

**MATERIAL CULTURE OF
DONEGAL COMMUNITIES
ABROAD**

with contributions by
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& Fidelma Mullane



Comhairle Contae
Dhún na nGall
Donegal County Council

An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council



donegal diaspora
pobal domhanda

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Cover photograph:

Emigrant's Suitcase (1950s)

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Introduction

Joseph Gallagher

The material culture of Donegal [and Irish] immigrant communities abroad has not been documented to the same extent that the social history of immigrants has been recorded. The material culture of these immigrant communities is based on the 'cultural baggage' that these people brought with them along with smaller material heritage objects that they could carry. The purpose of this booklet is to raise awareness of selected historical cultural migrations by Donegal emigrants and to identify and outline aspects of their material culture that underwent transfer to their new destinations. A number of material culture items has been identified as being indicative of the kind of things that Donegal emigrants took with them to their new destinations or of things they produced abroad based on their Donegal culture. They include:

- suitcases/barrels and their contents;
- small household items;
- farming implements;
- craftsmen's tools;
- musical instruments;
- smoking pipes;
- rosary beads;
- photographs;
- emigrant letters that people sent back home;
- house form/layout of their homes in their new destinations similar to those they left behind in Donegal;
- material evidence of the naming of places based on the Donegal origins of their settlers; and
- material evidence of the retention of the Irish language by Donegal immigrant communities in their adopted land.

Much has been written about Irish emigrants and Irish immigrant communities abroad yet, surprisingly, little attention has been given to their material culture and expression in the built environment. Further research on immigrant material culture in light of processes such as material culture transfer, acculturation and assimilation is needed. Much greater attention needs to be given to specific aspects of material culture using case study material from the main cultural migrations undergone by Donegal people in the past including seasonal migration to work in Scotland, assisted travel programmes in the mid-nineteenth century to Australia, work emigration to England and voluntary or forced trans-Atlantic migration to the United States and Canada. We hope that the narrative accounts in this booklet will encourage greater discussion and investigation.

Barrel or Suitcase: towards a material culture of Irish emigration

Fidelma Mullane



Figure 1: Pictured outside the home of impending emigrant Paddy Herron after a night's playing at an 'American Wake' in Garvan, Commeen, Glenfin in 1933 are (from left to right): John Doherty, Mickey Mór Doherty, Mickey Doherty & Paddy Herron.

Image courtesy of Jimmy Gallagher

'When my great-grandfather left here to become a cooper in East Boston, he carried nothing with him except two things: a strong religious faith and a strong desire for liberty'. In speaking these words at New Ross, County Wexford on June 27th 1963, then President of the USA, the late John Fitzgerald Kennedy, was perpetuating (consciously or otherwise) what could be regarded as a convenient myth of Irish emigration. Convenient in the way it provides a blanket explanation of emigrants' motivations for leaving an Ireland where it is implied that emigrants had no material belongings; it also defines the host country as one where they will create and accumulate a material culture not possible at home. The myth of 'leaving with nothing' continues to inform perceptions of Irish emigration at many levels including the construction of an historic emigrant stereotype that contributes to an overarching, one-dimensional understanding of emigration. Offering a counter-narrative to the generally accepted 'leaving with nothing' type interpretations and references, an examination of the material culture of Irish emigration will provide for a more nuanced and layered understanding of the complex realities of its circumstances and practices through time and space.

The lack of a substantial literature on items carried by emigrants when departing indicates that the material culture of Irish emigration is not comprehensively documented. It appears to be a neglected topic. Not only is it difficult, then, to decipher practices relating to items carried by emigrants from Ireland, it is also a challenge to identify significant patterns and meanings surrounding such objects and customs. Neither are we aware of what might have been considered an emigrant's preferred or standard object to carry, or even if such an object type existed prior to the twentieth century. Objects of emigration can come to hold a different meaning or narrative as objects of immigration, the former inextricably linked with the processes and rituals of leave-taking, the latter frequently defining and distinguishing the bearers in their new and unfamiliar culture. Researching the objects sought by immigrants from newly arriving family members and neighbours, for example, would enhance our understanding of attitudes and behaviours and provide us with insights into those material things that emigrants missed and sought from home. In this regard, a re-reading of emigrants' letters could offer new insights into the objects associated with emigration and, by extension, the process of emigration itself.

Contrary to popular perception, it is likely that even in the most difficult circumstances emigrants would have carried some items with them from the home country. An examination of objects as agency in daily life (such as musical instruments, carpenter's tools, agricultural implements and/or clay tobacco pipes) provides one interesting approach to an interpretation of items chosen by emigrants or given to them at the point of departure. Part of the process of cultural translocation, and revelatory of the carrier's life and home place, such items can be interpreted as biographical objects.

There is evidence that some of the objects that emigrants brought with them were not perceived or considered as fundamentally necessary for practical daily-life needs in their new surroundings. Archaeological excavations in North America have revealed the presence of Irish tobacco pipes in a number of locations. It is generally accepted that the clay pipe, often decorated with popular motifs such as shamrocks and harps, was



Figure 2: The bowl of a clay tobacco pipe in a keeping hole beside the kitchen fire in the house where Micí Mac Gabhann was born in 1865 and from where he emigrated to America. His book *Rotha Mór an tSaoil* (*The Hard Road to Klondike*) became a classic for its description of his life as an emigrant and his part in the Gold Rush.

a common personal possession carried by emigrants, particularly in the nineteenth century when they were produced in industrial quantities in Irish factories. In this context, it should be noted that clay pipes were exported from Ireland and it is possible that, in some instances, were acquired by emigrants, post-arrival.

It is interesting to note that, anecdotally at least and in line with President Kennedy's remarks in New Ross, intangible, non-material culture was significantly represented among the known personal objects carried by emigrants – part testimony to the trust placed in a greater, divine power to oversee such a dramatic, and potentially dangerous, translocation as emigration. Talismans and other symbolic objects represented the intangible world of religion, popular beliefs and customs in the home country. Sacred clay from the St. Colmcille sites on Tory Island and at Gartan was commonly carried as a talisman to protect against rats and drowning. The employment of the clay for protection in daily life appears to have been widespread in areas adjacent to the sacred sites and its use was not confined to emigrants. It would seem that emigrants carried

such items of intangible culture with them when leaving as well as other objects of Christian faith including prayer books, holy water, scapulars, holy medals, and rosary beads. Such personal possessions were carried over exceptionally long physical and psychological distances from familiar and extended familial surroundings to generally unfamiliar circumstances with a considerably reduced family environment including, as we know, solitary living. In such circumstances, objects must have been, through their constructed cultural and personal meanings and their heightened immediacy, intensely poignant symbols of extended or definitive absence.

