

# Irish Roots



*Celebrating Irish Ancestry*

**Taking A Research Trip To  
Ireland? What To Expect  
And How To Prepare!**



**Local Family History Resources For Tracing COUNTY MONAGHAN Ancestors.  
Alternative Sources In Place Of Ireland's Lost Nineteenth Century Census.  
The Imirce Project; A Powerful Collection Of Emigrant Letters & Life Stories.  
Guidance For Using Griffith's Valuation Online Resource For Your Research.  
News From The World Of Genealogy, Keep Up To Date With The Latest Irish  
Genealogical Record Releases, Your Ancestral Research Queries Answered,  
Books Selections And Lots Lots More!**

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## A few words from the editor

Welcome to our autumn edition of Irish Roots magazine 2025. One of the articles featured in this issue features *The Imirce Collection*, pages 18 and 19. Kerby A. Miller spent five decades collecting Irish emigrant letters and life stories from Irish people who came to live in North America. The collection was donated to the University of Galway Library where a digital repository was launched to share this collection with the public. The main theme of many of the letters is the emotional toll the emigrant endured, and the sense of loss and longing for their home and family that many experienced. Old Irish ballads are full of this sentiment that exiles had to endure. I can remember hearing about the American Wake when I was young. Once upon a time when people emigrated to America it was unlikely that they would ever return, so a gathering was held at the home of the person due to emigrate, to bid goodbye to neighbours, extended family and friends. The following day, they made their way to Cobh, Co. Cork to board a ship for the long journey to America and most likely to never see their homeland again. In the 1960s air travel between America and Ireland became more accessible with airlines operating frequent routes, and lowering prices, so this thankfully afforded the exile an opportunity to return home to Ireland once again.



In this issue, Stephen Smyrl seeks alternative sources to the loss of the Nineteenth Century Census Returns, page 5. Dr. Mary Hatfield, gets busy *Using Griffith's Valuation*, page 6. DNA expert Donna Rutherford introduces us to *Getting Started with Chromosome Browsers and Chromosome Painting*, pages 8 and 9. James G Ryan takes us around *County Monaghan Local Resources for Family History Research*, pages 10 and 11. Seán O'Murchadha keeps us in the know with *Surnames of Co. Monaghan*, pages 22 and 23 and Susan McKee whisks us off on a well prepared ancestral research trip to Ireland, pages 28 and 29. Robert Flanagan Stieglitz kindly shares his reflections on his recent trip to Ireland (as pictured on the cover), page 14. See the contents section opposite for the full listing of articles on offer in this issue.

If you would like to share your genealogical reflections with us or would like to share some meaningful details about your Irish ancestors, do please do get in touch with us. We love a good story and enjoy sharing yours with our readers even more! You can contact us through the contact form on our website page at [www.irishrootsmagazine.com](http://www.irishrootsmagazine.com) or email us at [editor@irishrootsmagazine.com](mailto:editor@irishrootsmagazine.com).

We hope that you had a really lovely summer and are now refreshed, recharged and looking forward to getting busy again with your family tree research and adding to your own genealogical story during the autumn season.

Happy researching!

Maureen



Robert Flanagan Stieglitz visiting the old homestead of his (Mc)Tighe family, Lisnagon, Co Meath on 29 April 2025, page 14.

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# The Imirce Collection

## Irish Emigrant Letters And Life Stories

## From North America

By Marie-Louise Rouget

History is the study of people – in all their glory and their frailties – and for the fly-on-the-wall perspective of the past, there may be no better medium than personal correspondence. Beyond the typical measures of demographics and economics, letters capture the complex perceptions and preoccupations of the authors as they tackle the myriad challenges of daily life.

**K**erby A. Miller, the distinguished historian of Irish emigration and Irish diaspora communities, spent five decades collecting letters to preserve and elevate the stories of ordinary Irish men and women in North America. In 2021, Miller's research collection was donated to the University of Galway Library, and in March 2024, a digital repository was launched to share this collection with the public. Whether researching a particular location, family name or historical period, or just looking for an entertaining read, all are welcome to explore *Imirce*.

### *Kerby A. Miller And The Imirce Collection*

In the 1970s, when researching what became his landmark publication *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (1986), Miller sought letters that were already held in libraries and archives collections. He also placed adverts in Irish newspapers asking members of the public to share their family correspondence with him to copy, transcribe and return. This method yielded great results, as hundreds of families welcomed the opportunity to



share their precious heirlooms with someone with genuine interest and knowledge about this subject area. Allowing Miller to make a copy meant that the letters could be preserved and shared with others while also allowing families to keep the original manuscripts that often hold significant sentimental value.

The Kerby A. Miller Collection (Archival ID: p155) was digitised in its entirety in early 2023 (more than 150,000 pages). Over the last two years, the collection has been catalogued to item level for release online to a dedicated repository called *Imirce* (the Irish word for 'emigration'). In addition to letters, Miller collected longer emigrant narratives, including memoirs,



journals, diaries, oral history interviews, biographies and autobiographies. These texts are also being released under the umbrella term of “life stories.”

