

NEWSLETTER

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Mayo's Famine Girls:

Over 4,000 girls from Irish
workhouses were sent to Australia
after the famine.

*We feature a list of the
group from Ballina.*

*(Cover image: Mayo Famine Girls Memorial
Ballina, Co. Mayo - taken from
Mayo Forgotten Famine Girls facebook page)*

MAYO'S FORGOTTEN FAMINE GIRLS

In the immediate aftermath of the Great Famine, over 4,000 girls and young women in Irish workhouses were sent to Australia. The first ship carried a group from Ballina Workhouse.

The first ship carrying orphans to Australia under the Earl Grey scheme, named after the Secretary of State for the Colonies, brought girls from Ballina Workhouse to Melbourne.

Whatever became of them?

Ballina Workhouse served the Ballina Poor Law Union which stretched from Dromore West in Sligo, to the Mullet Peninsula on the western seaboard.

Like most ordinary people of the time, the new arrivals in Australia left very little of a paper trail for historians to track their new lives.

The colonial authorities in Australia registered their names, place of origin and the name of the employer to which they were indentured, usually for four years. Once their four years were up they were free to go where they wished.

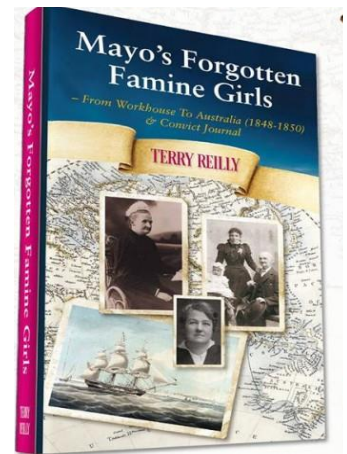
Occasionally a run-in with the authorities spilled over into the courts and a little glimpse of their lives was captured in a local newspaper. Otherwise there is mostly silence from the records.

Barbara Barclay, an Australian researcher living in Mayo, maintains the website The Mayo Orphan Girls at

<http://mayoorphangirls.weebly.com/>

Here's what we know of them (sourced from Mayo's Forgotten Famine Girls and www.mayoorphangirls.weebly.com):

- **Biddy Browne**, aged 17 on arrival. It is believed that her sister **Mary** arrived in Sydney under the Earl Grey scheme a year later. There is no evidence that they were reunited.
- **Mary Carden**, aged 16 on arrival. Later married Preston man Robert Heaton. They had six children. She died at Hawthorne, Melbourne in 1894.
- **Mary Cogan**, married in 1850 to Sligoman George O'Malley, a carpenter and later an undertaker. They had six children. The family folklore has it that George, who had a number of skirmishes with the law, had met Ned Kelly during one of his spells in jail. Mary died in 1904.
- **Hannah Coyle**, aged 17 on arrival. She married twice and had nine children. She died in 1877 at Whitehills.
- **Mary Ann Davis**, aged 17 on arrival.
- **Biddy Duffy**, aged 16 on arrival.
- **Bessy and Catherine Gordon**, Ballina, aged 16 and 15 on arrival respectively.
- **Mary Knox**, Ballina, aged 16 on arrival.
- **Mary McHale**, aged 16 on arrival. She married Carlowman James Nowlan, 20 years her senior, in 1851. They had at least nine children.
- **Biddy McClean**, aged 18 on arrival.
- **Elizabeth and Mary McNamara**, sisters from Kilfian aged 17 and 16 on arrival respectively.
- **Mary O'Hara**, Crossmolina, aged 18 on arrival. Married Mayoman John Bermingham in 1849. They had twelve children.
- **Mary Roland**, aged 15 on arrival.
- **Catherine and Mary Staunton**, both aged 16 on arrival.
- **Bridget Tighe**, from Kilfian, aged 16 on arrival. Married in 1849 to James Farrell. They had twelve children born in different gold rush towns. She died in New South Wales in 1908.
- **Winnie Nealis**, from Skreen, Co Sligo. Aged 16 on arrival. She married Samuel Pickersgill in 1852. They had nine children. Her life is documented in Terry Reilly's book (our Book of the Week). She died in 1891.
- **Bridget Benson**, aged 16 on arrival. She is believed to have married Bartholomew O'Connor. They had seven children. She died in 1905
- **Bessy Forbes**, aged 16 on arrival.
- **Mary Fox**, aged 16 on arrival.
- **Bessy Gordon** (Sister of Catherine)
- **Biddy Quinn**, aged 18 on arrival.
- **Margaret Roach**, aged 17 on arrival.
- **Biddy Fallon**, aged 17 on arrival. Married George Bonnett, Geelong, 1950. They had ten children. She died in 1884.



BOOK OF THE WEEK MAYO'S FORGOTTEN FAMINE GIRLS

by Terry Reilly
€25 (+postage)

Between 1848 and 1850, as the aftershock of the Irish famine continued to roll across the landscape, over 4000 Irish orphan girls, aged mainly from 14 to 18, were sent from overcrowded disease-ridden workhouses to Australia.

There, men outnumbered women 8 to 1. As one critic put it, they were like 'Circassian beauties sent to Turkish towns.....destined to become wives and mistresses of bushmen or savages'.

They did not have a voice, their opinions were rarely if ever sought or entertained.

Mayo's Forgotten Famine Girls is available from Reception or from the North Mayo Heritage Centre ebay bookstore.



The Australian monument to the great Irish famine
(Image from sydneylivingmuseums.com)

An exhibition on Mayo's links with Australia, including the Famine orphans, is currently on display at the North Mayo Heritage Centre.