The act of emigration was marked by two important practices – a social gathering in the houses of the emigrants on the eve of departure and their accompaniment the following morning to a parting place of significance, such as a bridge, or train station. Such custom is known, in County Donegal at least, as the ‘American Convoy’:

“... when the mornin’ would come and the person would be leavin’ home it was the custom to accompany him a long distance from his home – sometimes for a couple of miles or so. . . . They always had the same convoy if they were leaving for Canada or Australia or any far off country, but I have never seen or heard of a convoy for people going for Scotland or England or any country near home. . . . These convoys must be in vogue a long time. They are going since I remember and long before it, because I heard my parents and grandparents talk about them away in the distant past.”¹

The leave-taking by thousands of emigrants from the Gaoth Dobhair, Falcarragh and Cloughaneely areas as they bade farewell to their neighbours and families who accompanied them often over many miles to a particularly significant separation site, *Droichead na nDeor* (the Bridge of Tears) at *Mám na Muaise*, mostly likely has a material culture of separation objects that merits exploration. Reading the inscription engraved on the stone marking the bridge today, we are curious to know what items, if any, were given to emigrants at that wayside:

1 James McCauley (76), Meenaleenaghan, Glenties, National Folklore Collection (1955).



Figure 3: *Droichead na nDeor* (Bridge of Tears) at *Mám na Muaise*

*Fhad le seo a thagadh
Cairde agus lucht Gaoil
An té a bhí ag imeacht
Chun na Coigríche
B'anseo an scaradh
Seo Droichead na nDeor.²*

Significant as the belief and trust in divine power may appear from emigrants' testimonies and as mediated by talismans, further investigation suggests that considerations of a more practical nature may have underwritten the choice of items emigrants would carry with them and that such practical considerations critically informed, and perhaps defined, pre-departure practices and events. An interesting account from the Ballynoe area of County Galway describes the variety of practical, symbolic and talismatic items carried by emigrants in their tin trunks:

2 Inscription on a commemorative stone at *Droichead na nDeor*.

*“At that time Emigrants always carried in their little tin trunker Holy Water, an oat meal cake, a fat hen (cooked), a glass of whiskey in a small bottle in case of sea sickness – and they never, never, on any occasion, forgot to bring a bunch of shamrocks and a sod of turf cut from their parents’ turf bank”.*³

From a reading of the replies to the emigration questionnaire⁴, we know that the American Wake was a widespread and a fundamentally important event held on the eve of an emigrant’s departure. An examination of the responses to the questionnaire from County Donegal indicates that this type of event, commonly known as a ‘Bottle Drink’, was limited to departures to far-distant destinations such as North America and was not organised for those setting off for Scotland or England. It should be noted, however, that such type of gathering was not confined to emigrants. It was also held when a ‘Yank’ returned home, and for weddings; indications that such type of event was not necessarily defined as a ‘waking’ ritual:

*“There would be another Bottle Drink the night the Yankee came home again for a visit and no matter how many went in to see him he would treat them all – a glass of whisky to all hands”.*⁵

*“When you were going to an American Bottle Night you took your Bottle of whiskey with you just the same as you did when going to a wedding Bottle night”.*⁶

The event was not usually referred to as the ‘American Wake’ in Inishowen, and this may be the case further afield. It was known as the ‘The Bottle Bring’, ‘The Bottle Drink’ or ‘The Bottle Night’:

3 Kathleen Hurley, Ballynoe, County Galway, National Folklore Collection Ms. 485 (1938), 218-219.

4 In 1955, Arnold Schrier, in collaboration with the Irish Folklore Commission, devised a questionnaire on the topic of Irish emigration to America. The questionnaire was distributed by the Commission to its collectors and to its network of respondents. The author is especially grateful to Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh at the National Folklore Collection (NFC) for assistance with the 1955 questionnaire on emigration to America.

5 James Gubban, Ballyliffin, NFC (1955)

6 Charles Rawdon, Moville, NFC (1955)

"I have often heard of American wakes but in this parish of Moville they were not called American wakes but The Bottle Night or The Bottle Drink".⁷

Bottle Drinks are comprehensively described in several County Donegal responses to the emigration questionnaire such as the following account from Inishowen:

"I was often at a Bottle Drink for when I was young they were going strong. They started early in the evening – that is around night falling for they were nearly always in the spring as it was from March to May that most people left. It would just be a night of singing and dancing and drinking for the men. Everybody came to the 'Bottle Drinks' as they were thought to be a big night for the townland. No matter how many were going away there would be a Bottle Drink for them all and they would be all alike. It was in their own house that they would be held . . . It is now thirty-eight years since I was to the last Bottle Drink and I think they began to die out from about that time on . . ."⁸

Annie McColgan's account provides insight into the 'Bottle Drink' that appears to have been a standard pre-departure gathering in the area. Defining it in time and space, she describes it as lasting from dusk to dawn, taking place seasonally between the months of March and May, and extending over the geographical area of a townland. The question arises as to what objects were selected and offered to the emigrant during, or immediately following, a 'Bottle Drink'. The Irish Folklore Commission questionnaire on emigration to America, for example, does not include a question in relation to the items emigrants carried with them on leaving home. There is, however, one apparently common practice that can be identified from the County Donegal responses, and possibly other questionnaires from throughout the country; that is, the amassing of food provisions for the emigrant's journey. The frequent reference to carrying food for consumption during the long sea voyage, particularly

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Annie McColgan (78), Pollan, Ballyliffin, NFC (1955)

oatmeal cakes, *arán coirce*, suggests that this was a common practice that may coincide with the historical period when sailing ships carried emigrants to America or other far-distant destinations, as intimated in the following accounts:

"I do not know how long the Bottle Drinking is going on but I never remember the start of it or my father before me . . . In the times before that when the sailing ships were going the women of the whole parish would be busy baking oat bread for them to eat on the boat for at that time you had to take your barrel of stuff with you or go hungry".⁹

"In those days it was all sailing ships and the people had to take all their food with them. They used to take all kinds of hard bread with them in a barrel and when the neighbours heard of anyone going to America in those days they always came with something to put in their barrel. The ship of course had to sail with the wind and God [sic] luck to the poor emigrants. Their hearts sunk to their shoes when the food and maybe worse, the water started to give out".¹⁰

"All the men took a bottle but the women took nothing but before my time the women did play a part when anyone was going to America for in those days when they went on sailing ships they had to take their food with them and for weeks before the person would leave, all the neighbouring women would be coming to the house with oaten bread or butter or something of that sort to put in their barrel".¹¹

