

Famine1

Mná in Aimsir a' Ghorta – Women in the Time of the Famine

Life Expectancy: Before the Famine, men and women had an average life expectancy of 38 years. During the Famine, this dropped to 18.17 years for men. For women, it dropped to 22.4.

In the Swedish Famine of 1772-73, the Ukrainian Holodomor Famine in the 1930s and two different outbreaks of measles in Iceland during the 1800s, women also survived longer. Dr Virginia Zarulli determined that women, almost everywhere, live longer than men.

“Finding that women have longer life expectancy under harsh conditions would support the hypothesis that the female survival advantage is biologically determined,” she wrote. **At present**, an Irish woman is expected to live until 83.2 years of age, while male life expectancy is 78.7.

Impacts of the Famine on Women: Women experienced the tragedy in distinct and painful ways. Some, selflessly, cared for the wretched victims of hunger and disease. Abroad, the **Grey Nuns** of Montréal were one of a number of female religious orders, members of which lost their own lives in the Fever Sheds, where they cared for the diseased Irish who arrived in Canada in 1847. At home, the **Sisters of Mercy**, founded by **Catherine McAuley** in 1831, ministered to the needs of Famine victims.

A picture, known wherever the Famine is spoken of, is that of 'Bridget O'Donnel, and Children', drawn by the artist James Mahoney, for The Illustrated London News (December 1849).



BRIDGET O'DONNEL AND CHILDREN.

(Source: Photo12/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

An interview with Bridget was published with the drawing. Before the Famine, she and her husband had rented some seven acres in the County Clare. Behind with the rent, they were evicted two months before

Bridget gave birth to a still-born child. Her son, then 13, died 'with want and with hunger'. Like hundreds of thousands of other Irish women, she disappeared from the record. Yet her story and her image appeared in one of the most widely-circulated newspapers of the day.

Hundreds of petitions by poor women, some written on scraps of paper, others penned by literate neighbours, highlighted one way in which these women were trying to ensure that they and their families survived. Most petitions were addressed to the local Landlord, telling many individual stories. Thus, Widow Neary of Strokestown petitioned for ten shillings to allow her to go to England. She promised: 'I never will be of further trouble to your honour or any other gentleman in the country'. On Christmas Eve, 1846, Mary Lattimore of Cootehill asked for 'a small complement of flesh meat' for her starving children. The indifference of English Landlords, to the suffering of the poor, was a reflection of absolute power.



An evicted woman and her children dig for potatoes: The Illustrated London News, January 1849 (Source: Universal History Archive/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

Orphaned teenage Girls: Over 4,000, girls, facing anti-Irish sentiment, discrimination and abuse, were 'emigrated' to **Australia** under the Earl Grey Scheme. He was the Secretary of State for the Colonies.

The first girls arrived aboard the Lady Kennaway on September 11th, 1848. Most of them were from Galway, Mayo, Sligo and Donegal. Many spoke Irish. Between 1849 and 1851, the Earl Grey scheme took girls aged from 14 to 19 from Workhouses across Ireland, to work in Australia as servants, and to help populate the new colony. After the horrors of starvation and loss of family and home, after surviving destitution and abuse in the infamous Workhouses and enduring an arduous sea voyage, the orphans reached a strange and intimidating new land, where welcome did not await them.



Image: Wikicommons

According to the 1848 records of the *Lady Kennaway*, the complement of 191 orphans were ‘well behaved and in excellent health’, enjoying the benefit of a **full allowance of rations** on the 85-day voyage. Later, some orphans suffered abuse from unscrupulous employers, and many again fell on hard times. All were subjected to rampant discrimination, as anti-Irish sentiment grew with the arrival of each ship.

An excerpt from *The Argus*, Melbourne's main newspaper, on April 4th, 1850 said: *"Another ship-load of female immigrants from Ireland has reached our shores, and yet, though everybody is crying out against the monstrous infliction and the palpable waste of the immigration fund furnished by the colonists, in bringing out **these worthless characters** ..."*

Another excerpt from *The Argus* on April 24th, 1850 read: *"The whole country cries out against the further admission into our colony, of such **degraded beings** as the majority of the female orphans have been found. ... every vessel that brings an increase,, to our female population, brings... **vice and lewdness** that is now to seem rampant in every part of our town. From this class we have received... no virtuous, and industrious young women, fit wives for the labouring part of the community; ... the floods of iniquity that are now sweeping **every trace of morality** from the most public thoroughfares of our city."*

Against the odds, some orphans did flourish, married and raised families in the harsh, unforgiving colony.



