

Reading Irish- American Fiction

The Hyphenated Self

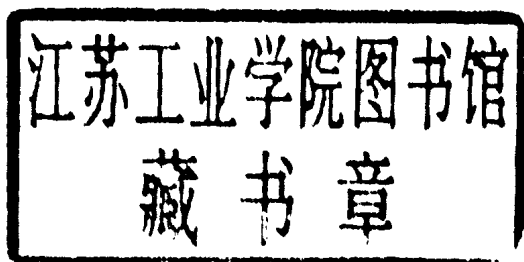
Margaret Hallissy



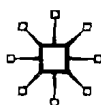
READING IRISH-AMERICAN FICTION

THE HYPHENATED SELF

MARGARET HALLISSY



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First published in 2006 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN™

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010 and

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England RG21 6XS

Companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 1-4039-7090-4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hallissy, Margaret.

Reading Irish-American fiction : the hyphenated self / by
Margaret Hallissy.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-4039-7090-4 (alk paper)

1. American fiction—Irish-American authors—History and criticism.
 2. Irish-Americans—Intellectual life.
 3. Irish-Americans in literature.
- I. Title.

PS153.178H35 2006

813.009'89165—dc22

2005051333

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: March 2006.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America.

Reading Irish-American Fiction

For Grace and Raymond Duggan
on the other side

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would not have been possible without the institutional support of the C.W. Post Campus of Long Island University. In addition to providing research time and sabbatical leave, the university's flexible course-scheduling policy allows for a faculty member's research interests to be incorporated into the curriculum in timely fashion. The dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Dr. Katherine Hill-Miller, has provided encouragement and advice at crucial points in the development of the manuscript. The Chair of the English Department, Dr. Edmund Miller, has been as ever a supportive colleague. He has scheduled Irish- and Irish-American fiction courses to help me develop my thinking on the material in this book, and he is always available with a fund of information. Dr. Joan Digby, director of the Honors Program, has enabled me to present Irish- and Irish-American writers to the university's most talented students in the form of courses, tutorials, and theses. Dr. Kay Sato, director of the Hutton House Lecture Series, supported my research by adding my lectures to her offerings. The writer of a book like this benefits greatly from students' insights, and so I thank my students in my Irish- and Irish-American fiction courses for the comments and questions that teach the teacher.

My husband Jerry and my daughter Megan have indulged my obsession with things Irish by undertaking journeys to Ireland that have been far more successful than those of the American characters in these novels. My daughters Maria Casey and Jennifer Hallissy have provided cheerleading, computer troubleshooting, and editorial advice. My friend Dr. Jean E. Fisher has been exactly the sort of reader I envision for this book. Intelligent, enthusiastic, and a fellow Irish-American, she has kindly read all five novels and the manuscript in draft, providing helpful insights. To all, many thanks.

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
Preface Connections and Separations	1
Introduction Irish Types, American Patterns	19
1 What Americans Know and How They Know It: Song	33
2 What Americans Know and How They Know It: Story	47
3 "Picture Postcard Ireland": Thomas Moran's <i>The World I Made for Her</i>	61
4 Naming the Past: Lisa Carey's <i>The Mermaids Singing</i>	83
5 The Pain of Not Knowing: Katharine Weber's <i>The Music Lesson</i>	105
6 Bringing Paddies Over: Alice McDermott's <i>Charming Billy</i>	127
7 The Rage of the Dying Animal: Mary Gordon's <i>The Other Side</i>	149
Conclusion The Journey	173
<i>Notes</i>	183
<i>Bibliography</i>	201
<i>Index</i>	207

Preface

Connections and Separations

There are few real Irish people in the United States. They know little about authentic Irish culture, and care less. The Irish American is a victim of cultural disintegration, as much so as the Mayan Indian. We have to go back to the beginning, to learn again what it means to be Irish.

—Brian Heron

I am Irish and Irish Americans always irritate me. They pretend to be Irish when in fact they are Americans through and through.

—Bob Geldof

The tricky tiny hyphen . . . is used quite distinctly to connect (or separate) individual words.

