

## **THE MCHUGH FAMILY LETTERS**

### **Nineteenth-century emigration**

The McHugh family letters are a collection of over 100 letters sent between 1878 and 1994 with the vast majority dating to between the 1880s and 1900s. Most were written from Australia and America by three brothers, John, Patrick and Thomas McHugh, the great-uncles of Micheal McHugh of Drum, Milltown. It hardly needs saying that the age and number of these letters give them a lasting significance for the McHugh family. However, when they are considered in a wider context, it is possible for even an unrelated reader to gain a real understanding of the relevance of these letters which goes beyond the familial or local, and to view them as a valuable primary historical source.

The bulk of the McHugh letters were written at a time when mass emigration was a major feature of Irish history. The nineteenth-century emigration from Ireland and its causes are well documented with Galway among those counties with the highest rate of departures. The majority of people leaving were heading to America, but a substantial number travelled to Australia. This migration coincided both with the introduction of an improved transatlantic postal service and the facility to send money home. In short, conditions were good for emigrants to maintain reasonable levels of contact with family members remaining in Ireland and for providing financial assistance to them.

Relatively frequent communication and monetary support are factors directly related to what is recognised as a striking characteristic in the pattern of Irish emigration: chain migration, the phenomenon whereby people from a particular location joined others, sometimes family members or neighbours or friends, who had already settled in a new destination. Indeed, this was the manner of the three McHughs' own journeys to Sydney and Chicago; and as subsequent correspondents, they went on adding to the tradition. But for the McHughs, as for countless others, chain migration came at a price. For decades the McHughs made repeated references to those who might join them and their assurances that they would be sending for family and friends were matched by an awareness of the full significance of any such invitation. The McHughs were insistent that potential emigrants should be as prepared as possible to deal with the challenges they would undoubtedly face and to seize opportunities that might be presented. And the writers also acknowledged that departures would cause emotional distress and possible hardship for those remaining in Milltown; hardship which in turn often led to the McHughs overseas offering increased financial help.

Obviously, the poverty which resulted from conditions such as small farms and large families, and the desire or need to escape the injustice of landlordism were reasons for leaving Ireland. These are elements which undeniably drove the Irish from their homeland. However, it is also true that, for some, there was a recognition, or at least hope, of better opportunities to be had by leaving Ireland. In other words, emigration was not always exclusively about simply feeling unable to remain in Ireland. It could also be the case that emigrants felt drawn to try life in another country. In building lives in America and Australia, the McHughs knew both difficulties and opportunity and their letters bring to life the lived experience of emigration over 100 years ago.

## Discovery of the Letters

The letters of John, Patrick and Thomas were mainly sent to their parents (Micheal's great-grandparents), John and Catherine McHugh also of Drim who were tenants of the Seymour estate. Micheal and his wife, Maureen, discovered the letters in the family home where they had been stored for several decades in a tin and so were badly crumpled. In the 1990s, after many hours of painstaking effort, Micheal and Maureen had smoothed the letters rendering them readable again. In 2021, Micheal and Maureen very generously offered them to Milltown Heritage Group.

## The McHugh family

John McHugh married Catherine Flattery in 1851 and John, Patrick and Thomas were three of their four surviving sons. John, aged 25, left Milltown in 1878 sailing to Sydney where he was met by his uncle, Terence McHugh. Patrick, also at the age of 25, followed in 1880. Thomas, aged 21 or 22, emigrated to Chicago in about 1890 where he joined cousins already resident. John eventually ran a 'post car' business (vehicles for hire), Patrick became a policeman and Thomas set up as a horse-shoer. For over 30 years, John, Patrick and Thomas wrote to their parents and to the two siblings, Michael and Honour, who had remained in Milltown. Their letters and a smaller number written to Milltown by other family members offer a fascinating insight into the lives of emigrants as they started anew in a way that facts and statistics cannot.



Thomas McHugh with his wife Delia (nee Coyne), one of their daughters and their two grandchildren believed to be circa 1940.



Michael McHugh (brother of John, Patrick and Thomas) who remained in Drum, Milltown pictured with two of his children, Kate (12) and John (10) in 1898.



Michael McHugh and wife Bridget (nee Higgins) with four of their eleven children, Nellie, Tommy, Julia and Freddie (Faith).

## Emigration

Whether the McHughs felt reluctant yet compelled to leave Ireland, or saw America and Australia as places of opportunity, it is plain that emigration was no easy option. In 1889, John was adamant that Thomas should not consider Australia as a destination because he believed times were as difficult there as in Ireland. At a personal level, the letters make unsurprising and frequent references to homesickness and contain expressions of great fondness for the writers' parents, siblings and wider family, friends and neighbours. Harsh weather and working conditions are also talking points as is a desire to return to Milltown at some stage, if only for a visit which is what Thomas McHugh did in May 1895 when he enjoyed a 'trip which agreed well with me.'

Significant family occasions such as weddings were notified to John and Catherine in Milltown only after the event as, of course, were the births of children. This kind of news was received with great pleasure as shown in the replies from John and Catherine to their sons and daughters-in-law. As their grandchildren who were born in Australia in the 1890s grew older, John and Catherine received letters from them and these too form a small part of the collection.

## Attachment to Ireland and Milltown community

The McHugh brothers left Ireland to establish a different kind of life thousands of miles away, but the conditions which encouraged their departure also ensured that they maintained an interest in the momentous developments in Ireland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their letters and those of their relatives sometimes comment, albeit briefly, on the idea of Home Rule, on the actions of Michael Collins in 1921 and on the call for the end of landlordism. Occasionally, these observations on major political events are linked very closely to their impact on the McHugh family circumstances. John McHugh wrote from Sydney in March 1896, nearly twenty years after he left Ireland, referring to the sale of the Seymour estate (through the Land Commission). He was optimistic about the effect of the sale for the McHughs, noting, 'You have something to look forward to now'. Other McHugh family documents show that John McHugh senior was in the process of buying some of Seymour's land while Thomas was back in Milltown in May 1895. That purchase did not prevent Thomas' return to America, but his interest in home affairs continued. In December 1906, Thomas wrote, 'I see that ye are having some exciting times over there. I believe we can all go back after a while and get a good farm.'

In addition to telling their parents of personal events in their lives and remarking more generally on Ireland, John, Patrick, Thomas, their uncle Terence and their cousins were all concerned with the idea of sending for other family members or friends in Milltown to join them. While often emphasising the need to be a hard worker, there was, too, a recognition that the women who emigrated might be spared what was seen as a harsher life in Ireland. And the women themselves in their letters, also included in the collection, make occasional references to how much easier life was in America and how well the country suited them.



Kate McHugh with her husband Thomas Kelly on their wedding day in 1921. Kate left Milltown in 1906 to join her Uncle Thomas in Chicago.

## Transcription and online presentation

The original letters in the main are in very reasonable condition and indicate good levels of literacy at a time when many people were still unable to write. Some letters, though, are incomplete and others damaged, faded, not fully legible, or are overwritten in parts. To make the original scanned texts as accessible as possible, they have been transcribed and as part of that process some adjustments to spelling, punctuation and grammar were made. However, it was important to retain the tone and style of the writer and therefore these corrections were minimised allowing minor errors and idiosyncrasies to stand where they do not affect comprehension. The letters are presented chronologically, with approximations used where possible for those which were undated by the writer. As a result, of course, some may be slightly out of order.

(Margaret Marlow August 2021.)



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