

Transportation, Australia, and the Workhouse Orphans

By David K. McDonnell, from *ClanDonnell: A Storied History of Ireland*

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The word “transportation” had a different meaning to the Irish in the first half of the nineteenth century than it does to you and me today. It did not mean a way to get from point A to point B. It meant shipment to one of the several penal colonies of Australia.

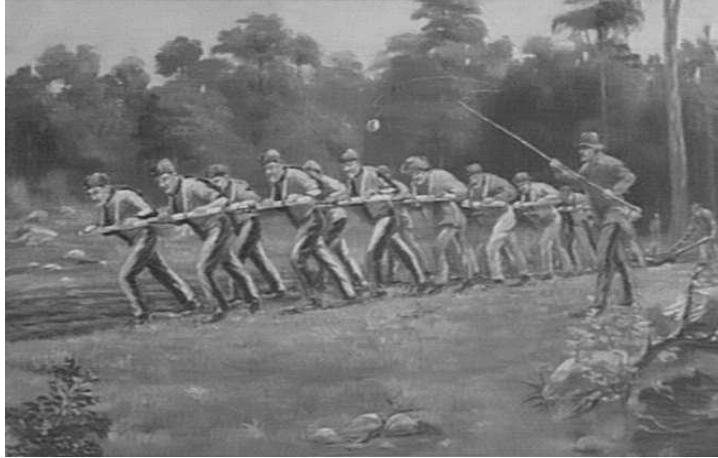
The United Kingdom did not have the extensive prison system that it and other modern nations have today. Ireland had few prisons. It had many local jails for short-term confinement. Nearly every town also had gallows for the many hanging offenses.

But prisons were a different matter. They were expensive to maintain, and from the British perspective, they didn’t work. The conventional wisdom of the time was that criminals were defective in character and that this defect was somehow genetic. None of the more modern concepts relating to prison sentencing – rehabilitation, punishment, deterrence – made sense in dealing with people born with bad blood. The best way to deal with criminals, it was thought, was either to hang or exile them.

The Banishment Act of 1716 allowed the government to banish prisoners from Britain or Ireland for almost any crime. The English sent convicts to Georgia for several years, but this practice ended when Georgia and the other colonies won independence in the American Revolution.

To the Irish, one of the crimes subject to banishment was more galling than the others. This crime was poaching. There had always been plenty of wild game in Ireland, as well as fish in Irish rivers, but hunting game and fishing for salmon was reserved for landlords. No matter how hungry an Irish family was, it could not be fed by hunting or fishing. Of course some Irish ignored this, but they did so at their peril. The punishment for poaching was transportation.

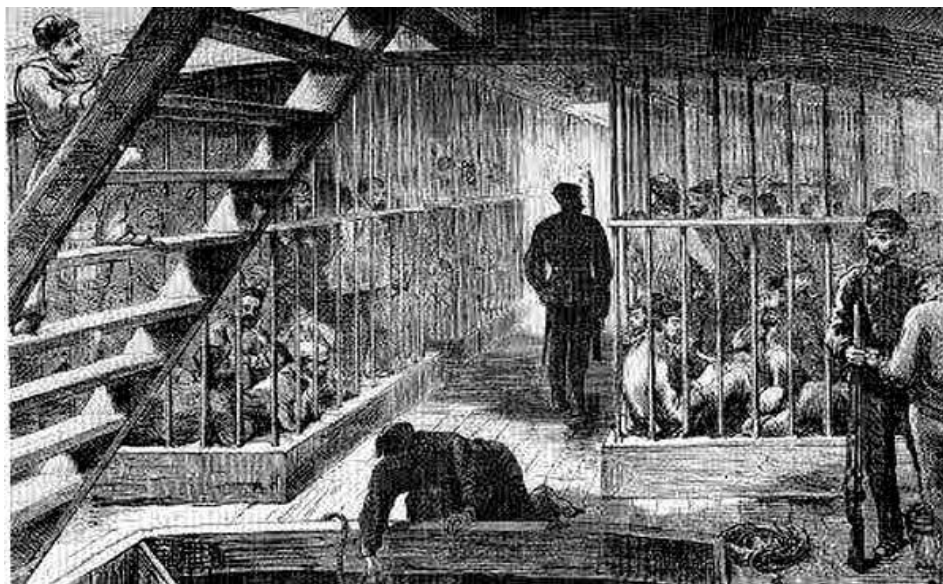
Royal Navy Captain James Cook first discovered the Australian continent in 1770, but the British did not initially attempt to colonize it. After the American Revolution, the British looked for somewhere else to dump their prisoners, and Australia became it. The first convicts were transported in 1788, and shipments continued until 1868. The original convicts arrived on the “First Fleet” on January 26, 1788, and this date is still celebrated as Australia Day.



