Irish Famine
Unit V.

V.

Emigration: Departure, Crossing and Arrival

ADDITIONAL UNIT GOALS:

PERFORMANCE OBJECTIVES

1. The student will be able to describe the conditions in Liverpool, where Famine emigrants disembarked, and explain the deaths on board the "coffin ships".

TEACHING/LEARNING STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES

Students will examine the problems faced by Famine victims before and during their transport to America.

Activity 1. Students will read excerpts from The Great Hunger, and The End of Hidden Ireland, and answer questions immediately following. Students will discuss the viewpoint of landlords, ship captains, and the public, as well as the hazards faced by the emigrants.

INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIAL/RESOURCES

Scally, Robert James, The End of Hidden Ireland: Rebellion, Famine, and Emigration, Oxford University Press, New York, 1995, pp.212-215

Woodham-Smith, Cecil, The Great Hunger; Ireland 1845-1849 Penguin Books, London, England, 1991. First printing: 1962. pp.226-228

Objective 2.

The student will be able to describe the conditions at the quarantine station at Grosse Ile (Isle) Quebec, where the Famine emigrants landed.

TEACHING/LEARNING STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES

A. Examine two of the historical descriptions of Grosse Ile.

Activity 1. Students will read excerpts from The Great Hunger and Robert Whyte's 1847 Famine Ship Diary, answer questions following the readings and discuss the issues raised.

INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIAL/RESOURCES

Mangan, James (Ed.), Robert Whyte's 1847 Famine Ship Diary Metclef Press, Dublin Ireland,

1994. pp.lll-121

Woodham-Smith, Cecil, The Great Hunqer: Ireland 1845-1849 Penguin Books, London, England, 1991. First printing: 1962. pp. 218-221

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Activity 1

LEAVING FROM LIVERPOOL

The passage through the Liverpool funnel was also the most common experience of the famine emigrants. One might even say it was their first truly "national" experience. The sight of the exodus was concentrated and magnified in the few square miles of the waterfront

where, in a sense, all of Ireland's townlands met for the first time and witnessed the commonality of their fate. Whatever the circumstances of their leaving home or their ultimate destination, the vast majority of emigrants were unmistakably linked by characteristics that identified them as one in the eyes of Liverpool if not yet in their own. Rags, disease, and the ravages of hunger were among the signs attached to them, as we have seen.

For Rushton's police, baggage was the telling sign. The health officers looked for symptoms of "Irish fever." Adult males of the most ordinary appearance in Ballykilcline were the ape-like "Milesian' brutes of Victorian caricature. Above all, the symbols of Irishness in Liverpool were the signs of a poverty so extreme that, when found in the heart of the empire, it was seen as a fall from civilization and likened to savagery.

In Liverpool, the poverty of the emigrants was visible in their bodies, in their rags, and malnutrition. Toothlessness, matted hair, body smells, and other missing vanities also set them apart. But, according to some observers Irish poverty could be distinguished from that of other paupers as something more than just a lack of cash, something as evident in their gait and demeanor as in their obvious need. "Passive," "resigned," "stunned," and "mute" were descriptions most commonly given to distinguish Irish emigrants along the docks. The authorities, especially the unenviable health and parish relieving officers, were repeatedly frustrated by the tendency of sick or starving emigrants to hide themselves from view in the cellars and tenements, as though fearing to approach even those who meant to help them.

There was some reason to remain unseen, since Irish-born paupers could be brought before the magistrates and immediately returned to Ire-land under the Poor Removal Acts. Short of that dreaded prospect, the sick could be removed from the family for quarantine or "treatment" in the fever sheds. Inadvertently, the law also gave the lodging-house keepers and their intermediaries a new means of threatening their guests with exposure and repatriation. The laws and regulations aimed at emigrants, as well as the discretionary powers of health and parish officers, tended to reinforce the ingrained habits of isolation and secrecy with which the emigrants had long used to cloak themselves from scrutiny. In the townland, all deputies of the law or authorities were to be shunned indeed, many succeeded in evading them and some lived entirely out of their sight for years. But anonymity was no longer possible, since in Liverpool the law or the threat of it was everywhere in the person not only of every official but of almost any native citizen.