Sarah O'Malley was 17-years-old when she arrived in Australia.

Sarah Matilda O'Malley was 17-years-old when she arrived aboard the Pemberton, which docked in Melbourne, in May 1849. Ship records showed O'Malley was a Catholic and could read and write. She married in 1850 and settled in Victoria.



The Famine Rock was unveiled in Melbourne in 1998, in memory of those who died in the Irish Famine, in praise of the dispossessed who came to Hobson's Bay, in sorrow for dispossessing the Bunurong and Woiworung peoples (but in a spirit of reconciliation) and in solidarity with all those who suffer hunger today. The Rock is a catch-all lament for the ills of yesteryear and today. There is an inscription, in Irish, from the poem *Na Prátaí Dubha* (The Black Potatoes), by **Máire Ní Dhroma** in the 1850s:

Ní hé Dia a cheap riamh an obair seo - It is not God Who ever thought up this work
Daoine bochta 'chur le fuacht is fán - to put Poor People out into the cold, with nowhere to go

The rock was inspired by the "Crying Stone" near a bridge in West Donegal, where emigrants, mostly monoglot Irish speakers of the 19th and 20th centuries, started their long and lonely journey. An inscription notes:

"Fhad le seo a thagadh cairde agus lucht gaoil an té a bhí ag imtheacht chun na Coigríche, b'annseo an scaradh. Seo Droichead na nDeor." (Friends and relations of the person emigrating would come this far. Here they parted. This spot is the Bridge of Tears.)

Kenmare Women: The history of Kenmare, in the County Kerry, was **written by the victors** (as is usual). Thomas Babington Macaulay was a protégé of the powerful Landlord family, the Lansdownes.



Lansdowne Lodge, Kenmare

His references to our history, in 1849, are bigoted and attempt to show how the colonials civilised us, whom he describes as 'savages'. An account, as follows, is heartless.

Outsiders would come to Kenmare, in carriages, by times stopping for a night on their way from Killarney to Bantry. Poverty-stricken women were targeted. The Guardians of the local Workhouse took it upon themselves to judge such poor women, including those who became pregnant. They were allocated a special **'penitential ward'** with a separate **'penitential stairs'** so that 'their shameful society will not be imposed upon those whose character is correct'. In hypocrisy repugnant to common decency they claimed: "it would be an injustice to the virtuous, while it would be **a boon to the vile**, to allow them at once to bring their **polluted character** and their bastard children into the company of the others".

The Poor Law Commissioners, recognising the naked duplicity, suggested the term **'separation ward'** be used, to be less punitive, but the Guardians insisted on **'punishment ward'**.



A 'peasant' farmer in Kenmare in his one-room bothán (cabin)

In or out of the Workhouse, women often bore the brunt of poverty. Running a family, in a one-roomed cabin, will have been hard, even when potatoes were plentiful.

Women in Dungarvan Workhouse: Numbers in the Workhouse increased as Famine set in. Women accounted for the greatest percentage of inmates, in a ratio of three to one. For one thing, farm labourers were in demand because of emigration. In the Workhouse itself a greater variety of trades was taught to boys, namely, weaving, tailoring and carpentry. Girls were mostly trained as servants.

In 1854 a visiting Committee recommended that a separate ward in Dungarvan Workhouse be provided for the mothers of illegitimate children. In January 1855 the Female Idiot Ward, then unoccupied, was converted into an apartment for the women with such children. These *'dissolute females'* and their children were not allowed into the dining hall with the other women. All their food was sent to them in their apartment. Thus there was complete segregation of these women from the other inmates.

The Irish Poor Relief Act 1838 stated that unmarried mothers were liable for the support of their illegitimate children up to the age of 15. The natural father had no liability under this act. [2] This was one of the main reasons why a high proportion of births within the Workhouse were illegitimate, as unmarried women often had no option but to enter the Workhouse to have their children. A lot of them left the house soon afterwards with their children. The Act was amended in 1860's, making the natural father liable for the support and maintenance of his illegitimate child.