Australian penal colony from *Sky History*

The first penal colony was Botany Bay (later Sydney). Thousands of Irish rebels were sent there after the 1798 Rebellion. The two worst colonies were islands – Norfolk Island and Van Diemen’s Land (later renamed Tasmania). Penal life in Australia was extremely harsh and the mortality rate exceedingly high, but those who served out their sentences typically remained in Australia. Their descendants are still there.

The first Irish were transported to Australia in 1791. The practice stopped (with a few exceptions) in 1853 at the request of the Australians. They thought continued transportation of Irish convicts would deter immigration by non-convict settlers. Children as young as twelve were transported for crimes. Younger children were sent to Australia as well along with their transported mothers. This policy wasn’t so much to keep mother and child together as it was to get the children out of the country. Otherwise they might become a burden to taxpayers under the poor laws.



Convicts on route to Botany Bay from *History’s Shadow*

Transportation records are sketchy, but I did find a handful of McDonnells sent to Australia. Ellen (or Ellenor) Brien, maiden name McDonnell, from Kildare, was sentenced to seven years for a felony. She was thirty-five years old and was sent to Australia aboard the *Duke of Cornwall*. Most convicts aboard this ship ended up in Tasmania, and that is probably where Ellen went.

Sandy McDonnell was a British soldier who had evidently had enough of army life. He was transported for life in 1800 for desertion and was sent to Botany Bay. Christopher McDonnell of Dublin, aged twenty-seven, was sentenced to ten years in 1830 for stealing. Bridget McDonnell from Roscommon was another thief. Bridget was convicted of stealing clothes in 1830 and sentenced to seven years in an Australian prison colony. Thomas McDonnell's crime was a bit more serious. He was convicted in Dublin of highway robbery in 1837. He was originally sentenced to death, but his sentence was commuted to seven years in Australia. He was only twenty years old.

These seven- to ten-year sentences are deceiving. They defined the number of years the convict was required to spend in servitude, but the convicts rarely came home upon completion of the sentence. If the family was in court to witness the sentencing, this would be the last time they would see the convicted family member. This is why the "transportation" was so dreaded by the Irish.

A strange thing happened, though, during the Hunger: many people committed crimes, not because they thought they could get away with it, but in the hopes that they would be caught. They actually wanted to be put in jail and transported to Australia.

One of the more alarming figures of the era was the high number of youthful offenders. Young men committed the same offense over and over again. They were caught, arrested and released. Officials were reluctant to imprison or transport them because of their young age, but they had no choice when the same young man was arrested for the same offense a second, third, or fourth time.

Window "sashing" (the breaking of windows) became a daily occurrence in some Mayo towns. The culprit simply broke a window in the center of town and then another and another until he was caught.

Why? Because the British fed those in jail. And they fed those on board ships bound for Australia. And because food was available for the transported inmates once in Australia.

Another group of Irish "volunteered" to go to Australia. These Irish were young girls. While they did volunteer for the journey, they may have been a bit young for such a decision, but they may not have felt like they had much of a choice.

While Ireland was considered by the British to be too over-populated, Australia was a vast continent with few people. Britain was overpopulated as well and had far too many inmates in its own workhouses. British poor laws allowed commissioners to send these paupers to

Australia, and Australian employers offered to pay the cost for shipping. But few commissioners in England took advantage of the offer, and few English paupers were shipped to Australia.

During the Hunger, the Irish workhouses were terribly overcrowded. Well over half of the inmates were children under the age of fifteen. These children were called “orphans,” although many of them still had a living parent or two. Once in a workhouse, they were wards of the state and their parents (even if living) no longer had any parental control. These children were “orphans” whether their parents were living or not. This is why the Irish hated the workhouses. Moms or dads who checked into a workhouse with their children could say a permanent “good-bye” to the children. They were now orphans.

Australia was not only short of laborers but it was also short of women. There were far more men in Australia than women, and there were plenty of Irish girls in the workhouses.

To the British, this was all too easy. It could simultaneously help alleviate Australia’s shortage of workers and shortage of women and alleviate Ireland’s surplus of poor orphan girls. All it needed to do was ship Irish orphan girls to Australia.

In three years, 1848 to 1850, a total of 4,175 Irish orphan girls were shipped to Australia. Most of the girls went to Sydney, with a lesser number sent to Port Phillip Bay (which includes Melbourne) and Adelaide.

Their clothing allowance for the voyage consisted of six shifts, two flannel petticoats, six pairs of stockings, two pairs of shoes, and two gowns, one made of warm material. Their food allowance was increased from the basic “milk and gruel” standard workhouse diet to include such items as beef, pork, preserved meat, peas, rice, sugar, and butter. The better diet was to ensure their good health on the long journey so they would be employable and marriage-worthy. While some girls did not survive the long journey, the death rate was far lower than those in the coffin ships that transported the Irish to North America.