It is unlikely that most of the newly arriving emigrants understood the variety of proceedings of the law that could derail their hopes and plans: discovery by the relieving officers might be followed in a few hours by a summary hearing before the magistrates and forced removal along the same route they had just survived, as deck

passengers back across the Irish Sea. Medical or ship's officers could reject one or all in a family without appeal moments before they boarded. Health officers could order immediate quarantine in the fever sheds or the hulks moored in the river to isolate the infected. Doctors or beadles could remove "lunatics" from the poorhouses to the crowded asylum at Rainhill, where the wards were filled with hundreds who were diagnosed as suffering from "mental paralysis".

A large minority were also handicapped by language or illiteracy. The Irish accents of both native- and Irish-born could be heard throughout the city, distinguishing their bearers' place of origin or even their religious identity to each other. But speaking Irish above a whisper outside the Irish wards instantly marked the emigrant to both the authorities and the swarms of predators. More than half of the native population of the city was also illiterate, but new arrivals from Ireland were at greater risk of exploitation from this cause in the unfamiliar workings of the emigration system, in which reliable information and directions about ship movements, delays, and regulations were essential. At least in these circumstances, the literate children were more likely to be a help than a burden to many emigrant families; indeed, the value and status of the young adults had almost certainly risen as the distance from the townland lengthened and the powers of the elders diminished.

Another large but unknown number arrived in Liverpool with their tickets or their fares only and were completely unprepared for even slight setbacks. The routine delays in sailing dates were especially dangerous for these and accounted for the thousands caught in the gauntlet of official and criminal coercion from which few emerged unscathed and many totally penniless. Many were also vulnerable to the devious practices of the freelance banditti who infested the lower levels of the emigrant trade, being as unused to complicated transactions as they were to schedules or lodging houses. These easily fell afoul of money changers, offering to "dollar" their English coin into American currency of less or no value, or of lodging-house keepers who might keep a family "on the cuff" for food and shelter and strip them bare when payment came due, by force if threats failed.

Many of the petty frauds practiced on them were common bullying: baggage would be stolen by the runners and "commissions" demanded for its return; half-fare childern's tickets were sold to illiterate adults who would then be turned away at the gangplank. Worthless out-of-date tickets were casually altered and bought by the gullible or desperate. Others were refused passage because they lacked the additional one dollar "head money" required at American ports. In their rush to fill the steerages, brokers were known to book emigrants for New York on vessels bound for Baltimore or Boston, or even New Orleans, assuring them that these places were only hours apart.

The fleecing of "greenhorns" was widely practiced in all big cities

in Europe and America, often as in Liverpool by those who had survived a similar experience themselves not long before. It soon became a kind of initiation rite for migrant peasants in the new moral niceties of city life. But Liverpool's well-earned fame for this skullduggery could probably not have been achieved but for the overabundance of fresh and easy victims, a role the townland emigrant of 1848 was suited for as if by order.

The exposure of their weakness had begun at the moment they were assembled in the Strokestown square and proceeded daily on the road to Liverpool as they were marched and herded under the eyes of strangers, all now reduced to homeless paupers whatever their former standing had been. Patriarchs and independent widows who had ruled adult families on the land became burdensome dependents when severed from their holdings, and together with infants and children under five suffered the highest rates of attrition en route.

James Connor's father, a patriarch of one of the largest and oldest townland families, was rejected as "too old and debilitated" by a reputable captain who merely wished to reduce the risk of mortality aboard his ship during the crossing. Such descriptions tell us little about the old man's actual condition, since the same description was sometimes used of men or women of less than forty years of age as reason for rejection. Hundreds of similarly described emigrants were "repatriated' weekly from Liverpool alone, some of them no doubt creating bits of the scenes of "want and woe" described by Melville. Of the nearly 300,000 who arrived in 1847, some 15,000 were removed to Ireland under the new Poor Law Removal Act

Scally, Robert James, The End of Hidden Ireland: Rebellion, Famine, and Emigration, Oxford University Press, New York, 1995, pp.212-215

QUESTIONS:

- How were the Irish waiting to emigrate from Liverpool set apart and isolated?
- How were the Irish famine refugees in Liverpool victimized and exploited?

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Activity 1

COFFIN SHIPS

"In April Stephen de Vere, of the well-known family of de Vere, Curragh Chase, County Limerick, took a steerage passage on an emigrant vessel to Quebec, in order 'that he might speak as a witness respecting the sufferings of emigrants'. 'Before the emigrant has been a week at sea,' wrote Stephen de Vere, 'he is an altered man...

