

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY

2017

1726

Rose Sherry - My Irish Orphan Girl

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I've only ever seen one photograph of my great-great-great-grandmother, Rose Sherry.¹ It is not formal or posed, there's no young, smiling bride or proud, Victorian gentleman. Rose slumps in her seat, lopsided, like a woman who badly needed to be off her feet. She can't be more than about sixty in the photograph, but she looks twenty years older. Her large, rough hands rest in her lap, testament to life as a laundress. Lumpy and sagging, her figure tells a similar tale, of nine children born and raised.

In many ways we were lucky. For all that Rose's life was hard, it could so easily have ended in the mass grave behind Carrickmacross Workhouse. We know very little about her early life, but she was born around 1833, in Monaghan, Ireland.² Her mother's name was Catherine.³ Her father might have been Patrick⁴, or perhaps John.⁵ Growing up in a Catholic family in Magheross Parish must have been difficult. Irish industry had collapsed after the Napoleonic Wars while the population continued to climb. As unemployment rose and parcels of land became ever smaller, the Irish lower classes became almost entirely dependent on the potato.⁶ Even in good years, the months between the last potatoes from the year before and the new harvest were a precarious time. When the potato crop failed, as it did in parts of Ireland nearly every other year in the decade, people starved.⁷

Nothing could compare, however, to the devastating potato famine which began in 1845 when Rose was barely an adolescent. The successive, nationwide crop failures of 1845, 1846, 1848 and 1849 decimated the population, and killed around a million people.⁸ Like hundreds of thousands of others, Rose ended up in the workhouse. Life there was hard and overcrowded⁹, but for Rose it would also be lifechanging. In 1849, she was offered the opportunity to emigrate to Australia. The prospect of the long journey to a totally unknown country must have been terrifying, but what did she have to lose? Both her parents were dead¹⁰, and Ireland offered only the prospect of more hunger and poverty, perhaps death. On the 19th December 1849, Rose and 23 other teenage girls left the workhouse and everything they had ever known behind.¹¹

The journey from Carrickmacross to Drogheda, and then to Plymouth, where the Irish orphan girls would board the ship, would have been the first time that Rose had ever been so far from home. In Plymouth, the girls spent a few days in the Emigration Depot where they and their luggage were inspected.¹² Each girl had been provided with 6 shifts, 6 pairs of stockings, 2 pairs of shoes, 2 gowns, 2 short wrappers, 2 aprons, sewing equipment and a sturdy wooden box to hold it all.¹³ Owning such a wealth of clothing must have been exciting for the teenagers, even if they all matched! At the Depot, the girls from Carrickmacross also have met other girls from all over Ireland who were being sent with them; nearly three hundred in total.¹⁴

The 'John Knox' arrived in Sydney on 29th April 1850, after a journey of more than four months.¹⁵ The girls walked from the harbour up to Hyde Park Barracks¹⁶ where they found dormitories lined with camp beds, ready for their reception. In the following days, they prepared themselves for hiring day, when the girls would be indentured to employers.

Rose was a laundress by trade, perhaps a skill she learnt in the workhouse, and she could read but not write.¹⁷ No record of her employment survives, but given her lack of marketable skills, it was probably menial. It didn't help that anti-Irish sentiment was widespread. The Earl Grey Scheme, which brought Rose to Australia, ended in 1850 following a raging debate in the newspapers about the "hordes of useless trollops"¹⁸ who were "a serious injury to the community".¹⁹

This stigma obviously didn't deter the 20-year-old fisherman William Chamberlain, however, who married Rose in St Mary's Cathedral on the 29th of October 1851.²⁰ The young couple lived near William's family in harbourside Rushcutter's Bay where their first child, Charles, was born in 1853.²¹ Over the next twenty years, Rose gave birth to at least eight more children – Susan (1855-1927)²², William (1857-1905)²³, Richard (1860-1903)²⁴, Mary (1862-1894)²⁵, Emily Rose (1864-1926)²⁶, Charlotte (1866-1932)²⁷, Edward Arthur (1869-1925)²⁸, and Eliza (1871-?)²⁹ – as they moved around Sydney's eastern suburbs before finally settling in Double Bay, a tiny fishing village.