Charles Maclver Grierson's Women Potato Diggers in the West (1903) Crawford Art Gallery Cork

The Refractory (Unmanageables') Ward: The Refractory Ward was located in the front building. Its purpose was to accommodate unmanageable women, and **women of bad character**. Prostitutes were also accommodated in this ward. There was a separate yard attached to this ward. Therefore there was no contact between this group and the other inmates of the Workhouse. In May, 1852, the Board of Guardians ordered that the privy (outdoor toilet) located adjacent to the Refractory Ward be converted into a Refractory Lock-up cell (or 'black hole'). Noxious 'fumes' were emanating from the privy.

Probationary Wards: There were two probationary wards: one for men and one for women. The Probationary Ward for women was used to accommodate women who were being held for misdemeanours. They were detained for a certain period of time. In February, 1854, **sixteen women** were sent to this ward for **not properly washing clothes** in the laundry - resulting in the wastage of soap.

Ascendancy/Religious Women: Women were not solely victims — a small minority had agency and authority — as workhouse matrons, care-givers, poetesses and fundraisers. Individual women of the Ascendancy Class were moved to help, giving an insight into the rôle of the 'Big House'.



(Photo by Eye Ubiquitous/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

Surviving letters of **Lady Sligo**, of Westport House in County Mayo, reveal her sympathy. She and her young son George had well-formed characters. They responded in practical ways towards the crisis unfolding in the West, supplying their tenants with blankets and food. She was instrumental in bringing the **Sisters of Mercy** to Westport, to help the poor. One of the **three Sisters** who came was a **Mother Francis Warde** – who later founded more religious communities in the USA than any other woman. The Sisters ministered to the needs of Famine victims. Mayo was one of the hardest hit areas. A **Sister Xavier Peppard** contracted **Famine Fever**. She was, at the age of nineteen, amongst several Sisters to die.

In 1847 **Mary Ann McCracken**, 77, sister of the executed leader of the 1798 Rising, Henry Joy McCracken, was a founding member of the Belfast Ladies' Association for the Relief of Irish Destitution, established by women of all denominations. Subscription lists were drawn up, a fund-raising bazaar was planned and appeals were made to England and Scotland. By March, over £2,000 had been raised. The relief had been intended for the western counties, but as distress grew worse in Belfast, a separate committee assisted the local poor.



An engraving of Maria Edgeworth (1767 - 1849) from the Alonso Chappel painting. (Photo by Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

In Edgeworthstown in the County Longford, **Maria Edgeworth** used her international fame to appeal to women in America, stating that, 'during my sixty-six years residence in Ireland, I never knew of distress equal to the present'. She was touched by a donation from **children in Boston**, of £150 worth of food, with a note, 'To Miss Edgeworth, for her poor'.

Maria also asked the Quaker Committee in Dublin for leather to make brogues for men and boys working in bad weather on the public works. Additionally, the income from her short story 'Orlandino' was used to purchase grain for the local poor 'to encourage them to cook at home and **not be mere craving beggars**'.



Asenath Nicholson, an American visitor, wrote about what she witnessed during the Famine

Asenath Nicholson, an American abolitionist travelled throughout Ireland in 1847 and wrote forthright and distressing accounts of what she saw. She was impressed by the Belfast women, averring, 'The Belfast Ladies' Association embraces an object which lives and tells, and will continue to do so, when they who do so shall no longer be on earth'.

The precise number of women who died during the Famine is not known: death registers were not kept. In any event, people, living or dying in the uplands and isolated areas, are said **never to have been accounted for**.

<https://www.irishcentral.com/news/scientists-studying-irish-famine-reveal-women-more-likely-to-survive-life-threatening-situations>

<https://www.rte.ie/history/famine-ireland/2020/0831/1162378-hidden-heroes-women-and-the-great-famine/>

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<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/sex-savages-and-starvation-the-survival-of-kenmare-in-famine-times-1.4678761>

[https://waterfordmuseum.ie/exhibit/web/Display/article/330/19/Desperate Haven The Famine in Dungarvan Women And Children In The Workhouse .html](https://waterfordmuseum.ie/exhibit/web/Display/article/330/19/Desperate%20Haven%20The%20Famine%20in%20Dungarvan%20Women%20And%20Children%20In%20The%20Workhouse.html)



The Square, Kenmare