—Lynne Truss

When I was growing up in the 1950s, in New York's borough of Queens, in St. Patrick's parish (the church's administrative grid still serving then as our global positioning system), the question of national origins often came up. At such times, my mother, Grace Duggan, would assert that we were "Irish-American"—the stress in her voice, accompanied by a nod of her head and a just-perceptible squaring of her shoulders, falling decisively on the latter element of the term. In that little apartment, the only sign of the "Irish" in Irish-American was a shillelagh, said to have been brought from Ireland by my father Raymond's father Frank. Aside from the shillelagh, nothing in the apartment attested to the Irish background of its three inhabitants. Catholicism was everywhere—prayer cards, rosaries, crucifixes, a holy water font at the front door—but Irishness, nowhere. No books about Ireland were read, no Irish music was played, nothing remotely Celtic decorated the

walls, or, in the form of jewelry or clothing, ourselves. Neither of my parents had been to Ireland or expressed any desire to do so; neither had any specifically Irish interests or were affiliated with any Irish groups; neither celebrated St. Patrick's Day in any way other than watching the parade on television, which was almost unavoidable if television was to be watched at all, given the few channels available in those days.

Despite or perhaps because of being unacknowledged, however, Irishness permeated every aspect of our lives: in the perceived necessity immediately to identify by nationality anyone not clearly Irish; in the tendency to separate ourselves, psychologically if not physically, from other ethnic groups; in the distrust of those others, whose ways were not our ways; in the belief that Irish Catholics, and only Irish Catholics, were proper neighbors or friends or schoolmates or professional advisors, or, most emphatically, prospective mates. It is no coincidence that the derogatory adjective *parochial* derives from the same linguistic roots as the noun *parish* (the Greek root, *paroikos*, is most relevant, as it means "near the house"). In all possible ways we young Irish-American Catholics were encouraged to stay home, to remain within the parish. In subtle and not-so-subtle ways, we were taught, not to hate, but to be wary of those outside the parish; even, in the case of the other dominant Catholic ethnic group of the time and place, the Italians, to distrust some of those within it.

Much of this keeping-ourselves-to-ourselves behavior was designed to preserve our Catholic faith from what we believed were imminent onslaughts of proselytizers and unbelievers, and was acknowledged as such. But the matter of preserving our Irishness was more ambiguously presented. Many of the sisters who taught in St. Patrick's School must have been of Irish background, since many Irish women were members of the religious orders that staffed the Catholic schools at the time. But their ethnicity was concealed behind their religious names, elegant and Latinate: Sister Maria Incarnata, Sister Mary Immaculata. In school, St. Patrick's Day was celebrated enthusiastically, as one would expect; we children were invited to hearken back to the days of the Kerry dancers and to cut out construction-paper shamrocks. This flurry of Hibernian activity, which of course included all the students, might have occurred merely because our school was named after the saint; I do not recall any sense that I, personally, had any more special connection to the songs, the dances, the shamrocks than my Italian- and German-American classmates. At home, being Irish was conveyed to me indirectly, in a variety of baffling customs, and in unusual turns of phrase in speech. Only much later and after both my parents were dead was I able to identify some of these as distinctly Irish, taught to my Irish-American parents by their Irish parents, and conveyed without explanation to American me. Irishness was not so much discussed as assumed to be the norm from which others deviated.

But the lives of some of those others, especially our Italian neighbors, seemed better to me than ours was. A major area of conflict in my household centered around food. Unlike our Italian neighbors, whose food rituals (at least as seen from the outside) seemed gregarious and celebratory, my family seemed to experience the preparation and consumption of food as a painful duty best done in private. Since my mother was in charge of food purchases and preparation, her idiosyncrasies shaped our diet. A pudgy adolescent, I found baffling my mother's continual urging that I eat even more than my already hearty appetite demanded. As her authority on nutritional matters, she quoted the words of her own mother, Margaret Flynn Dunn: " 'Eat enough for tomorrow.' " I did not take my late grandmother's words as seriously as my mother wished, however. With what I saw as irrefutable logic, I would explain how, if I ate enough today for tomorrow, and then enough tomorrow for that day's tomorrow, I'd become even plumper than I was. My mother would turn from me in silent fury. Despite my attempts to show her the error of her ways, she persisted in other food habits that irritated me: saving tiny portions of leftovers, to be joylessly ingested long after they had lost any possible gustatory appeal; insisting that every such scrap be consumed, past the point of satiety. "We have to finish this up," she would sigh. I had no patience with this penitential approach to cuisine. Why could we not do as our neighbors did, gather happily around a table groaning with Italian food, not only delicious but enthusiastically prepared?