The accounts are important in that they give insight into what may be a critically important function of the Bottle Drink in circumstances where '[you] had to take your barrel of stuff with you or go hungry'. Such testimonies that describe a significant aspect of the material culture of emigration – the carrying of food – provide us with sufficient evidence for

9 James Gubban (83), Ardagh, Ballyliffin, NFC (1955)

10 John Davis (77), Lagg, Malin, NFC (1955)

11 Charles Rawdon (83), Moville, NFC (1955)

a revised interpretation of some aspects of emigration from Ireland. The practice appears to coincide with the historical timeframe of the sailing ship as a mode of long-distance travel by sea. The custom of carrying oat bread is revelatory of the conditions of travel, suggesting that emigrants fully or partly depended on a personal food store for the duration of long sea journeys. For such reasons as destitution, isolation from the home community or hasty leave-taking, a departing emigrant may not have been able to accumulate sufficient provisions to ensure well-being and survival during an extended sea voyage. It is possible, therefore, that departing without food provision may have been a critical factor in the mortality rates on transatlantic journeys and may explain in part such emigration phenomena as the 'coffin ships'. Emigrants who travelled without adequate food provision may have been, particularly, the victims of starvation, disease and death during long voyages to America.

The second important revision arising from an examination of the material culture of emigrants pertains to the type of luggage they used. Little is known about the different uses of varying types of luggage holders whether trunks, tin trunkers, barrels, suitcases or bundles carried on a stick. That emigrants carried luggage is indicated by some explicit references to 'luggage', in the emigration questionnaire as the following:

"In the mornin' then some of them would get a sidecar to take themselves and their luggage away to some conveyance that would take them to Derry. At that time they used to take the big ships from Derry . . . It was surely a custom when their neighbours would find out as to what part of America they were going, if they thought they were going anywhere near other relatives they would send presents to them. It was the custom in them times too if the friends thought a lot of the person going to America they would bake a cake or two of good oat bread and harden it thoroughly well, and give it to them on board the ship. It was better feeding than anything they would get on the ship. In those days it was sailing ships they crossed in and sometimes they were so long on the voyage that they were half starved with the hunger before they reached the other side".¹²

¹² James McCauley, op. cit.

Preserving the food for extended periods also impacted on the preparation of long-life food products; the most popular, as described in the above accounts, being oat bread that was baked thin and hard in the fashion of commercial water biscuits. If we accept that emigrants carried a personal food supply when boarding a sailing ship, the question arises as to the type of container used for keeping their provisions safely. Images of departure scenes typically represent emigrants leaving with small suitcases, or with bundles tied to a stick carried over the shoulder. It might be that migrants or emigrants carried bundles over shorter distances; suitcases may reflect the carrying of items other than substantial food provisions and therefore predominantly belong to the material culture of twentieth-century emigration.

The above accounts that describe emigrants travelling with barrels of food displace the suitcase as an iconographic image of Irish emigration during one historical period at least. The barrel and the dried oaten bread become defining objects associated with the historical period of sailing ships as emigration vessels. Furthermore, the significance of amassing food provisions for the emigrant's journey, for example, would indicate that the primary purpose of the pre-departure social event might not have been that of 'waking' the emigrant as commonly proposed. Rather, the event may have taken place first and foremost to gather sufficient provisions for the impending lengthy journey in a sailing ship.

From this preliminary investigation, it is evident that increased knowledge of the carrying of items by emigrants, combined with an understanding of their acquisition process within common cultural practices, gives a more nuanced and deeper understanding of emigration. Through a material culture of emigration from Donegal as reflected, for example, in the dried, hard oaten bread collected at Bottle Drinks and carried in barrels on sailing ships, a revised thinking on some aspects of Irish emigration is proposed. Interrogation of such aspects of the material culture of emigration further suggests that the emigrants who 'left with nothing' may have been specifically those who did not survive the outward journey.

Emigrant Irish Farming Implements & Practices

Jonathan Bell & Mervyn Watson



Figure 1: Reaping with a Sickle
Image courtesy of the Ulster Folk & Transport Museum

Most people who emigrated from Donegal during the last three hundred years based their decisions about where and when to go on the basis of contacts they had with people already established abroad. This resulted in a wide range of destinations being chosen but, for those who hoped to make a living by farming, a pattern emerged that was distinctive to the county in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

- Young people (often children) from West Donegal would go to a hiring fair, either in the Lagan in East Donegal, or elsewhere in Ulster.
- From the age of about 14 to 16, the same young people would travel to Scotland as part of a squad working in the potato harvest or, in smaller groups, for the grain harvest.
- After about two years travelling to Scotland, these seasonal migrants would return home or emigrate permanently. Most of those who stayed in Scotland or England would move to cities, but many of those who went to places such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada or the Mid-West of the United States worked as farm labourers or eventually became farmers.

Around 1900, big hiring fairs were held in a number of towns in West Ulster, including Letterkenny, Derry (Figure 2), Strabane and Omagh. There were usually two fairs held each year, and farmers would go to them to hire live-in farm servants. Before the introduction of a minimum school leaving age in 1926, the would-be servants could be as young as seven years of age. Those looking for work would gather at the fair site, usually the town's main street or central square, where farmers would inspect them and, if they were satisfied, offer them work.



Figure 2: Hiring Fair in Derry in 1910
Image courtesy of Derry City Council Heritage & Museum Service

Would-be servants were recognised by the bundle of belongings they carried; handing this bundle to a farmer committed the young person to the job being offered (Figure 3). Several Donegal writers have described the contents of these. Patrick MacGill described the preparation of a boy's bundle near Glenties, around 1900.

Everyone was hard at work, my sisters sewing buttons on my clothes [a shirt and a change of underwear], my mother putting new string on the Medal of the Sacred Heart which I had to wear around my neck when far away from her keeping, my father hammering nails into my boots so that they would last me through the whole summer and autumn.¹

Patrick Gallagher (Paddy 'The Cope') described setting out with other children to walk to the hiring fair.