It was in Clare Terrace, off William St, Double Bay, that the Chamberlains made their permanent home.³⁰ Conditions must have been cramped in the two-bedroom brick and shingle terrace³¹, but it was a good place for children to grow up. The family helped to petition for a local school.³² The children could play in the gully, swim in the waterfall, and mess around in boats.³³ Over the years, the family moved between the different terraces in the row, and their extended family would live there too: Charles, Susan, Emily, Charlotte, and Eliza all lived in the terraces with their respective spouses over the years.³⁴

On March 5, 1899, Rose was walking along New South Head Road when she stumbled and fell into the gutter. Rose's strength, in spite of her early suffering, and the risk that she took in coming to Australia, meant that she was to offer her children and grandchildren a life that she never knew. I hope that Rose was proud of that, and that she was surrounded by loved ones in the days after her fall. She clung on to life for a number of days, but on the 12th March 1899, she finally succumbed to her injuries.³⁵ Her death was mourned by her very large family, and her nieces published the following memorial:

Beloved by all, disliked by none,
Respected far and near;
There's many a one will give a sigh
To part from one so dear.³⁶

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- ¹ Great Irish Famine Commemoration Committee. 2011. "Famine Orphan Girl Database." *Irish Famine Memorial Sydney*. <http://www.irishfaminememorial.org/en/orphans/database/>.
- ² New South Wales Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Death Certificate, Rose Chamberlain, 3924/1899; State Archives NSW: Persons on bounty ships (Agent's Immigrant Lists); NRS 5316, Reel 2136, Item [4/4786].
- ³ State Archives NSW: Persons on bounty ships to Sydney, Newcastle, and Moreton Bay (Board's Immigrant Lists); NRS 5317, Reel 2461, Item [4/4917].
- ⁴ State Archives NSW: Persons on bounty ships to Sydney, Newcastle, and Moreton Bay (Board's Immigrant Lists); NRS 5317, Reel 2461, Item [4/4917].
- ⁵ New South Wales Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Death Certificate, Rose Chamberlain, 3924/1899.
- ⁶ Kelly, John. 2013. *The Graves Are Walking: The Great Famine and the Saga of the Irish People*. Picador, New York pp. 8-10.
- ⁷ Ranelagh, John. 2012. *A Short History of Ireland*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 124.
- ⁸ Geber, Johnny. 2016. "Mortality among Institutionalised Children during the Great Famine in Ireland: Bioarchaeological Contextualisation of Non-Adult Mortality Rates in the Kilkenny Union Workhouse, 1846-1851." *Continuity and Change; Cambridge* 31 (1): 101-26. doi:<http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy1.library.usyd.edu.au/10.1017/S0268416016000096>, p. 101.
- ⁹ *Statistical Statement for each Poor Law Union in Ireland, 1848-49*, 1850, Vol. L, No. 1154, p.4; Gartlan, Kevin. 2016. "Death, Starvation and Emigration in Farney." Carrickmacross Workhouse. http://www.carrickmacrossworkhouse.com/images/Local_History_Articles/Death_starvation_and_Emigration_in_Baroney_of_Farney.pdf.
- ¹⁰ State Archives NSW: Persons on bounty ships to Sydney, Newcastle, and Moreton Bay (Board's Immigrant Lists); NRS 5317, Reel 2461, Item [4/4917].
- ¹¹ Carrickmacross Workhouse, no date. "18th Article: Continuing the Story of the Famine Orphans", unpublished pamphlet.
- ¹² McCloughlin, Trevor. No date. "Earl Grey's Irish Famine Orphans 7 (C): The Voyage (Cont.)." *Trevo's Irish Famine Orphans*. <https://earlgreysfamineorphans.wordpress.com/2015/01/29/earl-greys-irish-famine-orphans-7-c/>.
- ¹³ Carrickmacross Workhouse, no date. "18th Article: Continuing the Story of the Famine Orphans", unpublished pamphlet.
- ¹⁴ Great Irish Famine Commemoration Committee. 2011. "Famine Orphan Girl Database." *Irish Famine Memorial Sydney*. <http://www.irishfaminememorial.org/en/orphans/database/>.
- ¹⁵ "Shipping Intelligence. ARRIVALS.", May 4 1850. *Bell's Life in Sydney and Sporting Reviewer*, p. 2. Retrieved May 26, 2017, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article59770572>
- ¹⁶ Rodgers, Emma Phyllis. 1884. "Emma Phyllis Rogers Diary of Her Voyage on the S.S. Warwick from Plymouth to Sydney, 19 January 1884 to 15 March 1884." Diary. Textual Records. State Library NSW.
- ¹⁷ State Archives NSW: Persons on bounty ships (Agent's Immigrant Lists); NRS 5316, Reel 2136, Item [4/4786].
- ¹⁸ "Irish Orphan Immigration", April 13 1850. *The Argus*, p. 2. Retrieved May 26, 2017, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article4764725>
- ¹⁹ "Irish Orphan Immigration", March 23 1850. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, p. 2. Retrieved May 26, 2017, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article12916637>
- ²⁰ National Library of Australia, Society of Australian Genealogists, and Mitchell Library (Sydney, NSW). n.d. "Church Registers of St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney and St Patrick's, Parramatta Roman Catholic" Microfilm. Frame 589.
- ²¹ New South Wales Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth Certificate, Charles H Chamberlain, 2471/1853 V18532471 39A.
- ²² New South Wales Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth Certificate, Susan R J Chamberlain, 990/1850 V1855990 42A; New South Wales Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Death Certificate, Susan R J Pearce, 3333/1927.
- ²³ New South Wales Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth Certificate, William H Chamberlain, 3548/1857; New South Wales Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Death Certificate, William A Chamberlain, 11217/1925.
- ²⁴ New South Wales Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth Certificate, Richard J Chamberlain, 3383/1860; New South Wales Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Death Certificate, Richard J Chamberlain, 4441/1903.
- ²⁵ New South Wales Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth Certificate, Mary A E Chamberlyne, 3416/1862; New South Wales Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Death Certificate, Mary A E Hinchey, 14841/1894.

