

## **CHERYL MONGAN**

### **Title**

A general and indiscriminate stigma - the Irish Famine Orphans, 1848–1850.

### **Summary**

Between 1848 and 1850, 4,114 females from the workhouses of famine stricken Ireland volunteered to emigrate to the Australian colonies. Preconceived notions of them as impoverished, untrained non-Protestant orphans, condemned many of these young women to considerable prejudice upon their arrival. Most overcome these difficulties to establish successful families. Today researchers are working to unite descendants with their Irish relatives.

### **Abstract**

The greatest social catastrophe of nineteenth century Europe was the famine that ravaged Ireland between 1845 and 1850. A million Irish perished of hunger and disease and a further million emigrated, many of whom perished on the 'coffin ships' bound for America. In 1848 Earl Grey instigated a scheme to bring young females to the Australian colonies for employment as indentured domestic servants. Some 4,114 young women between the ages of fourteen and nineteen volunteered to leave the workhouses and arrived on twenty ships at the ports of Sydney, Port Phillip and Adelaide between October 1848 and July 1850. Irregularities related to the arrival of the first ship, the Earl Grey, tainted perceptions of their characters and abilities. Their Catholic upbringing was a source of constant public comment and newspapers consistently reported their lack of training, supposed disobedience and other shortcomings. Girls returned by their employer were brought before the Water Police Court and could be returned to the Female Immigration Depot at Hyde Park Barracks. Despite such opposition, the majority established families of their own and prospered in their adopted land. Over the past two decades descendants of these young women have become absorbed in their stories, establishing contacts with other relatives in Australia. Many come together for the annual commemorative service at the Great Famine Memorial at Hyde Park Barracks each August or the Famine Rock at Williamstown each November. However, for the majority, information related to the orphan's pre-immigration lives has been difficult to locate. With a renewed interest in the Great Famine local Irish researchers have been making concerted efforts to unite families with their distant Australian relatives.

### **Audience**

Intermediate