We were all bare-footed; we had our boots in our bundles. There was not much weight in our bundles. There was nothing in mine, only two shirts, some patches, thread, buttons and a couple of needles.²



Figure 3: Making a deal at Derry hiring fair in 1910. Several servants' bundles are clearly shown
Image courtesy of Derry City Council Heritage & Museum Service

1 Patrick MacGill, *Children of the Dead End* (Ascot: Caliban Books, 1914), pp. 27 & 48.

2 Patrick Gallagher (Paddy the Cope), *My Story* (Dungloe: Templecrone Co-operative Society, 1948), p. 7.

When the hero in Patrick MacGill's first (autobiographical) novel went to Scotland to work in the potato harvest, he also brought a bundle. This may have been a little more substantial than the one he had carried to the hiring fair; the novel describes how he had used part of his first wages to buy clothes.³ Most accounts mention only one implement that seasonal migrants brought to use in Scotland; the toothed sickle (*corrán cíorach*), which they used in the grain harvest. (One classic British farming text, published in 1831, claims that Irish harvesters had introduced the smooth reaping hook to Scotland, but no other evidence has been found to support this).⁴ Reapers from Gweedore were famous for the speed at which they could reap using sickles. This was said to be because they gathered the newly cut grain against their leg, and this speeded up the task of collecting the grain to make a sheaf. Because of the skill of the Gweedore men, young workers from other parts of the county would try to attach themselves to a team from Gweedore, tying and stooking the sheaves. In the 1930s, for example, Hugh Paddy Óg Ward from Keadue in the Rosses was employed to do this by a team of four older men, who travelled around the Scottish countryside, offering their services.⁵ Men working in the grain harvest had a very good reputation in Scotland and the north of England. Reaping with a sickle is slow, but very neat. Irish reapers were so skilled, and so cheap, that farmers in the north of England often preferred to hire a large number of Irish harvesters, rather than a smaller number of local workers using 'improved' techniques such as scythes or reaping machines. This happened to such an extent that it was claimed that Irish harvesters had slowed up the introduction of new implements and techniques to the grain harvest in Yorkshire.⁶

Sickles could be useful as weapons. Harvesters usually carried them wrapped in straw rope (*súgán*) for safety (Figure 4), but this was sometimes taken off during the riots that often erupted between Irish and Scottish workers on the quays where boats from Ireland landed. Irish workers sometimes displayed an uncovered sickle for defence. Fred

3 Patrick MacGill, *op. cit.*, pp. 48 & 63.

4 J.C. Loudon, *An Encyclopaedia of Agriculture* (London, 1832), p. 373.

5 Ulster Folk & Transport Museum tape R87.60.

6 J.A. Perkins, 'Harvest Technology and Labour Supply in Lincolnshire and the East Riding of Yorkshire 1750 – 1800', *Tools and Tillage*, vol. 3:2 (Copenhagen, 1977), p. 128.



Figure 4: Irish migrant worker with a sickle wrapped in straw rope

Coll from Derrybeg in Gweedore, for example, said he did this when walking alone through towns like Hamilton at the end of harvest. He said that local thugs knew that Irishmen were likely to be bringing money home at that time of year, and would hide in doorways, waiting to attack them by surprise. The bare sickle blade acted as a warning to these people.⁷

In accounts of seasonal work in Scotland, Donegal people tend to emphasise what the wages they earned had been used to buy, rather than what they had brought with them when going away to work. The earnings might be used for something very practical, such as new boots or a new cow, or they could be used to display something that suggested an improved status; a new mirror, or some pretty sponge ware pottery. Even people living in a byre dwelling could afford some modest display, such as repainting the interior in two colours, rather than simple whitewash.⁸

The practice of travelling light also seems to have applied when people emigrated to countries such as the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Clothes and domestic items were brought, but apparently very few farm implements. This is not surprising, given the very different farming environments of many destinations. There are indications however, that some aspects of farming in Donegal did cross the oceans. One of Ireland's native types of cattle, the Irish Maol was well-known in Donegal. In the 1920s, not so much crossing oceans as the Foyle, Irish

⁷ Fred Coll & Jonathan Bell, 'An Account of Life in Machaire Gathlán, County Donegal early this Century', *Ulster Folklife*, vol. 36 (Holywood, 1990).

⁸ *Ibid.*

Maols from Donegal were accepted as foundation stock by the newly formed Irish Moiled Cattle Society in Northern Ireland, helping establish them as a distinct and successful native breed with a herd book and pedigree. The breed still exists today.

In the 1930s Irish Maols were given a special section in the Inishowen Agricultural Show. The following exhibitors were listed in the 1935 Irish Maol section of the show held at Tulnaree, Carndonagh:

*Denis Harkin, Falmore, Carrowmena;
Alexander McEldowney, Glack, Culdaff;
Edward O’Kane, Lecamy, Moville;
Hugh McGonigle, Kinnaglug, Carndonagh;
S. Henderson, The Bridge, Carndonagh.*⁹

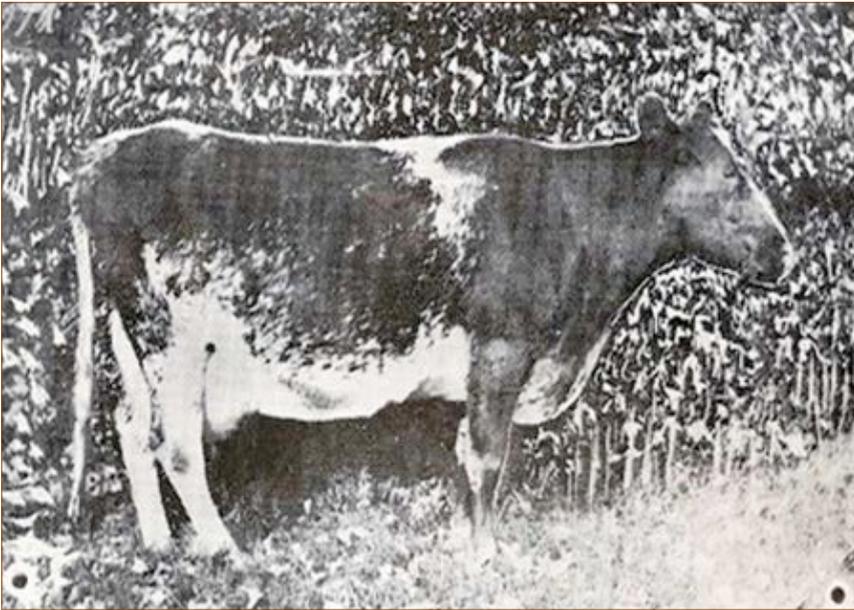


Figure 5: McConnell, Limavady, Irish Moiled Cow 'Limavady Meg' bred in County Donegal. Owned by Mr. Jas McConnell, Limavady, she won the Calwell Cup for the best dairy cow in Ulster in 1927. Image from the *Irish Moiled Cattle Herd Book, Vol. 1*.

⁹ Inishowen Agricultural Society, *Catalogue of the 31st Annual Show*, (1935), p. 23.