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- ²⁶ New South Wales Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth Certificate, Emily R Chamberlain, 3816/1864; New South Wales Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Death Certificate, Emily R Adams, 19674/1926.
- ²⁷ New South Wales Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth Certificate, Charlotte E Chamberlain, 3991/1866;
- ²⁸ New South Wales Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth Certificate, Edward A Chamberlain, 4359/1869; New South Wales Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Death Certificate, Arthur E Chamberlain, 10988/1925.
- ²⁹ New South Wales Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth Certificate, Eliza S Chamberlain, 4667/1871.
- ³⁰ File on *61 and 63 William Street, Double Bay* in Woollahra Library Family History Centre, compiled by Libby Watters, 2003.
- ³¹ "Rates Assessment 1871", File on *61 and 63 William Street, Double Bay* in Woollahra Library Family History Centre, compiled by Libby Watters, 2003.
- ³² Hurst, Mary. 1983. *Double Bay Public School*. Marrickville: Southwood Press, p. 44.
- ³³ Jervis, James. 1960. *The History of Woollahra: A Record of Events from 1788 to 1960 and a Centenary of Local Government*. Edited by Vince Kelly. Sydney, Australia: Halstead Press.
- ³⁴ File on *61 and 63 William Street, Double Bay* in Woollahra Library Family History Centre, compiled by Libby Watters, 2003.
- ³⁵ "New South Wales, Australia, Registers of Coroners' Inquests, 1821-1937" database and digital images, Ancestry.com (<http://www.ancestry.com.au> : accessed 30 May 2017), search for Rose Chamberlain; State Archives NSW; Series 1394; Roll: 1783; "New South Wales, Australia, Registers of Coroners' Inquests, 1821-1937" database and digital images, Ancestry.com (<http://www.ancestry.com.au> : accessed 30 May 2017), search for Rose Chamberlain; State Archives NSW; Series 2225; Item: 7937; Roll: 343.
- ³⁶ "Family Notices", 12 March 1900. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, p. 1. Retrieved May 30, 2017, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article14299083>