Years later, reading Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, like many another Irish-American, I suspect, I had an epiphany worthy of a character in the fiction of James Joyce. Mine was a food epiphany. The triggering episode was the one in which the child Frank gives the lone raisin in his raisin bun to his even hungrier classmate Paddy Clohessy:

I wanted the raisin for myself but I saw Paddy Clohessy standing in the corner with no shoes and the room was freezing and he was shivering . . . so I walked over and gave Paddy the raisin because I didn't know what else to do and all the boys yelled that I was a fool and a feekin' eejit and I'd regret the day and after I handed the raisin to Paddy I longed for it but it was too late now. . . .¹

At last, thanks to Frank McCourt, I understood what anxiety lay behind my mother's saving bits and scraps of food almost as small as this raisin. While she had been born in New York in 1905, her mother was born in County Waterford in 1869, only fifteen years or so, depending on what date one accepts for its ending, after the Great Famine. My great-grandparents, therefore, were Famine survivors; and their daughter Margaret, my grandmother, was eventually left a widow, raising nine children on her own in

New York. That unknown, long-dead woman, my grandmother, she who thought one must eat enough for tomorrow, must have followed her own advice; judging from the size of the wedding ring Michael Dunn gave her in 1892, she was a large woman. Yet she must surely have remembered her own mother's all-too-realistic fears of starvation, must have often worried about feeding her own children, and must have passed that anxiety about food along to my mother. I, however, was not worried about the reliability of the food supply in Queens; fearing no famine, I saw no need to stockpile body fat for future use. After reading McCourt's memoir, I did understand; but how could I, as an American child, have understood my grandmother's words without also understanding the historical connection between the Irish and hunger? Did my mother understand that she hoarded scraps of food at least in part because of the Great Hunger in Ireland? Did the nuns who taught me, Irish as at least some of them must have been, know about the Famine but not teach us about it? Perhaps there was a conscious conspiracy to keep silence; perhaps it was just that the connection with Ireland had become too tenuous by then, too much a matter of songs and shamrocks.

Despite the paucity of our knowledge, the history of the Irish shaped our lives. Irish poverty was the basis of one of my mother's favorite expressions: "making the poor mouth." P. W. Joyce defines this phrase as meaning "making out or pretending that you are poor."² In my mother's usage, this phrase heaped scorn on those who complained about money, even if indeed they were poor. Such behavior—not *being* poor, a common condition in our modest neighborhood, but *complaining* about being poor—was disgraceful. Personal finances were the second most private area of life (the first being, naturally, sex, which would not be discussed at all, ever). So "making the poor mouth" implied the confluence of several disgraceful situations: an inadequate breadwinner; an inability of other family members to live on the breadwinner's income, whatever it might be; speaking of the unspeakable; implying in the very act of discussing the matter that the listener was about to be hit up for a loan to compensate for the poor-mouther's improvidence. I had never heard this expression from anyone except my mother until, on my first day on Irish soil, I heard it used, in the same scornful tone my mother had used, by a tour bus driver in the Aran Islands refusing an Irish customer's request for what Americans call a senior citizen's discount. "Ah, would you listen to her makin' the poor mouth, now?" the bus driver lamented to all who had ears to hear. He won his point; the woman paid full fare; and I learned that my mother, who left her own neighborhood only with the greatest reluctance, was using an Irish phrase, probably her own mother's. The contempt implied in the phrase for those so lacking in self-respect as to seek sympathy—or worse, charity—for what was to her

mother's generation a universal condition explained my mother's frugality: saving scraps of food, eating enough for tomorrow, were precautions taken so that the day would never come when she (or I) would make the poor mouth. The Irish had long been poor, and dignity demanded that one suffer in silence.

Another, related expression, and one that she actually said in Irish, also had to do with money. She pronounced the term as "fla-*hoo*-la," and, judging from the context clues, it meant carelessness about money, throwing money around in a showy, extravagant fashion. Her tone of voice was scornful, suggesting that it described just the kind of behavior *now* that would cause the perpetrator to be making the poor mouth *later*. Upon researching the meaning of this word, I find that, according to P.W. Joyce, it is spelled *flahoolagh*, and means "plentiful" (with an analogy to the generosity of the Irish chieftains);³ and according to Loreto Todd, it is spelled *flaithiúil*, and means "generous."⁴ Assuming that Joyce and Todd know the Irish language better than a second-generation Irish-American who had never been to Ireland, my mother's personal adaptation of the word's meaning was probably an expression of the belief that she, the youngest of a widow's nine children, would never be in a position in which spending money freely would be anything other than foolishness.