Two of the distinctive features of the Irish Maol are that they are hornless (polled), and that many of them have a white streak along their back. In America, along the early emigrant trails such as the Shenandoah Valley, a type of cattle, known as 'Muleys' were recorded. A Professor H.W. Mumford, of Illinois University noted 'all along the Potomac, in Virginia, 'muleys' are numerous, and they are found occasionally in other sections of the country.'¹⁰ Muleys are also hornless, and have a distinctive white stripe along their back. Linguists accept that 'moillie' and 'muley' come from the Irish word 'maol' (polled or hornless) and there seems little doubt that some Muleys had their origins in Ireland. At present, however, we cannot say that they came specifically from Donegal or which individual emigrants brought them. Even more intriguingly, we know that the potato came to Ireland from South America. It is possible that it was brought to North America from Ireland, along with the distinctive techniques of ridge-making used in its cultivation. Again, however, we cannot say that the people responsible for this were from Donegal.

The most important thing that Donegal emigrants brought to their new home was themselves; their courage, adaptability, intelligence, energy and skills. Some of the skills they took with them, such as ridge making or reaping with sickles, were thousands of years old, but many new skills had to be learnt, appropriate to the vast farms, and often extreme environments of the new territories. As in traditional music, the old ways were rapidly modified to suit new conditions.

¹⁰ R. Wallace, *Farm Livestock of Great Britain* (Edinburgh, 1923), p. 91.

The Donegal Fiddle

Caoimhín Mac Aoidh



Figure 1: Danny Meehan playing the fiddle by the hearth
Image courtesy of Danny Diamond

Danny Meehan was born on September 24th, 1940. He is the fourth youngest child of Jimmy Meehan and Annie Marie, though known as ‘Nan’, Sheerin. He was raised in his father’s family cottage in the townland of Drimalost, Mountcharles, County Donegal in a family comprising five sons and six daughters. Danny progressed well through the local primary school. His most memorable achievement was winning a writing pen in a short story competition sponsored by the renowned Mountcharles author Seumas MacManus who personally presented the prize to Danny. It must be said that his powers of storytelling have continued to increase over the decades.

In his youth, Drimalost was stonemason and fiddle country. The nearby Drumkeelan quarry provided steady work for the local labour force with many men becoming highly skilled craftsmen in stone cutting. Socialising consisted of visiting neighbours’ houses and playing traditional music; dominantly on the fiddle and sometimes the melodeon. The fiddle players of the area included such revered musicians as Paddy McDyre, Charlie McCahill, John James Conaghan, Daniel Donnelly and Danny’s father, Jimmy, and his first cousin, Frank Meehan. Their standard of musicianship

was as high as could be found in any part of Ireland at the time. In Drimalost, to be called a good fiddle player was a badge of honour and commanded respect throughout the community. Danny began learning the fiddle from his father on Jimmy's full-size fiddle conquering two scales and a polka in the first lesson.

It was one of these fiddlers who, while on a short visit home from London, changed Danny's life. Peter Quinn lived on the farm directly across the glen from Danny's home. Peter's fiddle playing enchanted Danny. Having started to play at the age of eleven, Danny had an uncanny knack of learning tunes and understanding complex fiddle technique. Peter's ability to, as Danny remembers it, "make notes hang in the air" mesmerised the budding fiddler. Peter's stories of life in London also had the effect of charming Danny who remembers Quinn describing mechanical moving steps. The word 'escalator' had not yet entered the Drimalost vocabulary. This concept triggered images of a world of wonders beyond the foot of the Bluestacks. Danny set his mind on discovering the world and conquering it.

At the age of sixteen years on August 13th, 1957, Danny struck out for Selby, Yorkshire. This destination was not of Danny's design. His near neighbour who accompanied him on the journey was Stewart Graham, who had been retired from the Palestine Police Force. Graham had been back and forth on labouring sojourns to Selby. As Danny recalls "We walked heel and toe to the narrow gauge railway station in Donegal Town and made our way to far off Selby".

In one hand on his journey was Danny's father's old suitcase bound round with a belt in order to keep it closed. Inside were two pairs of socks, some underwear and two shirts. In his pocket he had just less than £3.00 which would keep him for a fortnight. In his other hand was a fiddle case. Inside it was a Maggini style fiddle conspicuous by its double purfling, the thin dark strips of wood following the outer contours of the belly and back of the instrument. Danny's choice of bringing the fiddle was obvious. As he says, "I could write my signature, Daniel Meehan, and that might tell you my name. But with that fiddle, or any other fiddle, in my hand, that would tell you who I am. Danny Meehan from Drimalost!"

The journey of this fiddle was not its first. Danny had two aunts who had gone to America and returned. While in New York, they regularly attended house parties at which the world famous Sligo fiddler, Michael Coleman, would play. Also there was their first cousin, Frank Meehan of Drimalost. Frank was a good fiddler and exceptional melodeon player. He played in Carrigart native John McGettigan's band, comprised almost entirely of Donegal men. Frank also recorded with this group which, unusual for the time, was fronted by three fiddlers, a feature not to be repeated until the emergence of another Donegal band, Altan. Knowing the treasured nature of a good fiddle at home, Frank sent the Maginni fiddle back to Danny's family with his aunts when they decided to return to Donegal. It was this fiddle that Danny took to England.

Danny landed in Selby and soon found a world similar to his own. He worked in remote farming areas digging trenches for electrical cable bringing light and power to isolated rural communities. His fiddle playing was stifled, however, as his landlady had no inclination to listen to jigs and reels emanating from the upstairs room. The work was excruciating. It took a physical toll on the teenager who sought solace and a cure for homesickness by fiddling whenever opportunities presented themselves. Conditions for playing were often difficult and the fiddle saw some rough treatment. As Danny remembers, "As I suffered, it suffered". Eventually it was in pieces.

Danny left Selby and moved onto Wales working on the quayside at Milford Haven. There was a daughter in the house in which he had digs who was learning violin. As the Maginni did not survive life in Selby she was unaware of Danny's gift. When she discovered his playing, he was regularly asked to play and guide her development. The fiddle was made available to Danny on his occasional trips to the local pub where his playing was very welcome. One particular winter was extremely harsh and the freezing conditions wreaked havoc on the paving of many of the cities throughout Britain. Danny heard of paving opportunities for workers with the stone cutting skills he learned in his youth associated with the Drumkeelan quarry work. Still without a fiddle of his own, Danny set off for

Manchester. There he met the legendary Tyrone fiddler, Dessie Donnelly, who was also working on construction sites. The two met and shared Dessie's fiddle playing with wild abandon in their similar northern styles.

