my talk is 'I Was Only Nineteen'. Many of you will recall that this was the title of a song by the Australian folk group Redgum – a poignant song about the Vietnam War which captures a sense of the bewilderment and alienation that a young soldier felt in travelling to a strange and foreign land and how his experiences on the battlefield there changed his life forever. Each verse ends with the refrain: 'God help me – I was only nineteen'.

Now it might seem that the experiences of a soldier in the Vietnam War is a long way removed, in both time and space, from the Irish famine orphans of more than a century before. But, to me at least, Redgum's haunting song evokes the same sense of bewilderment and alienation that those young women would have felt in travelling to a strange and foreign land, undergoing experiences that changed their lives forever.

Four pieces of information relating to Rosanna Flemming triggered this association in my mind. First was her description in the Famine Orphan Girl Database, which records that on arrival she was 19 and adds the information: 'kitchen maid, cannot read or write, no relatives in colony'.³ The second piece of information was a description by Athy historian Frank Taaffe of the journey which Rosanna would have taken from the Athy workhouse to Port Jackson.⁴ Taaffe wrote:

The young girls walked to the railway station while their trunks were brought by horse and cart. For young girls so poor as to be admitted to the workhouse I can assume that the train journey to Dublin was for all of them the first and only time they travelled on the Irish railway system. They then travelled by steamer to Plymouth On arrival at the Baltic wharf in Plymouth they eventually transferred to the sailing ship *Lady Peel* which reached Sydney after a journey of almost 3 months on 3rd July 1849.

The third piece of information was a letter that appeared in the London *Times* of 22 March 1849 written by a correspondent who visited the *Lady Peel* at the Baltic wharf in Plymouth shortly before it sailed.⁵ The correspondent wrote:

I was much struck with the cleanly, healthy appearance of a cargo of Irish girls from the "unions" on their way to Port Phillip and Sidney [sic]. They were nearly all Roman Catholics, and spending the Sunday on shore, went to mass; as they passed through the town, everyone was struck with their tidy, orderly appearance. I saw them the next day on board and was most pleased to find the pains taken to give them a thorough good outfit in every way.

In the Redgum song there is a verse which mirrors the descriptions by Taaffe and by that clipping from the *Times* of the bewildered young orphan girls watched by onlookers as they marched to the railway station and then through the town of Plymouth to the Baltic wharf in their thoroughly good outfits at the beginning of their journey:

² Melissa Plant, who spoke in 2012, is a descendant of Mary O'Hara from Galway who arrived at Port Phillip on the *Lady Kennaway*.

³ Irish Famine Memorial Sydney (<http://irishfaminememorial.org>). The website's database includes an entry for Rose Flemming (Fleming).

⁴ Frank Taaffe's Athy Eye On The Past, 21 April 2015 (<http://athyeyeonthepast.blogspot.com.au/2015/04/orphan-emigration-scheme-and-athy.html>); *Sydney Morning Herald* 22 May 1849, p. 2.

⁵ *Times* (London) 22 March 1849, p. 8. The letter is signed "SGO".

And Townsville lined the footpaths as we marched down to the quay.
This clipping from the paper shows us young and strong and clean.
And there's me in me slouch hat with me SLR and greens.
God help me - I was only nineteen.

And fourth and finally, as if to square the circle with the soldier in the song, life for Rosanna in the strange and foreign land became a battlefield and she a casualty.

When looking at Earl Grey's scheme to send young women from the workhouses of Ireland to Australia it is easy to fall into the trap of either romanticising it as a noble rescue operation, offering vulnerable young women a chance to escape to a new and prosperous country where land and food were in abundance, or damning it cynically as a means by which the Imperial government alleviated the burden on local Poor Law Union ratepayers by exporting 'workhouse sweepings' in 'bride ships' to supply wives and domestic servants to the lonely men of the Australian colonies.

In his classic study of the Earl Grey scheme, *Barefoot and Pregnant?* – note the question mark in the title – historian Trevor McClaughlin cautions us against such simplistic approaches and challenges us to look deeper into the lives of the individual orphan girls to develop a more nuanced understanding of their collective experience. As McClaughlin informs us, even the term 'Irish orphan girl' is a misnomer: 'in about one quarter of cases, one parent was still alive'.⁶ That was true for Rosanna whose mother was living at Ballyadams, about 7 kilometres from the Athy workhouse. Surely, the pain of separation for both mother and daughter was thus that much more intense.

In a study of the Irish famine orphans who arrived in Sydney in February 1850 on the *Thomas Arbuthnot*, historians Richard Reid and Cheryl Mongan observe:

The circumstances of their coming to Australia – the grim workhouse background, the misery of Ireland during the Famine, their tender ages, their dependence on what is assumed to have been an uncaring state dominated by Dickensian beadle-like values, and the relative absence in their lives of suitable guardians and protectors – all assist to produce a picture of put-upon helplessness which arouses our instincts of compassion for the individual and wrath for the system.⁷

But as their research shows and as McClaughlin points out, the government clothed and equipped the famine orphans with personal belongings and put in place procedures to protect their welfare. As McClaughlin states:

Once it offered them a free passage to Australia, the state became legally responsible for the young women's well-being, their health, their moral and religious welfare and their education and employment.⁸

No doubt such measures, applied appropriately, mitigated the trauma of displacement for many of the orphan girls. And it is true that many of them lived long, happy and fulfilling lives in their new homeland. But it will not surprise those of us familiar with television documentaries on child migration schemes implemented in more recent times, such as *The Leaving of Liverpool*, that the experience for many others was not as propitious.

