

RICHARD REID

Title

If you ever go across the sea to Ireland ... Realities of 19th century Ireland.

Keynote address

Summary

Dr Arthur Colohan's 1940s song, 'Galway Bay', imagines an Ireland of soft landscapes, of fields worked by Irish speaking women, a place in which to dwell eternally watching the sun go down on Galway Bay. Hard is the emigrant soul that doesn't feel a catch in the throat listening to those unforgettable lyrics. But family historians also need to ask that more hard-headed question – what was the Ireland of my ancestors really like?

Abstract

Irishman Dr Arthur Colohan's song 'Galway Bay', written in 1947, made Bing Crosby a lot of money. It became 'the' image of Ireland for a whole generation of Irish emigrants and the descendants of previous generations of emigrants. This was an Ireland of peaceful trout streams, women making hay and digging 'praties' while barefoot 'gosoons' gambolled on the cabin floor. Here Irish, 'a language that the strangers do not know', was spoken and these same scornful 'strangers' tried to teach the Irish 'their ways' although they 'might as well' have gone 'chasing after moonbeams'.

Popular songs don't pretend to be about the cold facts of historical reality. Ireland's problems throughout the 19th century, and for many decades of the 20th, produced that flood of emigration which gave countries around the world their Irish and Irish-derived populations. Having once established an Irish family tree what family historians have to grapple with are the specific conditions which led their own ancestor(s) to forsake the homeland for a place on the other side of the planet such as Australia.

And so begins the search for the Irish experiences of great-great grandfather Michael Byrne or great-grandmother Bridget Ryan. It leads to the world of civil registration certificates, shipping lists, original parish registers, land records, published government papers and across old maps to, hopefully, an actual landscape where an ancestor 'lived' his or her Irish life. But there the question of who they really were begins and the soothing generalities of a song like 'Galway Bay', beautiful as they may be to listen too, give way to some understanding of those actual circumstances, sometimes poignant and dramatic, which drove them to leave for ever the magnificent scenery of Galway Bay.

Audience

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