

"The Fields of Athenry"

By the lonely prison wall,
I heard a young girl calling,
Michael, they are taking you away
For you stole Trevelyan's corn
So the young might see the morn,
Now a prison ship lies waiting in the bay.

Low lie the fields of Athenry
Where once we watched
the small free birds fly.
Our love was on the wing, we had dreams
and songs to sing
It's so lonely 'round the fields of Athenry.

By a lonely prison wall
I heard a young man calling,
"Nothing matters, Mary, when you're free."
"Against the famine and the Crown
I rebelled, they cut me down,
Now you must raise our child with dignity."

Low lie the fields of Athenry
Where once we watched
the small free birds fly.
Our love was on the wing, we had dreams
and songs to sing

It's so lonely 'round the fields of Athenry

By a lonely harbor wall,
she watched the last star falling,
As that prison ship
sailed out against the sky.
Sure she'll wait and hope and pray,
for her love in Botany Bay.

It's so lonely 'round the fields of Athenry.

Written by Peter St-John

THE FIELDS OF ATHENRY

One of the most famous Irish Ballads of all time, "The Fields of Athenry" was written in 1979 by a Dubliner, singer, songwriter, Peter Mooney, better known by his stage name Peter St John. That year the song was recorded first by Danny Doyle and was an instant hit. In 1983 Paddy Reilly put it on the charts for 72 weeks running; making his version the most famous and forever immortalized in the hearts of Irish round the globe. The song rose to prominence during the 1990 World Cup in Italy becoming the unofficial Irish sporting anthem; sung at rugby and soccer games in Ireland, Liverpool and Glasgow. Perhaps one of the most memorable moments took place in the final game of the 2012 European Soccer Championship, when the world champions, Spain, knocked the outmatched Irish team out. During the last minutes of the game, the fans in a show of support for their losing team, began to sing the beloved ballad. It went on for a number of minutes stopping all action, including a German tv show whose announcers remained silent allowing the voices of the ardent fans rang throughout the stadium and over the air waves to the world.

According to St John the inspiration for the song came from an old tale he'd heard about a young man from Athenry, a town in County Galway, who had been caught stealing corn during the "Irish Potato Famine." The famine also known as "The Great Hunger" took place between 1845-1849 and was at its peak in 1847, commonly called 'Black 47.'

Though potatoes were not indigenous to Ireland, they were brought to Europe by Spanish explorers from South America sometime late in the 16th century. Since the potato was found to produce larger harvests compared to the traditional cereals, it soon became a major staple of the Irish diet. Mixed with buttermilk or milk it served as a decent diet for human consumption, as well as a feed for

farm animals. Planting was a matter of digging a shallow trench alongside the planted crop, then covering the spud with that soil allowing the trenches to serve as a necessary form of drainage. All that was required was a spade and a strong back. This method of garden planting became known as "lazy

beds” in that it allowed potatoes to be planted in places difficult to plough. Of course, the potato was disparaged by the British. Over future generations the potato grew in a dominant position in Irish farms, so when a fungus blight attacked the vegetable in mid-19th century, Ireland was devastated, both physically and mentally. The famine was most severe in the south and west of Ireland where the Irish language was spoken and so in Gaelic the famine is referred to as, *An Gorta Mor*, translated to, “The Great Hunger.”

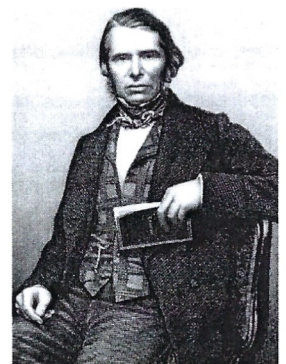
By 1850 the depravation had come to an end, but not after over a million people had died and another million or more had emigrated to England and America, or transported to Australia. reducing the Irish population by more than 20 percent. Michael, in the song, was one of the Irish “criminals” sent to Australia.

England’s history of using Australia as a prison colony was a long one. The process of criminal deportation by ship was aptly called, ‘The Transportation Act,’ of 1784, which, in part read:” to what Place or Places, Part or Parts beyond the seas.” The first ships departed Portsmouth, England in May of 1787, arriving at Tenerife in the Canary Islands in June, next to Rio De Janeiro in August, stopping then in Cape Town in October and finally arriving on January 20th 1788 in Botany Bay. It should be understood that many onboard these ships, though called convicts, were petty thieves, women and even children, who were treated much as the African slaves who were being sent to America. These transports consisted of eleven ships of approximately 1500 convicts known as the ‘Convicts First Fleet.’ These transports continued until 1865 and from the final count consisted of some 160,000 convicts. Numbers of long ago can be questioned but the general facts of what happened has been well documented. Michael’s theft of corn made him a criminal to be transported to Botany Bay.

