BOOK REVIEW  by Dr. Maureen Langan-Egan, Emeritus Senior Lecturer in Education, NUI, Galway, who has also trained as a Life Coach. She has published two works, Women in Mayo, 1821-1851 and Galway Women in the Nineteenth Century.

BOG IRISH MICKS: THE O’BRIEN FAMILY FROM SCARIFF

BY

KATH WOODLEY

The term Bog Irish Micks was frequently applied to the Irish who emigrated to New Zealand in the nineteenth century. It mirrored the myth, then prevalent in Australia, that the ‘Irish were irrelevant pathetic peasants and stereotypical rakes’ O’Farrell (1990). These words used, either individually or collectively, were keenly felt as a slur by the people to whom they were addressed, who were deemed fit for only the most menial of tasks. Indeed, they also caused brawls and street fights on occasions.

The phrase was selected as a title for this work as it was against this background that the five children of John O’Brien and Margaret Malone, all left Scariff between 1874 and 1883, in an example of chain migration. While the narrative applies primarily to their descendants, a full account is also given of all the other siblings in the family. Family links are also traced in Ireland. These include the MacDonough family of Rover Upper, Ballyfarnon, County Roscommon, one of whom, Elizabeth, married Benjamin O’Brien, direct ancestors of the author Kath Woodley.

The book contains many of the great themes of Irish history in the 19th century, including the Great Famine and events in its aftermath, emigration including chain migration, the effects of literacy on the lives of the family members and their upward mobility. Some of the family emigrated to New Zealand under the terms of the Vogel Scheme of Assisted Emigration, which paid for the passages of single people between the ages of 20-24, unmarried. Very many people in Clare availed of this scheme, while numbers emigrating to New Zealand dropped dramatically when the scheme came to an end. For this family, their adopted homeland was to prove a land of opportunity, which its members were able to grasp and use. Thus, within one generation, family members had attained respectable positions in Law, Banking, the media and sport (an All-Black) In Gaelic, thapaigh siad a ndeis. (they seized their opportunities).

This research is very relevant. Much is known about the lives of families who remained in Ireland. Not so much is known of the lives of many emigrants. The research comes alive through the use of photographs, press reports, official documents, interviews and, at all times, respect for historical truth.
What is amazing is how the major events in the Northern Hemisphere, such as the Great Flu and World War One impinged on their lives.

The research provides the reader with cameo passages. One such is contained in Appendix VIII, which gives a graphic account of life in the Trenches. The writer, Herbert (Shad) O’Brien, fought in the third battle of Ypres, Passchaendale. His account of the behaviour of officers and generals reflects that of the War Poets, such as Auden. Ironically, WWI provided Shad with an opportunity to visit Scariff, when on leave, accompanied by a brother, who was then in Europe. One delights in reading of the sense of community, the welcomes, the ‘drop of the crather’, produced on every possible occasion and the sheer joy and exuberance that some of the descendants had returned, if only for a fleeting visit. One section sees an old man offering to hide Shad in the hills so that the Germans could not get him. He did not seem to realize that he would have been in greater danger from the British military authorities at the time, if he deserted.

While the Vogel scheme was a godsend to enable young people to build a new life for themselves in New Zealand and have a wider choice of marriage partner than what was available to them at home at the time, accommodation was generally provided for them as steerage passengers. When the ships were well run, they had little cause for complaint and, indeed, on some occasions they held concerts to while away the long hours at sea. However, travel could go horribly wrong. The horrific journey endured by Margaret O’Brien and others on The Oxford in 1893 (Wellington Star –Parliamentary Gazette 1893) bears distressing similarities to the sea-voyages suffered by emigrants during and after the Great Famine. The ship, which was fit to be condemned before it left London, broke down in the Bay of Biscay, was towed to Cardiff and the passengers travelled to Plymouth, where repairs and fumigations were carried out, as deaths from typhoid had already occurred and were followed by others on the journey. The Royal Commission which investigated this voyage described the ship as a ‘floating coffin’. The accounts throw light on conditions for emigrants, particularly young women. A Matron was in charge on board all ships where young women were travelling. The duties prescribed for the Matron included the following:

The Matron must see that every woman is in her cabin before dark every night, lock the door and keep the key. (effectively they were prisoners in their quarters).

Yet love or boredom will always find a way. On the ill-fated Oxford, women and men still managed to get messages to each other through the ventilation shafts. These people had already suffered the indignity of being locked in the Plymouth Immigration Centre while the ship’s difficulties were being sorted out.

The Victorian attitude to idleness is seen here as well. Sewing materials were provided so that girls would be employed when on board ship. Ironically, this work was supervised by males!
Many of the attitudes prevalent in Irish society were transferred to the new society. There was little or no tolerance for mixed marriages, not merely from Church authorities, but from the families themselves. Bridget O’Brien who married thus was cut off by the family for over thirty years. Another lady married a divorced man and met with rigid disapproval.

It is thought that one of the reasons why the five O’Brien children emigrated was that their mother was a widow who had remarried. Her new husband was Robert Guerin, who worked on the farm in Scariff after her first husband died. ‘It was not the thing to do’. There were many objections to widows, particularly in rural areas, remarrying. In many cases, there was a fear that the children of the first marriage would be disinherited. Such strictures did not apply to widowers remarrying, however.

There is utter truth in this history. Subjects which were/are frequently not discussed in the home country are dealt with in a matter of fact manner. Thus, a sympathetic account is given of the family, three of whose members suffered from psychiatric illness. Such historical accuracy also depicts undesirable behaviour by a small minority – ‘we were not all Saints’.

Some of the traits of home were passed down in the family. They include the great love of the land, the interest in literature, music and poetry and in all things Irish, including the importance of having a good ‘send-off’ when one died. As in Irish newspaper obituaries, emphasis was placed on ‘a large and representative funeral’.

For me, this is a valuable historical work, which is the first of several planned family histories, written in a clear, lucid style. On reflection, one recalls the words of the noted historian, D.H.Akenson, who spoke of Irish heroes. In the context of the Irish Diaspora, it seemed to him that the people who made a conscious decision to emigrate to improve their life chances were real heroes. They had courage and were willing to endure hardship, loneliness and, at times, despair to give life to their dreams. Mar fhocail scoir (last word), the author states that

‘We (the descendants of the O’Brien emigrants) are their dreams come true’.

The book also contains a CD Rom which contains a full family tree, an extensive bibliography, mystery photographs which the author hopes some person may identify. It contains 78 pages in colour and innumerable photographs and illustrations.

The author, Kath Woodley, now described in her own words as ‘a genealogy fiend’, has worked as a teacher and farmer. She returned to the University to complete her qualifications in Music. She now teaches singing, researches family history and is currently President of the New Zealand Association of Teachers of Singing.
may be ordered from Kath Woodley, 249 Fox Street, Hamilton, New Zealand 3216
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Cost: $90NZ plus postage and packing.