How can it be otherwise ? Hundreds of poor people, men, women and children, of all ages from the drivelling idiot of 90 to the babe just born, huddled together, without light, without air, wallowing in filth, and breathing a fetid atmosphere, sick in body, dispirited in heart... the fevered patients lying between the sound in sleeping places so narrow, as almost to deny them... a change of position... by their agonized ravings disturbing those around them... living without food or medicine except as administered by the hand of casual charity, dying without spiritual consolation and buried in the deep without the rites of the church.'

The food, de Vere continued, was seldom sufficiently cooked because there were not enough cooking places. The supply of water was hardly enough for drinking and cooking-washing was impossible; and in many ships the filthy beds were never brought up on deck and aired, nor was the narrow space between the sleeping-berths washed or scraped until arrival at quarantine. Provisions, doled out by ounces, consisted of meal of the worst quality and salt meat; water was so short that the passengers threw their salt provisions overboard - they could not eat them and satisfy their raging thirst afterwards. People lay for days on end in their dark dose berths, because by that method they suffered less from hunger. The captain used a false measure for water, and the so-called gallon measure held only three pints; for this de Vere had the captain prosecuted and fined on arrival at Quebec. Spirits were sold once or twice a week, and frightful scenes of drunkenness followed. Lights below were prohibited because the ship, in spite of the open cooking-fires on her decks, was carrying a cargo of gunpowder to the garrison at Quebec, but pipes were secretly smoked in the berths, and lucifer matches used. The voyage took three months, and apart from fever, which does not seem to have been serious, many of the passengers, wrote de Vere, became 'utterly debased and corrupted'. Yet he was told that the ship was 'more comfortable than many'.

The worst ships were those which brought emigrants sent out by their landlords, and of all the sufferings endured during the famine none aroused such savage resentment, or left behind such hatred, as the landlord emigrations.

Before the famine, responsible landlords, for instance, Lord Bessborough and Lord Monteagle, advanced money and paid the cost of passages for tenants to emigrate. Lord Monteagle, in particular, believed that in emigration lay the solution of Ireland's population problem, and the Monteagle Papers contain a number of letters from grateful emigrants; he was also responsible for setting up the Select Committee of the House of Lords on Colonization, that is, emigration, in 1847.

Another landlord, Mr. Spaight, of Limerick, a well-known ship broker, bought Deify Castle, in Tipperary, for £40,000 in 1844, and found `a dead weight of paupers'. As he was engaged in the passenger trade, he offered free passage and provisions to those willing to emigrate, and

the value of two pounds on landing, provided the tenants 'tumbled', that is, pulled down, their cabins. He made the offer only to entire families, and said he had 'got rid of crime and distress for £3 10s. a head'. The first failure of the potato was followed by a number of landlord emigrations, and a total of more than a thousand tenants from various estates reached Quebec in 1846, those arriving early in the season being reasonably healthy and, on the whole, adequately provided for.

The fatal year 1847 brought a change. In January the Government announced that the whole destitute population was to be transferred to the Poor Law, to be maintained out of local rates at the expense of owners of property, and the only hope of solvency for landlords was to reduce the number of destitute on their estates. Emigration began to be used as an alternative to eviction, and Sir Robert Gore Booth, a resident landlord, was accused by Mr. Perley, the Government emigration agent at St. John, New Brunswick, of 'exporting and shovelling out the helpless and infirm to the detriment of the colony'. Sir Robert in reply put forward the landlord's point of view, declaring that emigration was the only humane method of putting properties in Ireland on a satisfactory footing. The country was overpopulated, and it was not right to evict and turn people out on the world. To emigrate them was the only solution.

Emigration also saved money; the cost of emigrating a pauper was generally about half the cost of maintaining him in the work-house for one year, and once the ship had sailed the destitute were effectually got rid of, for they could return only with immense difficulty. In 1847, therefore, the temptation was strong to ship off as cheaply as possible those unfortunates who, through age, infirmity or the potato failure, had become useless and an apparently endless source of expense.

No attempt was made to regulate landlord emigration, but the Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners did warn landlords that each tenant should have at least one pound landing-money, and provided the necessary organization for remitting money to British North America. No money, however, was sent.