While my mother worried about finances, my father, more lighthearted by nature, specialized in entertainment. My father's role in preserving what little Irish culture made it across the Atlantic to my home in Long Island City was in the realm of song and story. Privately, my father would sing Irish songs (or their American knockoffs). He sang, not well but enthusiastically, such Irish weepies as "Mother Machree" and "Galway Bay." Yet he never expressed, to me at least, any desire to visit the land that inspired these songs; the nostalgia in the songs seemed to be enough of Ireland for him. He also liked to tell jokes in a faked brogue. His favorite, oft-repeated, was of the genre that appears in one novel discussed in this book: a "Paddy" story. An Irish woman asks her husband for money to buy a new pram, the old one having broken under the strain of transporting twelve children. To which her husband replies (imagine a New Yorker's version of Irish speech here): "Ah, here it is, but this time, would you get one that will *last*!" Such paternal Hibernicisms would stop at the doorway of our apartment. Stereotypical Irish behavior in the outside world was foreign to him. Not a teetotaler, my father was nevertheless an abstemious drinker (one and no more), and was no frequenter of bars, Irish or otherwise. Gregarious, cheerful, fond of children, music, and repartee, he could easily have been cast as a typical Irishman in a film, as long as the part did not require a pub scene.

My parents probably did not consider their behaviors Irish, and I certainly did not at the time. Indeed they seemed to downplay any

characteristics other than their surname that might publicly identify them as Irish. My parents' ambivalent relationship to their ethnicity was, I learned later, characteristic of the second generation to which they belonged. For that generation was undertaking two simultaneous and contradictory tasks: they were attempting to blend in; and they were attempting to remain separate. No wonder their behavior seems odd. They avoided visible indications of their Irishness; but they nurtured a sense of separateness in their private associations nonetheless. In their little apartment in Long Island City, they kept themselves to themselves, associating only with family and with a select few of the ever-changing roster of the other tenants in the building. There my mother and father died, at the ages of ninety and one hundred respectively. It is fitting and proper that the last sounds they heard in this life were the sounds of Irish speech: that of their caregivers. I like to think that they felt themselves home again, hearing voices so much like those of their mothers, Margaret Dunn and Delia Duggan.

Since my parents died, I have seen what my father often sang about but never saw: the sun going down on Galway Bay. But I have also come back again in that I have chosen to focus on the kind of literature that speaks to me because it speaks of people like me: Irish-Americans. This book retraces the steps of my own literary journey for readers who are interested in exploring the Irish-American past through fiction as I did. The book reads these five novels in such a way as to, in Brian Heron's phrase, "go back to the beginning, to learn again what it means to be Irish."⁵ The book sketches in the Irish background, presenting what American readers need to know about Irish history, mythology, and customs to appreciate these American novels. I have organized the chapters not by chronology—all the novels were published from 1989 to 1999—but in pedagogical fashion, from simple to complex. I am not suggesting that some of these novels are less sophisticated than others, but rather that some require more detailed Irish background than others, and those that do are discussed later, in the hopes that the material presented in earlier chapters will also prove enlightening with regard to them. If readers follow the order of novels suggested here, my hope is that they will find themselves, at the end of the process, less the "victim of cultural disintegration," in Heron's words,⁶ than they were when they started. The sources listed in the bibliography will enable readers, if they so desire, to expand their knowledge further.

In my research, I have come to see that, while no one family, surely not my own, can be seen as typical of a vast historical movement, each Irish-American's family story is connected to the larger story of the Irish in Ireland and America. I have also come to realize that the type of investigation I have undertaken can most comfortably be done by a third-generation Irish-American like myself. Not only have people like me reaped the benefits of the educational and financial opportunities for which our

grandparents emigrated, but we are in a position to claim both sides of the hyphen as our own: Irish and American. The emigrant generation's story was about survival in a new land; the second generation's story was about assimilation, making that land accept them as "real" Americans. The third generation, secure in its American identity, can explore the part of themselves that is Irish. One way of doing that is by reading fiction which explores the meaning of the hyphenated self.

