



IRISH FEMALE IMMIGRATION TO SOUTH AUSTRALIA

DURING THE GREAT FAMINE.

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INTRODUCTION.

Irish migration to Australia during the Great Famine^{*} constitutes an interesting but neglected story. It is interesting both because of its effect on the Australian colonies themselves, and because of its contrast with the notorious Famine emigration to the Americas. It has been neglected because the numbers which migrated to Australia were small in comparison with the human flood which surged to the New World; but perhaps also, one suspects, because its pattern does not harmonise with the picture (often painted by those writing of the trans-Atlantic migration) of a neglectful British Government, fever ships, and emigrants dying on the threshold of their new homeland. Australian migration represents one of the happier aspects of the Famine, being beset by few of the problems of its American counterpart. Almost all Famine immigrants to Australia sailed under government-assisted schemes, for the Australian colonies, forced to compete for immigrants with the much shorter American run, instituted assisted-passage migration which the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission organised under the supervision of the British Colonial Office. Such government management not only resulted in a high standard of shipping, but also in commendable efforts to help the emigrants before departure and after arrival.

* I shall take "during the Great Famine" to mean the decade 1845-55.

The portion of the Irish Famine migration with which this thesis is concerned, is the migration of some five thousand single Irish women to the young colony of South Australia. In 1848, six hundred and twenty-one Irish orphan girls were sent out under a specific project within the general assisted-passage scheme. From that date onwards, single Irish women who applied for assisted passages were accepted in the ranks of the general assisted emigrants in increasing numbers until in the year 1855, the peak year for the immigration into the colony of single Irish women, three thousand of them arrived at Port Adelaide.

This thesis is mostly limited to the Australian aspect of this Irish single female migration. Apart from a comparison of shipping standards in the first chapter, it does not directly contrast American and Australian migration. Neither has the British end of the migration stream been adequately covered for the migration has been examined only through documents available in South Australia.

It has been difficult to follow the strict sequence of events because there are two distinct themes which interlock in this thesis. The first theme is the effect of the Irish female immigration on the colony together with the efforts of the colonists to overcome the integration difficulties which such an influx presented. Secondly an attempt is made to sketch the relationship between the British Government and the colony and the effect on their

relationship of this unusual immigration phase.

Chapter One is in two sections; Part I deals with the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission in England and draws a background to South Australia's relationships with it. Part II is concerned with the Irish Famine, some mention of which is necessary for an understanding of the women's behaviour in the colony. Chapter Two covers both themes with regard to the orphans of 1848-9, for these constitute a separate and distinct group from the general immigrants and need to be examined by themselves. Chapter Three deals with the England-South Australia theme and the climax of anti-British feeling in 1855 because of the large number of single Irish women sent during that year amongst the general immigrants. The last Chapter is concerned with the integration of this second group of Irish women, and with South Australia's efforts to cope with this flood which reached its peak in 1855.