On December 11, 1847, Mr. Adam Ferric, a member of the Legislative Council of Canada, wrote a furious open letter on Irish landlord emigration to the British Colonial Secretary, Earl Grey. He denounced landlords by name, the best-known being Lord Palmerston and Major Mahon, of Strokestown, County Roscommon, who later was tragically murdered. Hordes of half-naked, starving paupers, declared Mr. Ferric, including aged, infirm, beggars and vagrants, had been shipped off to 'this young and thinly populated county without regard to humanity or even to common decency'. They were given promises of clothes, food and money and told that an agent would pay from two to five pounds to each family, according to size, on arrival at Quebec; when they arrived no agent could be found, and they were thrown on the Government and private charity. Twice as many passengers as the

ship should hold were 'huddled together between decks'; there was too little food and water and conditions were 'as bad as the slave trade'.

Nine vessels had left Sligo carrying tenants emigrated by Lord Palmerston from his estates, and additional passages were hooked from Liverpool, about 2,000 persons leaving in all. The first vessel to arrive, the *Elira Liddell* , at St. John, New Brunswick, in July, 1847, raised a storm of protest; it was alleged that she brought only widows with young children, and aged, destitute, decrepit persons, useless to the colony. Another vessel, the *Lord Ashburton* , arrived at Quebec on October 30, dangerously late in the season, carrying 477 passengers, 174 of whom, Lord Palmerston's tenants, were almost naked: 87 of them had to be clothed by charity before they could, with decency, leave the ship. On the *Lord Asburton* 107 persons had died on the voyage of fever and dysentery; 60 were ill, and so deplorable was the condition of the crew that five passengers had to work the ship up to Grosse Isle. The Q *uebec Gazette* described the condition of the *Lord Ashburton as* 'a disgrace to the home authorities'. Even later in the year, on November 8, 1847, the brig *Richard Watson* arrived, carrying tenants of Lord Palmerston's , one of whom, a woman, was completely naked, and had to have a sheet wrapped round her before she could go ashore.

Most notorious of all was the *Aeolus* --bringing tenants of Lord Palmerston's from Sligo--which arrived at St. John, New Brunswick, on November 2. The St. Lawrence was then closed by ice, the Canadian winter had begun, and caleches , or horse-drawn sleighs, had replaced carriages in the snow-filled streets of Quebec. The captain of the *Aeolus* paid £250 in bonds to be allowed to land 240 emigrants at St. John. They were 'almost in a state of nudity', and the surgeon at Partridge Island, the quarantine station, asserted that ninety-nine per cent must become a public charge immediately: they were widows with helpless young families, decrepit old women, and men 'riddled with disease'.

The citizens of St. John declared that they could not feed or shelter the unfortunate emigrants; notices were posted in the streets offering to all who would go back to Ireland a free passage and food; and message was sent to Lord Palmerston that the 'Common Council of the City of St. John deeply regret that one of Her Majesty's ministers, the Rt. Hon. Lord Palmerston , either by himself or his authorized agent should have exposed such a numerous and distressed portion of his tenantry to the severity and privations of a New Brunswick winter... unprovided with the common means of support, with broken-down constitutions and almost in a state of nudity'."

Woodham-Smith, Cecil, The Great Hunger; Ireland 1845-1849 Penguin Books, London, England, 1991. First printing: 1962. pp.226-228

QUESTIONS:

- What were the conditions for the Irish Famine victims on board the "coffin ships"?
- Why did the landlords in Ireland wish to pay for their tenants to leave?
- Why were the worst conditions found on the ships paid for by the landlords?

Irish Famine
Unit V
Objective 2

Activity 1

Regulations at Quebec required that all ships with passengers coming up the St. Lawrence should stop at the quarantine station on Grosse Isle, thirty miles down the river, for medical inspection; those vessels which had sickness on board were then detained and the sick taken to the quarantine hospital. Grosse Isle, a beautiful island, lying in the middle of the majestic St. Lawrence, had been selected as the site for a quarantine station in 1832, at the time of a cholera epidemic.

On February 19, 1847, Dr. Douglas, the medical officer in charge of the quarantine station at Grosse Isle, asked for £3,000 to make preparations for the coming immigration, pointing out that during the previous year the number admitted to the quarantine hospital had been twice as large as usual, and that reports from Ireland indicated that the state of the immigrants this year would be worse.

