

#52 Ancestors 2020 Week 1 Fresh Start

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Week 1 Fresh Start

All of my immigrant ancestors came to Australia for a fresh start. For all of them it was a huge undertaking which meant a permanent severing of ties with their homes in England and Ireland – of sixteen of my direct ancestors who were born overseas, none was ever to leave Australia.

The enormity of these decisions was compounded by the difficulty of communication between the new and the old worlds. We take for granted now our ability to Skype and Facetime and send emails – some of my forebears couldn't read or write at all. Those who did would have to wait several months for a letter from "home" to travel by ship – and then several more for the reply to reach its destination.

But all of them were convinced that they had come to a better place for their futures, and they were right.

Perhaps none had better timing than the Power family – Peter and Mary and their children Patrick, Ann, Bridget (my 2x great grandmother), Anthony and Charles. They lived in a village called Elphin In Roscommon, Ireland and they left in 1839.

A few years later, this part of Ireland was one of the first to record the appearance of the potato blight which was to devastate the country and decimate the population.

On 12 October 1846, the local constabulary stated that 7,500 people were existing on boiled cabbage leaves only once in 48 hours.

The second failure of the potato crop in 1846 also brought a number of voluntary relief workers to the country. A young Quaker from Liverpool, Joseph Crosfield, passed through Boyle in December and reported:

“In this place, the condition of the poor previously to their obtaining admission into the work-house is one of great distress; many of them declare that they have not tasted food of any kind for forty-eight hours; and numbers of them have eaten nothing but cabbage or turnips for days and weeks.”

As was the case elsewhere, the potato failure put pressure on the local workhouses. To cope with the increase in disease, a 40-bed fever hospital was erected near to the Roscommon workhouse and an addition house was rented to accommodate fever patients, while local stables were fitted up for the reception of patients. However, at the beginning of 1847 the Roscommon workhouse was full and, under the terms of the 1838 Poor Law, had to refuse relief to other applicants regardless of their need. The suffering of the local poor was captured in the Dublin-based newspaper *The Nation* in March 1847: “In Roscommon, deaths by famine are so prevalent that whole families who retire at night are corpses in the morning.”*1



The Irish Famine Museum is now housed at Strokestown, near Elphin

Equally fortunate were Richard and Jane Mason, parents of my Australian - born great grandmother, Charlotte. They too escaped the famine by leaving the village of Ballingarry in Tipperary in 1841. Their first four children were born in Ireland and made the perilous journey with them – sadly the baby, Eliza, died shortly after their arrival In January 1842.

The image shows two pages of handwritten arrival documents. The left page is titled 'LIST of Passengers in the Ship' and the right page is titled 'and their arrival in the Colony'. Both pages contain columns for names, ages, and other details, with handwritten entries in cursive script.

Mason family arrival documents

The Powers and Masons were able to travel to Australia because of the Bounty Immigration Scheme.

The Bounty Immigration Scheme was first suggested by Edward Gibbon Wakefield and the first set of Bounty Regulations was gazetted by Governor Bourke in October 1835.

Bounty immigrants were free immigrants whose passage was paid by the colonial government under the “bounty scheme” whereby an incentive was paid to recruiting agents in Britain to find suitable skilled labour and tradespeople, then ship them out to the new colony which urgently need them.

Newly married couples or single men and women were given preference – large families were rarely accepted*2. Selected immigrants were generally shepherds, ploughmen and agricultural labourers*3 with some tradespeople such as brickmakers, carpenters, blacksmiths, tailors and needlewomen.

Bounties were paid to the ships’ masters for the safe delivery of their passengers under the scheme, Typical costs were:

- 30 pounds for a man and wife under 30 years on embarkation;
- 15 pounds for each single female 15y to 30y with the approval of the settler or the agent, and under the protection of a married couple or to stay with the family till otherwise provided for;
- 10 pounds for each unmarried male 18y to 30y (equal number of males and females, mechanics or agricultural labourers were to be encouraged by the settlers);
- 5 5 pounds for each child over 1year.

The Bounty Scheme was replaced by the Assisted Immigration Scheme of the 1840s and 1850s. My English ancestors Charles and Eliza White, with their four children, and James and Eliza Golding (and 4 children) took advantage of this. While there was nothing so dramatic as a famine to escape, they were certainly living in poor circumstances as agricultural labourers at a time of low wages, poor diet, insecure employment and unsanitary housing.

Like migrants everywhere, the first generation had hard lives as they worked to establish themselves in a new country. But the next generation all had at least a basic education, and many of them owned property - advantages which were unthinkable for their counterparts back "home".

*1 The Great Hunger in County Roscommon by Dr Christine Kinealy

*2 Four children would not have been considered a "large" family.

*3 All four of the men of these families were agricultural labourers. So too were the four Whitten brothers who came in the 1860s. Although we only know that Joseph came as an Assisted Immigrant it is reasonable to assume that the others did also.



Eliza White 1827 - 1895