Once in Australia, the girls were hired out as servants. Those in Sydney were kept at the British army’s Hyde Park Barracks until hired. The barracks had formerly been a prison for Irish and English convicts.



Hyde Park Barracks, Sydney, Australia

A clipping from a contemporary newspaper article in Sydney shows the “hiring room” where prospective employers met the orphan girls and made the necessary arrangements for hiring. I’m not sure if these affairs were as much a “job fair” as a “meat market.”

As anticipated and planned, the girls matured into women and married Australian men. On average, the girls married at age nineteen. Most of the orphan girls became the brides of farmers and gold miners and most had large families. Some of them died young in the harsh life as pioneer farmers.

Some of these girls certainly found their Australian princes and lived the rest of their lives happily ever after, and just as certainly, this wasn’t true for all of them. The girls were sent to Australia to be domestic servants. Most of them were peasant girls. They had spent their short lives in Ireland without ever wearing shoes. They grew up sharing their huts with a pig and a cow. They certainly didn’t know that the fork goes on the right and the knife goes on the left (or is it the other way around?), nor did they have special skills in polishing silver.

If the Australian employer was dissatisfied with the servant girl’s level of service, he might simply discharge her. Many of the orphan girls roamed the streets of Australian towns shortly after their arrival and discharge from employment. With few alternatives, some of them turned to prostitution.



Hyde Parks Barracks Hiring Room

The girls also tended to be quite independent minded, much to the distress of their Australian employers. There were many complaints of leaving the premises without permission,

wandering into town, or spending too much time with other nearby orphan girls. They were prone to the use of bad language and sometimes “unruly” behavior. Keep in mind that these were the reports of the employers. The unfortunate part of this story is that we have almost no record from the girls. They, of course, did not issue official reports and were never interviewed for official reports. Many of them were illiterate and left no diaries or letters behind.

We can only surmise what life must have been like for a fifteen-year-old orphan girl. She would have been starving and on the verge of death outside of the workhouse in Ireland. In the workhouse, she would have been fed but also would have been separated from her family (if they were still living) and subjected to the harsh life of the workhouse. She was placed on board a ship and journeyed nine thousand miles to the other side of the earth where she was expected to work as a servant for strangers in a strange land. If she were a bit rebellious at this, it would be understandable.

The ship records for the exported orphan girls are still available. All of the girls were shipped first to Plymouth, England. Several McDonnell girls were included on the ship records.

Specifically, three McDonnell orphan girls sailed from Plymouth to Adelaide, South Australia, aboard the *Elgin*. They left May 31 and arrived September 12, 1849 – a trip of over one hundred days. Catherine McDonnell was seventeen years old and Honorah McDonnell fifteen. Norah was also on board. Her age was not reported. Norah was one of those who did not fit in well in the life of a domestic servant. She was (at least allegedly) a prostitute. Her only arrest was in 1850 for “indecent language.”

Four McDonnell girls – Eliza (age seventeen), Mary (eighteen), Johanna (fifteen) and Margaret (fifteen) – sailed aboard the *Pemberton* from Plymouth to Melbourne, Victoria, in 1849. Eliza was from Dublin and the other three were from County Clare. Mary McDonnell (eighteen) was from Fermanagh. She sailed aboard the *Derwent* from Plymouth and arrived in Melbourne in 1850. All five of these girls found employment as domestic servants.

Another four McDonnell orphans ended up in Sydney. Jane (eighteen) from Belfast and Rose (eighteen) from Armagh sailed on the *Earl Grey* in 1848. Bridget (seventeen) and Catherine (fifteen), both from Westmeath, sailed on the *Digby* in 1849. All four were employed as domestic servants. Bridget’s indenture was cancelled within a year because of her ill health.

Many people in Australia today are descendants of these Irish orphan girls and were instrumental in creating a monument in their honor. The Irish Famine Memorial in Sydney was dedicated in 1988, 150 years after the first arrival of the orphan girls. The president of the Republic of Ireland was at the dedication, as were many descendants of the orphan girls.

The monument is appropriately located at the Hyde Park Barracks. It features a sculptured stool and table as well as an open wall. The names of each of the Irish orphan girls are engraved on the wall. There is immense symbolism in the design of the monument, much of which is beyond me. I nevertheless encourage you to see it if you are ever in Sydney or to view the images online if you are not.



The names of two girls named Catherine McDonnell, as well as Rose McDonnell, are inscribed on the monument. The monument makers missed the others. I did not.