Far from getting £3,000, Dr. Douglas was assigned just under £300. He was allowed one small steamer, the *St. George,* to ply between Grosse Isle and Quebec and given permission to hire a sailing-vessel, provided one could be found for not more than £50 for the season.

The citizens of Quebec, however, were so uneasy, that at the beginning of March, 1847, they sent a petition to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Earl Grey, in which they pointed out that the number of Irish immigrants was annually rising, that the present distress in Ireland must mean a further large increase, that they viewed with alarm the probable fate of poor Irish immigrants in the rigorous winter climate of Canada, and that there was also the possibility of such immigrants bringing disease. They begged the Canadian Government to take action.

The *Montreal Gazette,* prophesying that Canada was going to be 'inundated with an enormous crowd of poor and destitute emigrants', called for 'legislative measures' to meet the coming crisis. Everyone knew, declared the *Gazette,* that Quebec was merely the port where

emigrants disembarked for a few hoists, to embark again for Montreal, and it was on Montreal that the inundation would descend. However, a meeting of Montreal citizens, called by the Emigration Committee of Montreal on May to, 1847, to consider what steps should be taken, was so poorly attended that the meeting was adjourned.

There was one man who might have been able to convince the Canadian Government that a catastrophe was approaching, Alexander Carlisle Buchanan. He was the Chief Emigration Officer, he was esteemed in official circles, his reports were studied, his opinion carried weight. Nevertheless, Buchanan, though he anticipated a very considerable increase in sickness, 'did not make any official representation to Government' because, as he wrote, 'it was a subject that did not come within the control of my department'.

The Government, therefore, received no official warning that the emigration from Ireland was likely to present any problem, beyond being unusually large; and in April, 1847, the Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners made their seventh report without any inkling that disaster threatened. In the Canadian Legislature soothing assurances were given; the coming immigration would certainly he large, but the present system was adequate to deal with it; in 1846, 125,000 persons had arrived (this was an exaggeration), but the system had been found to work, 'and in general there were no complaints'.

The opening of the St. Lawrence was late in 1847; 'the merry month of May started with ice an inch thick', reported the Q *uebec Gazette,* and the first vessel, the *Syria,* did not arrive until May 17. Less than a week later the catastrophe had taken place, and was beyond control. The *Syria* had 84 cases of fever on board, out of a total of 241 passengers--nine persons had died on the voyage, and one was to die on landing at Grosse Isle. All her passengers were Irish, had crossed to Liverpool to embark, and had spent one night at least in the cheap lodging-houses of Liverpool. In Dr. Douglas's opinion, 20 to 24 more were certain to sicken, bringing the total for the *Syria* to more than 100, and the quarantine hospital, built for 150 cases, could not possibly accommodate more than 200.

Dr. Douglas now told the Canadian Government that he had 'reliable information' that. 10,600 emigrants at least had left Britain for Quebec since April 10: 'Judging from the specimens just arrived', large numbers would have to go to hospital, and he asked permission to build a new shed, to cost about £150, to be used as a hospital. On May 20, he received authority to erect the shed provided the cost was kept down to £135."

Four days after the *Syria* , on May 21, eight ships arrived with a total of 430 fever cases. Two hundred and five were taken into the hospital, which became dangerously overcrowded, and the remaining 216 had to be left on board ship. 'I have not a bed to lay them on or a

place to put them,' wrote Dr. Douglas. 'I never contemplated the possibility of every vessel arriving with fever as they do now.'

Three days later seventeen more vessels arrived, all with fever; a shed normally used to accommodate passengers detained for quarantine was turned into a hospital and instantly filled. There were now 695 persons in hospital and 164 on board ship waiting to be taken off; and Dr. Douglas wrote that he had just received a message that twelve more vessels had anchored, 'all sickly'.

On May 26 thirty vessels, with 10,000 emigrants on board, were waiting at Grosse Isle; by the 29th there were thirty-six vessels, with 13,000 emigrants. And 'in all these vessels cases of fever and dysentery had occurred', wrote Dr. Douglas-the dysentery seems to have been infections, and was probably bacillary dysentery.

On May 31 forty vessels were waiting, extending in a line two miles down the St. Lawrence; about 1,100 cases of fever were on Grosse Isle in sheds, tents, and laid in rows in the little church; an equal number were on board the ships, waiting to be taken off; and a further 45,000 emigrants at least were expected.