The repository has been developed and structured to make the items highly accessible. Through *Imirce*, the materials are available to view as digital images, and these images are scanned using Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software to make them fully text searchable. This means that users of the site can bring their own diverse queries to the material, from exploring specific events like the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906 or the Civil War, to more general themes like coal mining, marriage or shamrocks.

With the launch of the online repository, the Library announced an open call to the public to contribute new material, in physical or digital form, to continue in the spirit of Miller’s decades-long project. Over the last year, thirty donor collections have been processed and released online, totaling more than 700 letters and a handful of life stories newly added to the corpus.

### Enduring Themes Of Emigration

While the project remains ongoing, *Imirce* already hosts almost 5,000 items for the public to explore. Ranging from the 1680s to the 1990s, readers will find reflected in the texts all manner of emigrant experiences influenced by politics, gender, class and religion.

One of the prevalent undercurrents across the letters is the emotional toll of emigration. As Miller describes in *Emigrants and Exiles*, for many families “the departure for North America of a relative or neighbor represented as final a parting as a descent into the grave.” The early days for emigrants are especially difficult, and the letter authors often reflect on their desperate homesickness when writing to those who know them best. In this light, the “home letter” becomes essential for coping. In 1884, Cathy Greene, a maid in Brooklyn, wrote to her mother in Co. Kilkenny laying out her anxieties about receiving no recent news by writing:

*“What on earth is the matter with you all, that none of ye would think of writing to me. The fact is I am hearth sick fretting. I cannot sleep the night and if I chance to sleep I wake up with the most frightful dreams to think its now going, and gone into the third month since you wrote to me I feel as if I’m dead to the world.”* (Archival ID: p155\_0005\_0002\_0001\_d002)

Only two months into her new life in America, Maggie Black (née Hall) also wrote to her mother from Chicago in July 1890 about her longing for home, but with resolve to overcome the feeling.

She writes:

*“I do not Know why but I got thinking of ye all and the distance that lay between us, and I had no home letter so I got into low spirits, but I feel all right again. And fretting won’t put a plank across the Atlantic.”* (Archival ID: p155\_0051\_0002\_d001)

This mental load of living between two worlds is sustained by many emigrants throughout their lives, as they hold onto their last view of Ireland. In 1950, Peter McCullagh (New York) wrote to Michael Murphy in Co. Armagh, dwelling upon his thoughts of Ireland in his old age:

*“One does not appreciate what it means to stand on the top of a hill in Ireland until he has been away and gets that gnawing feeling at his heartstrings for a last look at the places that only death can erase from memory...”* (Archival ID: p155\_0055\_0001\_0001\_d012)

In other examples, emigrants carry their home affiliations with them as if they had never left. In 1880, Patrick Sheil of Melrose, Massachusetts (Archival ID: p194\_0001\_d050) wrote home to his mother in Co. Roscommon about a rumour he’d heard from “John in Boston” about how “my mother was brought to cort for milching her nabours cows.” What follows is a letter littered with invectives against “that party” (the neighbouring Flynn family) who are spreading this “infernell story” about stolen milk. After strongly advising his mother to do everything she can to “repare your good name” in the community, Patrick closes the letter with the hope that they “may live to see them [the Flynns] all dead and damned.”

Beyond the words sent by emigrants, *Imirce* also holds examples showing the development of a visual culture of connection across the Atlantic in the early 20th century. In one example, a postcard sent by a friend in Co. Westmeath to Mary Scanlan in New York City in 1915, shows the motif of clasping hands over the American and Irish flags, and the slogans “Hands across the Sea” and “Erin go Bragh” (Irish for “Ireland Forever”) (Archival

ID: p221\_0001\_d070). This postcard conveys the enduring bond between the Irish in America and the Irish at home that is evident across all of the material in *Imirce*.

### The Future For Imirce

These are only a few examples from the collection. While every effort has been made to make the materials more discoverable, there are many unique characteristics and modes of expression that cannot be easily inventoried for quick access. Exploring the collection with curiosity and a free afternoon will bring readers closer to the individual, and often remarkable, voices of the past.

The call for new donations remains open and all details can be found at [imirce.universityofgalway.ie](http://imirce.universityofgalway.ie).

Marie-Louise Rouget is a Digital Archivist and is the *Imirce* Project Manager.

Image opposite page:- A postcard from the Fergus O’Brien Collection (Archival ID: p221) on display at the at the *Imirce* celebration event, 13 March 2025. *Imirce*. Credit: Aengus McMahon.

Image opposite page:- Kerby Miller with materials from his collection (Archival ID: p155) in the University of Galway Archives and Special Collections Reading Room, 7 March 2024. Credit: Aengus McMahon.



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