The lure of Peter Quinn's London still pulled on Danny and he eventually moved to London where he spent many decades. He recalls arriving there and hearing of a Sunday morning pub session at which the renowned Clare fiddler Bobby Casey was playing. Danny went along and listened. During the session, Casey noticed the intense concentration Danny had in Bobby's unfamiliar style. During a break, Casey approached Danny and said that he must be a fiddler given his attention to Bobby's playing. He asked Danny to play. The young Donegal man stunned the audience with his performance. Casey took Danny home for Sunday dinner and sold him a fiddle. From that meeting the legend that was to become Danny Meehan, Irish fiddler, grew. Settling in to London, Danny established his own highly successful paving business and thrived. His powerful physique, which would attract offers from boxing promoters to take up a professional career, led to him being known as 'the man who built London single-handedly'. This claim he denies as he notes there were a few times when he had missed a night's sleep due to a long session and the

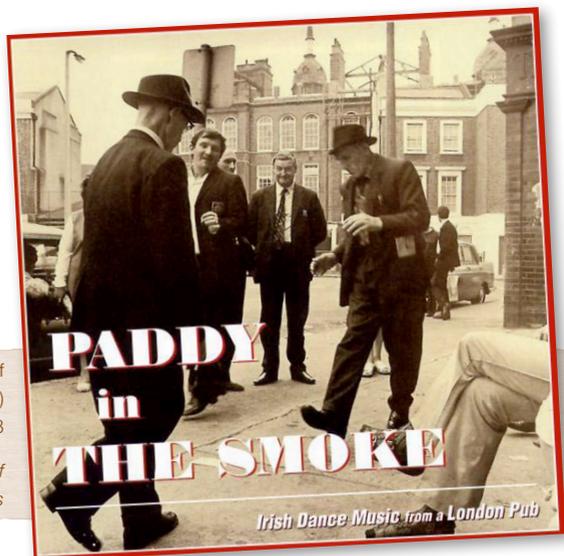


Figure 2: Sleeve of 'Paddy in the Smoke' (1997) originally released in 1968

Image courtesy of Topic Records



Figure 3: Danny Meehan outside his cottage playing the £30.00 fiddle

following morning he “had to use the two hands”. Danny featured on the historically important ‘Paddy in the Smoke’ LP for Topic Records (Figure 2), documenting the giants of Irish traditional music in London. He then became the fiddler with the famous group Le Cheile issuing three LPs and is still sought for festivals with both the group and in a solo capacity throughout Ireland, Britain and America. He released a solo CD ‘The Navy on the Shore’ in his later years and in 2012 released a double CD entitled ‘From Drimalost and Beyond’ on the Cairdeas na bhFidléirí label.

Danny now plays on a copy of a Stradivarius made in Germany between the two world wars. Many years ago he had gone into a second-hand shop in Ilford to buy some stonemason’s chisels and a saw when his eye was taken by a fiddle case. The shopkeeper wanted £30.00 for the fiddle (Figure 3), and a few pounds more for the tools. Danny got the lot for £30.00. Like Frank Meehan’s Maginni fiddle, the £30.00 fiddle has seen much travel. One trip it took was in 2012 to the University of Limerick where Danny was presented with the TG4 Lifetime Achievement Award for traditional music. Upon receiving the award the audience did not need his autograph to know his name. Once the fiddle was in his hand, they knew it was Danny Meehan.

The Material Culture of Donegal and its Diaspora Reflected in Migrant Letters

Patrick Fitzgerald



Figure 1: 'Letter from America' by James Brennan
Image courtesy of Crawford Art Gallery, Cork

This essay seeks to explore letters of Donegal provenance archived in digital form on the Irish Emigration Database at the Mellon Centre for Migration Studies, Ulster American Folk Park, Omagh in order to assess what light they may throw upon physical objects or what is generally referred to as material culture. In total, about 150 letters fall into this category but the bulk of the references below are drawn from about 20 letters. The letters all date from the century between 1820 and 1920 but should not be considered as representative of the migrant outflow from the county in general. The sample is clearly skewed in favour of Protestant correspondents, those from higher up the social scale and those who migrated to America rather than other destinations. There is more commentary relating to material culture in the destination than in Donegal itself as the majority of letters which have survived are letters sent back to Ireland from overseas rather than those travelling in the opposite direction. Letters afforded a canvas for migrants to paint a picture with words of their new worlds and often this invited comparison with their various local old worlds.

This is undoubtedly a neglected theme in relation to the study of the migration experience in Donegal, as in Ireland generally. It is interesting to note, for example, that only three objects included in Fintan O'Toole's recent *History of Ireland in 100 Objects* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, 2013) directly relate to the migrant experience and that this reflects in part the fact that the artifactual record or legacy of historic migration is not particularly rich. We should not lose sight of the fact that historic migrants had often limited capacity to bring much baggage with them. It would, of course, be wonderful if the correspondence of migrants regularly contained direct reference to objects which also crossed the seas or oceans but, in fact, discussion of this type is quite unusual. Before turning to consider the information contained within the text of these letters let us first think about the letters as physical objects themselves.

Letters as objects

To compose a letter a correspondent needed to gather a number of things – namely paper to write on, ink and pen to write with, an envelope to enclose the letter and any enclosures and a stamp to carry the letter to its destination. In the nineteenth century, gathering these things together and setting aside sufficient time might require quite a bit of effort. Most correspondents made little overt reference to the actual process of writing their letters but they often opened with excuses about why correspondence was irregular. To take one example, William Dray, in New York City wrote to his friend Robert Buchanan at Milford in late October 1892. He informed Buchanan that previous efforts to compose a letter had been thwarted as he “could find no note paper” and then on a second occasion he found that the ink had all been used up! In April 1889, John Walker in Ontario, in scolding his uncle Andrew Lowry in Ballindrait, joked that “if you are as long answering this as you were the last I will have time to write you a quire (25 sheets) of foolscap paper” (MCMS IED 8903138). Postcards were, by the 1890s, offering trans-Atlantic migrants another means of communicating and in the same letter as above William Dray records a “Postal Card” they had received from Robert Buchanan's cousin (MCMS IED 9705019). The vast majority of emigrants hand wrote their letters with a pen and a common refrain in the opening lines of a letter

was “I lift up my pen to write you these few lines”. In an era when stamps were relatively costly, migrants could demonstrate their efficiency by writing on as much of the surface of the paper as possible or even on the inside of the enclosing envelope. Earlier in the century, correspondents could express concern about the contents of a letter remaining secure. In February 1856, Mary Jane Stevenson in the United States sent a letter to Robert Moore in Carndonagh which advised the latter to “seal news in envelopes that cannot be taken off” and to then further “seal your letter with a wafer under the wax” (MCMS IED 9802454).