On June 1 the Catholic Archbishop of Quebec addressed a circular letter to all Catholic Bishops and Archbishops in Ireland, asking them to 'use every endeavor to prevent your diocesans emigrating in such numbers to Canada'. Nevertheless, the numbers continued to mount; ultimately, in 1847, 109,000 are stated to have left for British North America, 'almost all', stated the Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners, 'Irish'.

By July, more than 2,500 sick were on Grosse Isle, and conditions were appalling. 'Medical men,' wrote Dr. Douglas, were 'disgusted with the disagreeable nature of their duties in treating such filthy cases.' Many doctors died; Dr. Benson, of Dublin, who had experience in fever hospitals in Ireland, arrived on May 2d and volunteered his services, but caught typhus and died six days later. Each of the medical officers was ill at some time, and three other doctors died of typhus, in addition to Dr. Benson. At one period twelve out of a medical staff of fourteen were ill; of the two others, one left because he was afraid of catching typhus and one was summoned to a dying parent, leaving Dr. Douglas virtually single-handed.

Patients on the ships were often left for four or five days without any medical attention: under the Passenger Act of 1842 ships were not compelled to carry a doctor, and only one doctor besides Dr. Benson happened to have been a passenger.

Nurses, too, were unobtainable, and the sick suffered tortures from lack of attention. A Catholic priest, Father Moylan, gave water to sick persons in a tent who had had nothing to drink for eighteen hours; another, Father McQuirk, was given *carte blanche* by Dr.

Douglas to hire nurses, as many as possible, from among the healthy passengers. He offered high wages and told the women that, speaking as their priest, it was their duty to volunteer; not one came forward. The fear of fever among the Irish, said Dr. Douglas, was so great that 'the nearest relatives abandon each other whenever they can'. The only persons who could be induced to take charge of the sick were abandoned and callous creatures, of both sexes, who robbed the dead.

Woodham-Smith, Cecil, The Great Hunger; Ireland 1845-1849 Penguin Books, London, England, 1991. p.218-221

Irish Famine
Unit V
Objective 2

Activity 1 APPENDIX III
ON THE ISLAND: THE HORRORS OF GROSSE ISLE'

The Canadian authorities were hardly less remiss than the British in preparations to meet the terrible emergency before them; although they had equally received ample warning of it. In 1846, Dr Douglas, the medical superintendent at Grosse Isle, had repeatedly urged them to get ready for what was coming. The British, Irish, American and Canadian newspapers had almost daily reported and commented on the alarming progress which the famine and pestilence were making in Ireland, so that they could not plead ignorance of the ominous outlook or of the fact that the emigration from the Green Isle to Canada in 1847 would be on a very large scale.

Early in that year Mr. Robert Christie, the historian, then a leading member of the Provincial Parliament, wrote to the Provincial Secretary, Hon. Dominick Daly, complaining of the Government's inexcusable failure to take proper and necessary precautions and pointing out the great danger to which the country would be exposed, together with the measures to be adopted to avert it. Reverend Fr Moylan, the Catholic missionary at Grosse Isle in those days, also gave timely forewarning to the Government with respect to the gravity of the situation and it was upon his urgent recommendation that, later when the crisis was on, the available police force to keep order on the island was increased by 50 men of the 93rd Regiment, under Lt. Studdard, sent down from Quebec.

But all the signs and the warnings of the coming storm were virtually unheeded until it was practically too late. The only additions made to the Quarantine establishment were through the purchase of 50 bedsteads, double the quantity of straw used in former years and the erection of a new shed or building to serve as a hospital and to contain 60 more beds. In this way, provision, including the old

hospitals and sheds dating from 1832, was made for only 200 sick, the average of former years never having attained half that number requiring admission at one time. How utterly inadequate this was, the alarming sequel soon showed.

But, while there was little or no excuse for the failure of the British authorities to have risen equal to the great emergency, there was certainly a good deal for that of their Canadian colleagues. At that time the British North American provinces were comparatively new and poor, carrying on a struggling existence and possessing little means or few re-sources that were then available. Their political and social organization was yet in a more or less primitive and chaotic state, and as already seen, they were also divided among themselves by conflicting opinions as to the gravity of the danger and the steps to be taken to avert or meet it.

