

MARY FLANAGAN AND THE STORY OF ASSISTED MIGRATION

FROM

MOUNTBELLEW WORKHOUSE TO WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Every so often you discover a story that's begging to be told. This, the story of Mary Flanagan, is one such. Her story is part of our local and national history and one that is largely unknown in current times.

On 24th July 2015 I had the pleasure of meeting three Australians, who while passing through Moylough en route from Mountbellew to Galway, spotted the sign for the Community Resource & Heritage Centre and decided to call in. Aleysha McGrath, her husband David, and her sister Wendy Bethune had been in Mountbellew trying to find information on their Great Grandmother Mary Flanagan who'd emigrated from there to Western Australia in 1852/'53.

The years struck me as significant being just at the end of the Famine; my immediate thought was of the Workhouse in Mountbellew. I knew of the Assisted Migration Programme and that Mountbellew Workhouse had participated in the scheme. Famine ravaged Ireland between 1845 and 1852. A new disease "potato blight" led to total failure of the potato crop, on which the majority of the population depended. It is estimated that a million people died and a million more emigrated.

Many of those who remained were forced to enter the workhouses as a last resort. Workhouses were where impoverished people who had no job or home sought refuge. They earned their keep by doing jobs in the workhouse. Also in the workhouses were orphaned and abandoned children, the physically and mentally sick, and the disabled, the elderly and unmarried mothers. People had to be destitute to enter. Life in the workhouse was harsh and cruel. Families were separated husbands from wives and children from parents. They were not allowed further contact with one another and punished if caught speaking to each other. The food was poor, there were many rules and punishments were harsh. People were hungry, frustrated, badly treated, bored and mostly without hope. Because of the overcrowding and weakened state of the people disease spread rapidly leading to large numbers dying in the workhouses also. Many preferred prison to the workhouse.

Mountbellew Workhouse was built about a mile from the town in the townland of Bovinion. It was built on a six acre site, designed by architect George Wilkinson to house 500 inmates. It cost £5,150 to build plus an additional £920 for fixtures and fittings.

One of the ways that workhouse numbers decreased was through emigration. The cost of emigration to landlords was less than that of keeping paupers in the workhouse. An Emigration Commission was set up. Its representatives visited every workhouse in Ireland. Those who wanted to emigrate were offered free passage, clothing and a little money. It is estimated that between the years 1848 – 1852 there were 4,175 orphan girls aged 14-18 years who left Irish workhouses for Australia. Girls were in greater demand than boys because of the shortage of women in Australia. Initially it was hoped that they would find work in their new country, then marry and raise families.

Two groups, approximately 30 per group, of orphan girls left Mountbellew in 1852 for Freemantle, Western Australia via Plymouth in England. The first group sailed on “The Travencore” departing 30th September 1852 and arrived on 13th January 1853. At the moment there is little information about them. The second group sailed on “The Palestine” and arrived 28th April 1853. Mary Flanagan was numbered among this group. Another group of 50 girls from Mountbellew were sent to Canada on “The Primrose” in 1853. They had spent the following number of years in workhouses: - 7 spent 2 – 3 yrs., 26 spent 3 – 5 yrs., 15 spent 5 – 7 yrs., 2 spent over 7 yrs. On arrival they were taken to the Sisters of Charity in Bytown, Ontario to be trained as domestic servants, later it is believed that many moved to Toronto or Hamilton for work.

Mary Flanagan left Mountbellew Workhouse in 1852, aged 18yrs., along with 29 others bound for Freemantle, Western Australia. They would have had a medical to ensure they were fit to undertake such a long voyage. Before they left each of them was given a box containing clothing, bonnets, stockings shoes, soap, a bible and prayer book. One can only begin to imagine what was going through their minds: - a mixture of sadness, apprehension, hope..... most probably had never been much beyond the area they grew up in. They’d also endured and survived the horrors of the famine. Now they faced a long sea voyage and a new, unfamiliar country. They departed Mountbellew for Dublin and were taken by boat to Plymouth. There they had some days to rest and possibly another medical before boarding “The Palestine” on Nov. 30th 1852. The Palestine was a 467 ton barque owned by Sim & Co., London, built in Newcastle in 1834. There were 229 people on board the ship, many were British families emigrating as the men were tradesmen needed in the colonies, while some were the wives (and children) of convicts who were being allowed to reunite with their husbands. The Mountbellew girls travelled under the care of a Matron – a Mrs. Amos.

The journey took 5 months with the ship docking in Freemantle on 28th April 1853, at this time the harbour in Freemantle was shallow and the passengers had to climb down ladders into open boats to be rowed ashore. They’d already had an eventful voyage having encountered bad weather due to the ship sailing so late in the year, hence the length of the voyage. There were well founded fears that the ship had been lost at sea. Supplies ran low and they docked at the Cape of Good Hope from March 19th – 22nd 1853 to restock essential items. It was reported to the British House of Commons that there were 13 deaths (2 adults and 11 children) and 8 births during the voyage. It was also stated that the carpenters were quickly finding work, and that the unmarried women were being hired as domestic servants. After that the greatest demand was for farm labourers and shepherds, those who were blacksmiths were finding it difficult to get employment. The Immigration Agent an F.D. Wittenoom also reported that the emigrants said they were well treated on the voyage.

The story of Mary's life in Australia was told to me by Aleysha McGrath; her great granddaughter. Mary may like many of the other girls have initially found work as a domestic servant on arrival in Australia. The following year in January 1854 at Bunbury, W. Australia, she married George Armstead Smith. Her marriage certificate gives her father's name as Thomas Flanagan. George would later change the family name to Brown. He himself became known as Henry George Armstead Brown (HGA Brown).

On October 20th 1858, five years after her arrival in Australia, Mary placed an advert in a Melbourne newspaper "The Argus" seeking her sister and brother. It read as follows: -

"Mount Bellew, Galway – Anne or Patrick Flannigan, If you are in Victoria, you will hear of your sister Mary, by addressing a letter to Mary, care of this paper." Recently it has come to light that Patrick immigrated to Boston, USA in 1854 where he married and reared a family. He gave his parents' names as Thomas and Anne on his marriage cert. His descendants believe he was from Kilchreest and that his sister Anne had married and immigrated to California possibly during the gold rush of the 1850's.

Mary and Henry had eleven children, nine of whom survived infancy. Their first child, a daughter was born in Bunbury in 1856. The family of three then left Bunbury and moved to north-eastern Victoria. The remainder of the children were born here, the youngest born in 1878. Henry worked as a carpenter initially and later became a school teacher. This required the family to move on a regular basis. Later in life he owned a photography studio. His final profession was Inspector of Public Works in Maryborough, Victoria.

In 1892 their eldest son Arthur was killed by a one punch assault outside "The Shamrock Hotel" in Bendigo, Victoria. Arthur was 33yrs. old and an off duty police officer who was married with a young son and daughter. During WW1 the son, who was by then himself married with two children joined the Australian Army and lost his life on the Gallipoli Peninsula on 25th April 1915.

Mary herself died in 1898, aged 62yrs. She died in Ballarat, Victoria and is buried in Ballarat New Cemetery with Henry who died 6yrs later. Henry was killed in Fitzroy, Melbourne in April 1904. He was alighting from a tram on returning from the opera when he was hit by a horse and buggy. It was a hit and run incident and the driver of the buggy was subsequently charged with manslaughter but acquitted.

Things have come full circle with the return of her great granddaughters who were thrilled to learn about the Irish side of their family history and have remained in contact since then. It was a pleasure to meet and help them with their research.