⁶ Trevor McClaughlin, *Barefoot and Pregnant?: Irish famine orphans in Australia*, Vol 1, Genealogical Society of Victoria, Melbourne, 1991, p. 13.

⁷ Richard Reid and Cheryl Mongan, *'A decent set of girls': the Irish famine orphans of the Thomas Arbuthnot 1849-1850*, Yass Heritage Project, Yass, 1996, p. 3.

⁸ McClaughlin, *Barefoot and Pregnant?*, Vol 1, p. 13.

Evelyn Conlon's novel *Not the Same Sky*, which closely follows the historical facts, gives us a deeper insight into the varied experiences of the orphan girls, as only an accomplished novelist can. Evelyn reminds us that each of them was an individual who had her own way of facing up to the challenges of the profound change which her displacement brought about: some survived; some did not. Of those who survived, some did well; others did not. *Not the Same Sky* is a story of life's lottery and not all were winners.⁹

The novel also puts paid to the idea that the Irish famine orphans were willing participants in the Earl Grey scheme. It is true they accepted the offer of a chance to escape to a new and apparently prosperous land. But it was an offer like that in Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* – an offer they could not refuse: emigration or starvation. In *Not the Same Sky* there is a scene where Surgeon Superintendent Charles Strutt tells Julia Cuffe, one of the orphan girls in his charge, 'But you had a choice. You all had a choice, well you could have said no, I think ...'. To which Julia responds, 'Some choice'.¹⁰

And in famine-ravaged Ireland it did not require a horse-head in the bed to get the message across. In the overcrowded workhouses it was all too plain to see. The Athy workhouse, which opened in January 1844 just before the famine, was designed to accommodate 600 inmates. By February 1849, when Rosanna left on her journey to Australia, it held almost 1400.¹¹ For many of the girls, particularly those from the west of Ireland, the message might have been the sight of emaciated bodies on the roadside, their lips stained green from their last meal of grass and nettles.

After landing in Sydney, Rosanna was given 12-months indentured employment with Dr John Dickson, a medical practitioner and a recently-elected member of the Legislative Council for the seat of Port Phillip in what would soon become the separate colony of Victoria. Dickson had moved from Geelong to Sydney to take his seat just a few weeks before the *Lady Peel* arrived.¹² But Rosanna's employment with him did not last long. On 26 October 1849 her indenture was cancelled by Magistrate Hutchinson Hothersall Browne for 'improper conduct'.¹³ Trevor McClaughlin warns that we should not read too much into that endorsement, accusing Browne of 'naked anti-Irish prejudice' and noting that 'both master and servant tried to work "the system"':¹⁴

Masters thought they could return their unruly servants to Hyde Park Barracks, forgetting that they were already compensated for the orphans' ignorance of domestic service by the low wages they paid. ... In turn, the young women, hearing of better conditions elsewhere (higher wages, a kinder master or mistress) knew full well that insolence or neglect of their duties was the means of terminating their employment.

Nevertheless, in Rosanna's case this was the first of many appearances she would make in the colony's Courts of Petty Sessions. In fact, reading through her long list of convictions for various 'street offences', she could almost be described as a one-woman

⁹ Evelyn Conlon, *Not the Same Sky*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town (Sth Aust), 2013.

¹⁰ Conlon, *Not the Same Sky*, p. 118.

¹¹ Frank Taaffe's Athy Eye On The Past, 23 February 2012

(<http://athyeyeonthepast.blogspot.com.au/2012/02/orphan-emigration-scheme.html>).

¹² *Goulburn Herald* 28 October 1848, p. 3; *Sydney Morning Herald* 16 May 1849, p. 2; *Maitland Mercury* 9 June 1849, p. 2.

¹³ Minutes of Evidence of the NSW Legislative Select Committee on Irish Female Immigrants 1858-1859, Appendix J, Item 46.

¹⁴ McClaughlin, *Barefoot and Pregnant?*, Vol 1, pp. 19, 18.

crime wave. Yet it was not the public who were harmed by her offending, but herself and, no doubt, her family.

On 12 November 1849, a little more than a fortnight after her indenture was cancelled, the 19-year-old Rosanna married at St Mary's Catholic Church 45-year-old James Clark of Surry Hills, a native of County Westmeath, who had arrived in the colony not long before Rosanna.¹⁵ Their first child was born a little more than two years later, and over a period of 17 years they had a total of nine children (5 boys and 4 girls).