However, they were very soon brought face to face with it in all its hideousness and scarcely a month had elapsed after the opening of navigation in 1847, when a session of the Provincial Parliament was hurriedly called and held in Montreal, a select committee was appointed to inquire into the situation, and a commission was also appointed consisting of Drs. Painchaud, of Quebec and McDonnell and Campbell, of Montreal, to investigate the character and amount of sick-ness prevailing among the emigrants at Grosse Isle and the best mode to be adopted to arrest the disease and prevent its dissemination, with full powers to make all such changes on the island as they thought proper.

The commissioners reported. Of the sick in the hospitals, sheds and tents, they said: "We found thence unfortunate people in the most deplorable condition for want of necessary nurses and hospital attendants; their friends who had partially recovered being in too many instances unable and in most, unwilling, to render them any, assistance, common sympathies being apparently annihilated by the mental and bodily depression produced by famine and disease. At our inspection of many of the vessels, we witnessed some appalling instances of what we have now stated - corpses lying in the same beds with the sick and the dying, the healthy not taking the trouble to remove them."

Immediate steps were taken by the commissioners for affording temporary shelter on the island, by means of spars and sails borrowed from the ships and the putting up of shanties for the accommodation of the healthy.

What pen can fittingly describe the horrors of that shocking summer at Grosse Isle? All the eye-witnesses, all the writers on the subject, agree in saying that they have never been surpassed in pathos, as well as in hideousness and ghastliness. In a few months one of the most beautiful spots on the St Lawrence was converted into a great lazar and charnel-house to be forever sanctified by the saddest memories of an unhappy race.

In speaking of the fever sheds, Mr. De Vere says: "They were very miserable, so slightly built as to exclude neither the heat nor the cold. No sufficient care was taken to remove the sick from the sound or to disinfect and clean the beddings. The very straw upon which they had lain was often allowed to become a bed for their successors and I have known many poor families prefer to burrow under heaps of loose stones, near the shore, rather than accept the shelter of the infected sheds."

Captain, afterwards Admiral Boxer, of Crimean fame, stated that there was nothing more terrible than the sheds. Most of the patients were attacked with dysentery and the smell was dreadful, as there was no ventilation.

Frs. Moylan and O'Reilly saw the emigrants in the sheds lying on the bare hoards and ground for whole nights and days without either bed or bedding. Two, and sometimes three, were in a berth. No distinction was made as to sex, age or nature of illness. Food was insufficient and the bread not baked. Patients were supplied three times a day with tea, gruel or broth. How any of them ever recovered is a wonder. Fr O'Reilly visited two ships, the *Avon* and the *Triton. The* former lost 136 passengers on the voyage and the latter 93. All these were thrown overboard and buried in the Atlantic. He administered the last rites to over 200 sick on hoard these ships. Fr Moylan's description of the condition of the holds of these vessels is simply most revolting and horrible.

As for the dead, who were not buried at sea, it has been already seen how they were taken from the pest ships and corded like firewood on the beach to await burial. In many instances the corpses were carried out of the foul smelling holds or they were dragged with boat-hooks out of them by sailors and others who had to be paid a sovereign for each.

A word more as to the removal of the corpses from the vessels. They were brought from the hold, where the darkness was, as it were, rendered more visible by the miserable untrimmed oil lamp that showed light in some places sufficient to distinguish a form, but not a face. It was more by touch than by sight that the passengers knew each other. First came the touch and then the question, who is it? Even in the bunks many a loved one asked the same question to one by his or her side, for in the darkness that reigned their eyesight was failing them.

The priest, leaving daylight and sunlight behind, as each step from deck led him down the narrow ladder into the hold of the vessels of those days, as wanting in ventilation as the Black Hole of Calcutta, had to make himself known and your poor Irish emigrant with the love and reverence he had for his clergy, who stuck to him through thick and thin, endeavored to raise himself and warmly greet him with the little strength that remained.

Another death announced, orders were given by the captain for the removal of the body. Kind hands in many cases attended to this. In other cases, as we have seen, it was left to strangers. Up the, little narrow ladder to the deck, were the corpses borne in the same condition in which they died, victims among other things of filth, uncleanliness and bed sores and with hardly any clothing on them. There was no pretence of decency or the slightest humanity shown.