To understand these novels, it is first necessary to focus on the characters who emigrated and to place them in historical context. At this point, readers of literature depend on the work of historians; first among them with regard to the history of Irish emigration is Kerby A. Miller, whose *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (1985) is the definitive study to date. The following overview draws on the work of Miller and others, the intent being to link the individual stories of the emigrants in the novels to the larger framework of Irish history. Since the motives for emigration changed over time, the fictional emigrants are discussed in chronological order. Like their historical counterparts, the emigrants in these novels left Ireland for economic, political, and sociocultural reasons. The strength of each of these motivating factors varies depending on the individual and the time period in which he or she emigrated. Why they left the land of their birth is a crucial question, in that the answer affects not only their own characterization, but the image of Ireland and the Irish that they transmitted to their American children and grandchildren.

The great-great-grandparents of Patricia Dolan, the protagonist of Katherine Weber's *The Music Lesson*, left Ireland during and shortly after the Great Famine (1845–49). While neither the first famine nor the last, the Great Famine is the watershed event of Irish history: everything that happened in Ireland is dated as before, during, or after. The basic facts are stark and grim: following a blight on the 1845 potato crop, with successive blights over the following five years, "half the population disappeared—just like that. Into graves or off across the ocean."⁷ Kerby Miller cites a more conservative but still disastrous figure of 2.5 million (out of an original 8.5 million) for population loss from 1845 to 1855, which not only constituted a "demographic catastrophe" at the time, but set a pattern of population decline in Ireland that has not yet been reversed.⁸ It is a truism of Famine studies that, for many years, the collective memory of its horrors was suppressed. In the recent past, and in particular since the 150th anniversary of the Famine in 1995, this alleged cultural amnesia has been largely eradicated; research on and artistic response to the Famine has become intense. In the northeast United States alone, Famine memorial parks have been opened to the public in Boston in 1998, in New York in 2002, and in Philadelphia in 2003. Fiction exploring the continuing impact of the

Famine on contemporary Irish and Irish-Americans such as Seán Kenny's *The Hungry Earth* (1997) and Lisa Carey's *In the Country of the Young* (2002) have reached an expanding readership. New insights into the Famine have been provided by historians like Christine Kinealy, Robert Scally, and Cormac Ó Gráda. For the reader of fiction, the best point at which to begin study of the Famine is Cecil Woodham-Smith's *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845–1849*, published in 1962. Later historians have examined every aspect of Woodham-Smith's work, confirming some insights and questioning others; but this work remains the single work to which all refer, the one that must be read by anyone who hopes to understand the tragic story that can only be sketched here.

Michael Dolan, Patricia's great-great-grandfather on her father's side, emigrated from Skibbereen in 1848, and her mother's ancestors from Cork in 1851. Skibbereen is well known to readers of Woodham-Smith as the scene of some of the most extreme sufferings caused by the Famine. In an 1846 letter imploring the Duke of Wellington to help the starving population, Nicholas Cummins, the magistrate of Cork, described a scene that he observed in Skibbereen:

... the scenes which presented themselves were such as no tongue or pen can convey the slightest idea of. In the first [cottage], six famished and ghastly skeletons, to all appearances dead, were huddled in a corner on some filthy straw, their sole covering what seemed a ragged horsecloth. . . . I approached with horror, and found by a low moaning they were alive—they were in fever, four children, a woman and what had once been a man. It is impossible to go through the detail. Suffice it to say, that in a few minutes I was surrounded by at least 200 such phantoms, such frightful specters as no words can describe, either from famine or from fever.⁹

Cummins's description of death by starvation or by the infections consequent upon severe malnutrition could be multiplied hundreds of times over in contemporary sources. The "phantoms" that Cummins described would never become any American's ancestors; only those who were well enough to get to a port city and able to pay passage from there could have any hope of emigrating. Even those relatively fortunate ones risked an equally harrowing death at sea; their story is told in Edward Laxton's *The Famine Ships: The Irish Exodus to America* (1997). Those who remained in Ireland and survived were scarred; they dealt with the psychological trauma of the Famine with suppression and silence.¹⁰ This may have been their only way of coping with the intense emotions generated by the British response to the Famine while at the same time continuing to live under British rule.