In this respect, Rosanna was typical of the Irish famine orphans. As Trevor McClaughlin observes:

[W]e know that they married early, at the tender age of 19 years, on average, and that sixty per cent (60%) of them married within three years of their disembarkation ... [and that] the orphans had a propensity to marry older men. ... The completed family size ... averaged nine (9) children'.¹⁶

But unfortunately for Rosanna, she was also typical of Irish famine orphans in another respect; not of a statistically established profile, but of a stereotype propagated by the colonial opponents of the Earl Grey scheme. While Trevor McClaughlin has done much valuable work in this area, his database is far from complete, so we cannot say for certain how accurate the colonial stereotype was. He notes:

Colonial criticism of the female orphan scheme, starting with the scandal over the orphans who arrived by the first vessel, the *Earl Grey*, rose to such a crescendo that the scheme was brought to an end by 1850. ... In Sydney, as in Melbourne and Adelaide, the arrival of female orphans was a signal for anti-Irish and anti-Roman Catholic elements in the community to give free rein to their prejudice.¹⁷

Nevertheless, he concedes:

One can, of course, find evidence to support the orphans' critics, for example, by looking at prison records.

And he provides some examples, which do not include Rosanna, but could have. Yet he adds:

But this is a spurious way of proceeding. If we look at criminal records, naturally we will find criminals. What we have done here is merely add the bias of expectations to the bias of the evidence itself.¹⁸

So what I now put forward is neither an affirmation nor a refutation of the colonial stereotype but rather the story of an Irish famine orphan who happens to be my great-great grandmother.

After her marriage, Rosanna's first brush with the law was a little more than six years later when in 1856 she was fined 20 shillings for drunkenness. Over the next 33 years she would be convicted more than 20 times for various street offences, mostly related to alcohol, for which she was fined and in some cases imprisoned. The family moved from Sydney to Armidale and then to Muswellbrook. Perhaps that was to break the cycle of recidivism, for after each move there was a pause in her litany of convictions: after the

¹⁵ Certificate of Marriage of James Clarke and Rosanna Flemming No. 300 Vol. 96; Certificate of Death of James Clark 1898/2419. This St Mary's, on the site of the present St Mary's Cathedral, burnt down in 1865.

¹⁶ McClaughlin, *Barefoot and Pregnant?*, Vol 1, pp. 17, 20, 21.

¹⁷ McClaughlin, *Barefoot and Pregnant?*, Vol 1, p. 1.

¹⁸ McClaughlin, *Barefoot and Pregnant?*, Vol 1, Preface.

first move it was five years and after the second, nine. But each time the pattern of offending resumed.

Clearly Rosanna had serious medical and psychological issues. It is not known what triggered them. We know that she lost at least two children in infancy, but perhaps her earlier experiences in Ireland played a part, perhaps it was the trauma of displacement, perhaps it had something to do with her relationship with James, or perhaps there were organic causes. We can only speculate.

I would like to think that in today's more enlightened times the state's health system would intervene early to address such problems. But in mid-Victorian New South Wales with its colonial imitation of Dickensian England, the law was used as a blunt instrument to defeat anti-social behaviour, with punishment rather than intervention the preferred antidote. But lest we be too smug, we should remember that the decriminalisation of public intoxication in New South Wales only occurred in 1979.¹⁹

Surprisingly, despite Rosanna's sad and tragic life, she lived until the age of 71, when, according to the Coroner she died on 29 June 1901 of natural causes, not a bad innings for that time, especially for someone who had lived so rough. Nevertheless, the demons which brought her down so low, were no doubt with her to the end.

As with the young soldier in Redgum's song such damage tends to linger:

And can you tell me, doctor, why I still can't get to sleep?
Any why the Channel Seven chopper chills me to my feet?
And what's this rash that comes and goes, can you tell me what it means?
God help me - I was only 19.

For years while I was researching my family history my mother would often ask me whether I had found any information on her great grandmother Rosanna Flemming. As mentioned at the outset, I only learnt Rosanna's story late last year, which was three years after mum's death in March 2013. Having now uncovered Rosanna's story, I wonder whether mum knew all along and was quizzing me to see if I had found out the family's dark secret or whether she hoped that I might be able to tell her what it was that her aunts and uncles used to whisper to each other behind cupped hands when she was young.

But let me finish on a more cheerful note by quoting from Trevor McClaughlin's concluding paragraph, which gives us a broad and positive perspective of the Irish famine orphans, among them my great-great grandmother Rosanna, who was only 19:

Yet, despite the hardships which many of them endured, they became part of the expansion of Australia's cities and the 'push into the bush'. They were women who made a remarkable contribution to the natural increase of Australia's population. ... [T]hey became founders of large extended families. Their children were instilled with their ambitions, hopes and values. Their descendants enjoyed opportunities unheard of in Ireland. Although much maligned, the female orphans literally became mothers to the Australian character.²⁰

¹⁹ Luke McNamara and Julia Quilter, "Public Intoxication in NSW: The Contours of Criminalisation", (2015) 37 *Sydney Law Review* 1.

²⁰ McClaughlin, *Barefoot and Pregnant?*, Vol 1, p. 23.