On deck a rope was placed around the emaciated form of the Irish peasant, father, mother, wife and husband, sister and brother. The rope was hoisted and with their heads and naked limbs dangling for a moment in mid-air, with the wealth of hair of the Irish maiden, or young Irish matron, or the silvered locks of the poor old Irish grandmother floating in the breeze, they were finally lowered over the ship's side into the boats, rowed to the island and left on the rocks until such time as they were coffined. Well might His Grace the Archbishop of Quebec, in his letter to the Bishops of Ireland, say that the details he received of the scenes of horror and desolation at the island almost staggered belief and baffled description.

There was no delay in burying the dead. The spot selected for their last resting place was a lonely one at the western end of the island at about 10 acres from the landing. At first the graves were not dug a sufficient depth. The rough coffins were piled one over the other and the earth covering the upper row, in some instances, was not more than a foot deep and generally speaking about a foot and a half. The cemetery was about 6 acres in extent. Later huge trenches were dug in it about 5 or 6 feet deep and in these the bodies were laid often uncoffined . Six men were kept constantly employed at this work.

Be'chard, in his history of the island, adds a new horror to the ghoulish scene. He states that an army of rats, which had come ashore from the fever ships, invaded the field of death, took possession of it and pierced it with innumerable holes to get at and gnaw the bodies buried in the shallow graves until hundreds of loads of earth had to be carted and placed upon them.

At first, says the late J. M. O'Leary, the sick were placed in the hospitals, while the seemingly healthy were sent to the sheds, but emigrants were continually arriving who were left for days and nights without a bed under them, or a cover over them, wasting and melting away under the united influence of fever and dysentery, without anyone to give them a drink during their long hours of raging thirst and terrible sufferings.

For want of beds and bedding, for want of attendants, hundreds of poor creatures - after a long voyage consumed by confinement and hunger, thirst and disease - were compelled to spend the long, long nights and sultry days, lying on the hard boards without a pillow under their burning heads, without a hand to moisten their parched lips or fevered brows and what was the result? They who, by a little

providential precaution and ordinary care, might have been restored to their large, helpless families and distracted relations, were hurried away in a few hours to their premature and unhonored graves while those who should at once have provided for their salvation at any cost and sacrifice were haggling about the means.

What encouragement was it for a young professional man to expose himself to almost certain death for the paltry remuneration of 17 shillings and 6 pence a day held out to those who tendered their services? What could be hoped for or expected from nurses who were willing to spend their nights and days in a fever hospital for 3 shillings a day?

In the sheds were double tiers of bunks, the upper one about 3 feet above the lower. As the planks of the former were not placed close together, the filth from the sick fell upon those in the lower tier who were too weak to move. Filth was thus allowed to accumulate and with so vast a crowd of fever cases in one place and with no ventilation, generated a miasma so virulent and concentrated that few who came within its poisonous atmosphere escaped.

Clergy, doctors, hospital attendants, servants and police, fell ill one after the other and not a few of them succumbed. A number of the captains, officers and crews of the pest ships also died at Grosse Isle and some of the vessels were so decimated of these during the voyage across and so short-handed, that it is a wonder how they ever reached the island.

Often times there were two and sometimes three in a bed without any distinction of age, sex or nature of illness. Corpses remained all night in the places where death occurred, even when there was a companion in the same bed, while the bodies that had been brought from the ships were piled like cordwood on the beach without any covering over them until such time as they were coffined.

In the midst of this fierce Canadian summer, thousands of sick kept pouring into Grosse Isle. Not a drop of fresh water was to be found on the island, no lime juice, no clean straw even to protect the patients from the wet ground in the tents while in the beginning of July, with the thermometer at 98° in the shade, hundreds were landed from the ships and thrown rudely by the unfeeling crews, on the burning rocks and there they remained whole nights and days without shelter of any kind.

Mangan, James (Ed.), Robert Whyte’s 1847 Famine Ship Diary , Mercier Press, Dublin, Ireland, 1994. P.111-121

Objective 2
Activity 1

Questions for discussion:

- How many famine and fever victims were the medical authorities at Grosse Isle prepared to handle? How many arrived in 1847? Why were they so unprepared?
- What was the general state of the Irish emigrants as they arrived at Grosse Isle?
- Were the famine victims given food, water, shelter, clothing, medical care and decent burials?

In what sense were the Irish better off than they were in Ireland?