It must be pointed out that the devastation of the famine was in large part a result of English indifference to Ireland, a land and people who had been united to England in 1801 by the Act of Union which created the United Kingdom. The boot that ground deeply into the Irish neck for centuries was not changed in the United Kingdom which continued to export food produced in Ireland in spite of the starvation in Ireland.

The main characters of St John’s ballad are a typically Irish married couple, Mary and Michael, who have a child suffering from the Famine. The times are desperate, the famine is raging, so the child must be fed and Michael does whatever he must to keep the family alive. Here the song introduces the villain in the line, “Michael, they have taken you away for you have stolen Trevelyan’s corn.”

Lord Charles Trevelyan, a member of Parliament for many years, had been put in charge of famine relief in Ireland. Trevelyan was a student of Malthus, a brilliant man who believed in the theory of population control by natural disaster, famine etc. He had a laissez faire attitude, meaning that he did not believe that the government should get involved too deeply in economic policies and that individuals should be self-reliant. At one point he did negotiate the purchase of corn from India which was impossible for the Irish to digest, being more suitable to animal rather than human consumption. During the height of the famine, rather than assist the starving Irish people, he encouraged the export of beef, corn and other agricultural products back to Britain. Some of his written articles show an animosity toward the Irish people, writing, “the famine was a judgement of God sent to teach the Irish a lesson,” and that the famine was, “a mechanism to reduce the surplus population.” Some



Charles Edward Trevelyan

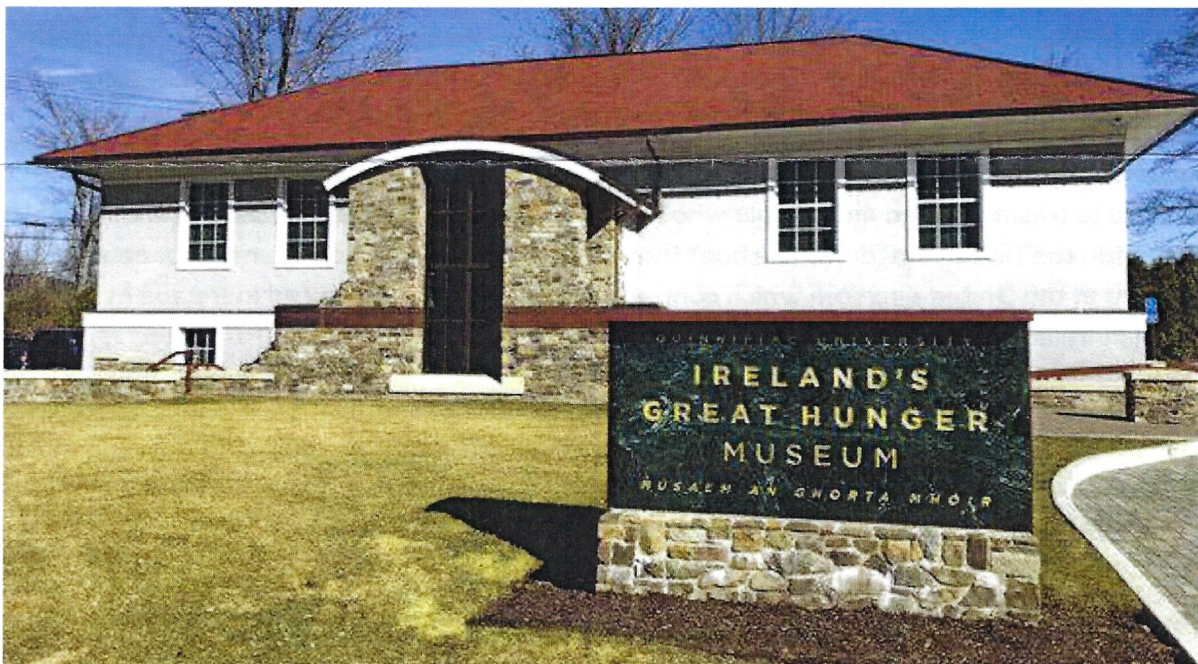
wonder if W. B. Yeats, in his poem "The Municipal Gallery Revisited," was referring to Trevelyan in his words "a soul incapable of remorse or rest."

When we hear the sonorous words of the iconic song, we may well understand how those words fit into the context of Irish/British history and understand how Peter St John could feel the agony and pain of those who'd lived and suffered those so many generations ago.

R Duke Liddell

IRISH FAMINE MUSEUM AT QUINNIPIAC UNIVERSITY IS SHUTTERED

The museum which opened in 2012 under the leadership of former president Dr. John Lahey houses the world's largest collection of Irish Famine art. As expected, there are many individuals and groups, like the GAA, who will fight the closing. Benefactors who gave works of art to the museum are extremely upset. Connecticut's Attorney General has been asked to investigate the closure to ensure that the museum's valuable and historical collection remains intact.



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