At the time of the Famine, Ireland was part of the British Empire; the decision-making powers of government were based in London. Therefore,

if help were to come for the stricken population, its source should have been the empire of which Ireland was a part. What happened instead is succinctly phrased in the often-quoted words of Irish patriot John Mitchel (1815–75): “‘The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the Famine.’”¹¹ Historians generally agree that the scientific cause of the destruction of the potato crop in 1845 and subsequent years was a fungus; but the moral responsibility for its becoming the Great Famine, one of the great demographic disasters in history, is the British government’s. John Waters, writing in 1997, sums up a viewpoint shared by many: “When I speak about it in public, I make a point of saying, unequivocally, that the Famine was an act of genocide, driven by racism and justified by ideology.”¹² Professional historians add volumes of nuances to generalizations like Waters’s, but the real-life equivalents of Patricia Dolan’s great-great-grandparents would have brought with them to America opinions similar to his and Mitchel’s about the British government: that it could have saved them, should have saved them, but deliberately did not save them; that both its inadequate action and deliberate inaction were based on contempt for the Irish people; that the feeble best that can be said about the British government of the period was that its members were in thrall to *laissez-faire* economics, which required them to do nothing to affect market forces, while millions died.

Emotions generated by Famine suffering were carried across the ocean and passed down the generations, as was the rage against England, which was more acceptable to express in the United States than it was in Ireland. The result was an “anti-British feeling among some of the descendants in America of those forced to emigrate as a result of the Famine . . . often attributed to strong race memories.”¹³ Memories transmitted from survivors like Patricia Dolan’s forebears would keep the Famine alive in the minds of future generations. Ancestral anger influences Patricia to involve herself in a plot against the British crown, despite the fact that she herself never experiences more than the vaguest anti-Irish sentiment. This apparent disconnect between one’s own experience and historical memory is not surprising; as Caroline Ramsay notes, “the Famine endures in the Irish collective unconscious, the way the Holocaust in Germany resides within Jews who have never experienced anti-Semitism.”¹⁴

By 1913, when Ellen and Vincent MacNamara in Mary Gordon’s *The Other Side* leave Ireland, Ireland’s people are no longer starving, but the legacy of the Famine persists. Irish emigration predated the Famine; but after the Famine, emigration became “a self-perpetuating phenomenon and an integral, automatically accepted feature of Irish life.”¹⁵ Despite improvements in Ireland, emigration continued, and continues still. Over 150,000 people emigrated from Ireland from 1911 to 1920, as did Ellen and

Vincent.¹⁶ Like many of his historical counterparts, Vincent leaves for economic reasons, but not survival. He will not starve if he stays, but he leaves to avoid being a superfluous person in terms of the post-Famine landholding system in Ireland. The way land was owned after the Famine was an attempt to remedy at least one of the problems that contributed to it: partible inheritance. Before the Famine, when landowners died, the land was divided into smaller and smaller parcels, enabling more sons of each family to marry and form families of their own. Over generations, this process resulted in plots of land so small that only potatoes could be grown on them. As the potato was nutritious (one can, and many did, live on potatoes almost exclusively), and as the potato is one of the few crops readily grown on tiny plots, the result was an increasing marriage rate, an increasing population, and an increasing dependence on the potato. Thus it came to pass that, when the Famine struck in 1845, there were no readily available alternatives to the one crop that could support so many on so little land.

After the Famine, in an effort to promote more varied farming and thus prevent this overdependence on one crop in the future, changes were made in the landholding system. The custom of splitting the land among the men of a family was replaced by a primogenitive system in which the land was left to the oldest son. Younger sons and any daughters who did not marry another landowner were expected to make their living in some other way, with emigration being the main option.¹⁷ This process was so effective that by 1914, one year after Vincent emigrated, "both land and livestock were increasingly concentrated among a small minority of farmers."¹⁸ This allowed for raising more varied crops, but rendered enormous numbers of young people redundant. Many of those who emigrated at the same time as Vincent and Ellen did were, like Vincent, "non-inheriting sons," young and alone; on their journeys or when they arrived, they would find young Irishwomen like themselves, as the women of the time were emigrating too, and in similar numbers.¹⁹ While young men like Vincent left Ireland to avoid uselessness, many were also attracted, as was Vincent, to a country in which the streets may not have been paved with gold as legend had it, but where steady, relatively well-paying, and even interesting work was available.²⁰ Most of these jobs were in cities. Unlike other emigrant groups, the Irish tended to stay in or near the cities where they first landed in America; one theory about the "marked preference" of the Irish in America for urban life²¹ is that the Irish developed an aversion for life on the land, which had failed them in Ireland.

Unlike Vincent, with his rural background, other emigrants, like Ellen, town dwellers and the children of merchants or tradesmen, were less affected by the system of land tenure. Nevertheless, because the mass emigration that had begun before the Famine was massively increased by