Enclosures

Those at home in Donegal often looked forward with great eagerness to what might accompany a letter from those overseas or anticipate the arrival of a parcel from the ‘New World’. Amongst items which were enclosed in ‘Donegal’ letters or sent in parcels from America included money remittances, photographs, personal mementos like a lock of hair and newspapers. In the era of sail (up to the mid-1860s) cash, usually in the form of dollars, could be sent home within an envelope but, in time, money postal orders took over. In July 1879, Mary Gailey, from near Raphoe, wrote to her friend Ann Russell in Ontario, Canada telling her that she could send “a Post Office Order” or a “Bank Order of any of the Banks in Ireland and we will get it cashed in Raphoe as we have got a bank there now” (MCMS IED 2006232). Remittances were often sent at a particular time of the year, timed to assist with rent payment or clearing ‘the slate’ in a local store or pub. Christmas, of course, was a significant peak in the calendar of migrant correspondence. On the 14th of December 1881, for example, L.A. Jennings wrote home to her mother at Rossnowlagh and rounded off her letter by referring to the enclosure of “a small Christmas box in the shape of two pounds” (MCMS IED 9601017). In the final two decades of the nineteenth century, there are several references in Donegal letters to photographs. In July 1887, Ann Walker in Ontario, Canada wrote to her uncle, Andrew Lowry at Ballindrait to inform him that she was “glad you got our photo. I always thought I would like to have some of my friend’s likeness in the Old Country I wish you would tell all my cousins to send their pictures” (MCMS IED 8809073). A year later in December

Brooklyn July 11th/876

Dear Brother i write these
 few lines too let you know
 that i am well at present
 Hoping that you will find
 you enjoying the season
 i want you too see James
 Gallagher an see if he
 would not send the
 Money i loaned him \$200
 i have some money too
 by the store and tho
 want too get it if
 you get the money from
 him you might make it
 2500 if not try and send
 me 2500 your self as soon
 as possible ablyage your
 Brother Paul Brown



1888, Ann's sister, Mary made reference to having sent "a piece of Aunt Ann's hair" with a letter sent to Andrew Lowry (MCMS IED 8809079).

An interesting alternative to a photograph was enclosed in an 1857 letter home from John Anderson to his sister in Donegal Town. Enclosed for the attention of his brother William was a Phrenologist's chart of his head he had recently acquired (MCMS IED 212202). References to the sending of newspapers across the Atlantic are quite common. Another nephew of Andrew Lowry in Ontario, John Walker was an avid reader and clearly engaged in a regular two-way exchange of newsprint. In September 1889, he noted in his letter "I received a paper from you last week I will send you three or four next week". Clearly this would require a parcel rather than simply inserting issues or cuttings into a standard envelope (MCMS IED 8903062). As well as an interest in political affairs in Ireland and Canada, this correspondence also reveals that Walker thought his uncle would be keen to know the price of provisions and commodities there (MCMS IED 8811001, 8903153). Newspapers sent off from home allowed the emigrant to keep in touch with developments in the 'Old Country' whilst American papers allowed prospective migrants to work out costs and comparative wages in the New World and gain insight into the material world they might be destined for. In other words, newspapers assisted migrants in 'colouring in' the picture of the new material world they now inhabited.

Reference to poverty and prosperity

Although letters from those in Donegal to those across the Atlantic are fewer in number and not drawn from the poorest section of society, there are occasional references to deprivation experienced at home. Of course, we need to appreciate that such references may reflect, at least to some extent, the vested interest of the correspondent as much as the actual economic reality of the times. At the end of January 1877, after a number of years of relative buoyancy in Ireland's agricultural economy, Annie Brown, near Laghy, wrote to her brother Audley in America.

Figure 2: Brown family emigrant's letter (1876)
Image courtesy of Mellon Centre for Migration Studies

Outlining the bad prices that year for livestock, potatoes and corn, she explained that once the rent was paid “we had not one sixpence to call our own”. They could hardly afford a “drop of tea” and told Audley that his mother asked him to send £1 “to buy her some nourishment” (MCMS IED 400074). The corpus of letters collectively communicate that whilst emigrants could certainly remain vulnerable to the threat of poverty in America it was generally thought to offer the prospect of very real material improvement and the New World could be presented as a land of bounty and opportunity. In August 1856, Alexander Lowry in Pittsburgh informed his parents near Raphoe that he was living in a large house he had built himself which contained “6 apartments” and encouraged younger members of the family to follow him to America where “they could make a good living”. The very mention of the term ‘apartment’ also serves to remind us that the language used to describe the material world could change as migrants adjusted to a New World vocabulary not easily recognisable to those in Donegal (MCMS IED 8809075).

Reference to material culture

Perhaps the greatest single difference between Donegal and certainly the American South before 1865 was the fact that in the latter place human beings themselves constituted an element of material culture as the chattels of slave owners. The same Alexander Lowry quoted above toured ‘The South’ during the winter of 1856 and observed sugar and cotton plantations, where he recounted to his parents “all the work was done by slaved negroes and mules” (MCMS IED 8809075). However degraded the status of a cottier or landless labourer might be in Ireland, they were never just mere property. Emigrants of the post-Famine generations often made the transition from a rural, farming world to an urban, industrial world. John Anderson, travelling west to Cincinnati by rail as early as 1857 (when Donegal’s railway development was in its infancy) told his sister at home of the “20 or 30 towns” he had passed through and helping her to imagine the scale of this new urban world, informed her that the city he was destined for had a population “six times the number of Derry” (MCMS IED 212205). A generation later, John Walker in Ontario told his uncle Andrew Lowry at Ballindrait how cheap horses were

because “they are not used any more in cities” where “the cars are all run by electricity instead” (MCMS IED 8903057). Sometimes the migrant correspondents drew direct comparisons between Old and New Worlds. In 1887, Wilson Moore in Oaklands, Kansas related to his brother Robert in Carndonagh the “great difference between the Hotels here and the old Country they sell no drink of any description nothing but cook meals and supply beds”. Furthermore he noted “plenty of restaurants but not a whiskey shop” (MCMS IED 9503086). The ‘Saloon West’ of Hollywood fame would appear to jar somewhat with Moore’s account.

Another trans-Atlantic novelty often endured by migrants was the climatic extremes which could be encountered in America. Robert Buchanan’s correspondence from the early 1890s relays information about how people sought to stay warm. On New Year’s Day 1892, William Dray in New York wrote to him complaining of a record cold spell and how he missed “our big stove”. Two years previously, Robert’s brother James had written to Robert when he was then out in New York telling how their father minded the kitchen fire at home, regularly adding coal and fir to keep it roaring in a house James clearly found cold and drafty (MCMS IED 9705006, 9705011, 9705013). Of course, summer in the same city offered the opposite challenge. In July 1857, John Anderson complained to his brother in Donegal Town that it was “awful hot here at present”. Getting a night’s sleep proved hard as John, discarded the more familiar blankets and sheets in favour of “a thin cotton quilt” but, still found “in the morning my night-shirt is wet as if I was coming out of a bath”. Wagons carted ice through the streets to every house and butter left without ice would soon “run off the plate in oil” (MCMS IED 212203). Although most migrants gravitated to urban America, Canada still offered opportunities to farm and letters could communicate the sense of excitement about the rapid changes mechanization was bringing. Andrew Lowry in Ballindrait was given a glimpse of the future by his nephew in Ontario. In 1889, he read an almost breathless account of a “steel binder that one Span of horses can handle all day with ease, and cut and tie with cord” processing “one acre every hour in the day”. Four years later, the nephew enclosed “a circular of our hay forks” and declared “you ought to see them work

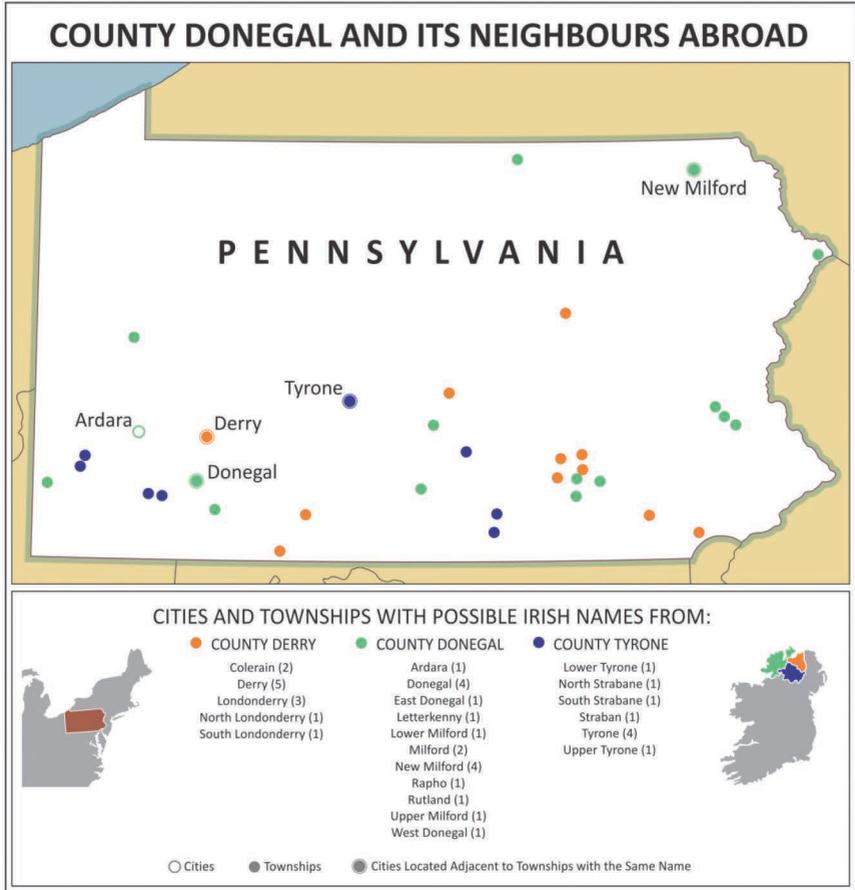
it would make you smile". After further details of the new farming technology, the eager young agriculturist speculated that "manual labour is getting to be a thing of the past" (MCMS IED 8903138, 8905061). As mentioned above, it was a rarity for emigrants to write explicitly about items which were carried across the ocean but a letter of 1856 by Mary Jane Stevenson to Robert Moore in Carndonagh carried the following information. Reporting back that her brother Joseph had completed a seven-week passage across the ocean, she noted that he "had his kettle very well all the road" (MCMS IED 9802454)¹. Drawing on item number 82 from O'Toole's volume (Figure 3) we might well imagine at least one everyday item of material culture which joined the Donegal Diaspora in the mid-nineteenth century.



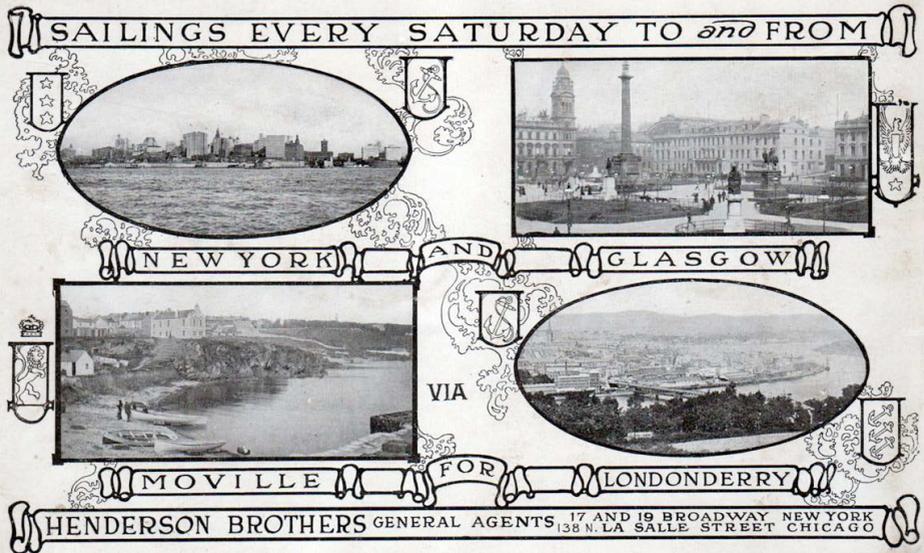
Figure 3: Emigrant's Teapot (1850-1950)

This image is reproduced with kind permission of National Museum of Ireland – Country Life

¹ References are to The Mellon Centre for Migration Studies Irish Emigration Database which may be consulted online at www.djppam.ac.uk



The placenames of the U.S. state of Pennsylvania provide evidence to suggest that Irish emigrants used placenames from their homeland in the New World. A cursory glance at the placenames of Pennsylvania suggests that Donegal, Derry and Tyrone emigrants were neighbours at home and abroad.



Further Information

If you have any information on items that Donegal emigrants took with them when they left to go abroad, please contact or send information to:

County Donegal Heritage Office,
Donegal County Council,
Station Island,
Lifford,
County Donegal.
Telephone: (074) 917 2576
E-mail: heritage@donegalcoco.ie

This booklet can be downloaded free-of-charge from the County Donegal Heritage Office website at: www.donegalcoco.ie/heritage

