

HOW TO RESEARCH AND WRITE THE LIFE STORIES OF IRISH FAMINE ORPHANS

By Amanda Midlam

*DEDICATED TO THE REMARKABLE YOUNG WOMEN WHO CHANGED THEIR LIVES FOREVER – AND
SOME OF OURS – BY EMIGRATING FROM IRELAND WHILE STILL IN THEIR TEENS IN 1848 - 1859.*

Under the Earl Grey scheme, more than 4000 young women emigrated to Australia, coming from the appalling workhouses in Ireland during the famine. The idea was that they would provide cheap domestic labour, reduce the gender imbalance in Australia and be saved from starvation. Nobody knows how many descendants they left but it would be a considerable number. This guide was specifically written for anyone wanting to tell the story of an Irish famine orphan but the research and writing tips may be helpful to others.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide came out of a research project I undertook as part of my studies for a Master of Research, Macquarie University, under the supervision of Dr Tanya Evans. For this project I researched and wrote the story of Mary Rattigan and this guide came out of what I learned along the way.

First, I suggest you give this guide a quick read through then keep it as a reference as you research and write your own famine girl stories.

There is currently more information available about conducting research and where to find records than there is about writing up your research, so I have included writing information.

I have a Masters in Creative Writing and love passing on writing skills. The reality is that the research is only half the task. It is what you do with your research that brings the Irish Famine Orphans to life for other people. Best of luck. There are great stories to be found and told.

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ACCURACY. Aim at accuracy but keep in mind that telling the story is more important than nailing down a single fact, a feat which sometimes turns out to be impossible. Keep an eye on the big picture instead.

ADDENDUM OR APPENDIX. This is where you can put information that has some relevance or context but is not part of the story, or else slows the story down. Not everything you find must make it into the story.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. Many people will help you track and trace your famine girl and it is a good idea to keep a list of their names right from the start. You might want to write an acknowledgement page thanking the people who helped and from courtesy you should send each person a copy of your work when it is completed. When people hear about these teenage girls travelling to Australia, usually on their own but sometimes with a sister, they almost always become engaged. Convict ancestors inspire interest, these young female free settlers inspire sympathy and empathy along with interest.

ANCESTRY.COM. Some people find this a great resource and others doubt the accuracy of family research found on this site. See Resources – Primary and Secondary.

ARE THERE RIGHT AND WRONG WAYS OF TELLING THE STORY?

No. There is a format that works – born, workhouse, migrated to Australia, worked, married, had children, died – but which parts you focus on and how you ultimately tell the story is up to you. The way you tell the story does not matter but try to develop the skill to tell it as best you can.

ATTRIBUTIONS. This is a way of acknowledging, in your writing, the work or ideas of others. There can be copyright or ethical reasons for this and, I would argue, literary reasons

because attributions can make for a better story. Mary Rattigan's story was enriched, in my view, by naming contemporary family members and quoting them as this provided a strong link between past and present.

AUDIENCE. Think about who are you writing for. The answer to that will affect the tone of your writing. For a start, are you telling the story for children or adults? It can be helpful to imagine a reader while you are writing. This imagined reader may be a partner, a relative, a friend or a version of yourself. Thinking about your audience will guide you in such things as tone, choices of vocabulary, sentence and paragraph length, and focus of the story.

BAPTISMS and BIRTH CERTIFICATES. Baptism certificates are more likely to have accurate birth dates than birth certificates as there was a fine for late registrations of births.

BAREFOOT AND PREGNANT? IRISH FAMINE ORPHANS IN AUSTRALIA, VOLS 1 and 2, by Trevor McClaughlin, are the definitive books about the subject. Unfortunately currently (Nov 2021) they are not digitised.

BEGETTING. Avoid begetting, a word no-one seems to use any more. What I mean is the long list of names that purports to explain who someone is by listing all the ancestors.

Solomon begat Isaiah who begat Shania who begat Kylie... If you want to list the family line, attach it as an addendum. A list of names is not part of telling a story.

BEGINNING. Where do you begin the research? You start with what information you have. The Irish Famine Memorial database gives you barebones information and that is a great start.

BIBLIOGRAPHY. It is important to create a bibliography because it acknowledges the work of others, helps you keep track of the information you have read, and is a guide for future researchers. Generally the bibliography is in alphabetical order but I found it more convenient to divide it into types such as personal contacts, electronic sources and books. I

have included the bibliography for Mary Rattigan as a sample in the addendum. Some of the sources listed here will be general to all Irish famine girls while others are specific, but you can substitute my local sources for your own local one, for example historical societies.

BLOG. Trevor McLaughlin's blog, "Trevo's Irish Famine Orphans", at <https://earlgreysfamineorphans.wordpress.com/author/trevo1/> is a great resource. You may find other blogs that are helpful too. Do a search using a key word and the word "blog".

BOOKS. In my attached bibliography I have listed many books and you will find more relating to life in Ireland, migration at the time, Australian history and related subjects.

CHRONOLOGY. It is best to keep your research in chronological order. The Earl Grey Scheme ran from 1848 to 1850, so the information you gather falls before or after that. With the writing you might want to start the story at a dramatic point then backtrack and that is fine. Keep in mind, if you have doubts about how to tell the story, a chronological telling works and is understood by everyone.

COPYRIGHT. Information itself is not subject to copyright but the way it is expressed is. The copyright lies in the words and the ordering of them. You might find information in a book or on a website that you want to use. If you copy and paste without permission that is a breach of copyright. In that case you can either ask for permission to use the material or rewrite the information in your own words. Sometimes the writing of the material is so beautiful it is worth asking permission to use it.

CREATIVE NONFICTION. If you want to improve your writing skills look up creative nonfiction. Life writing – whether it is your life or someone else's – falls into the category of creative nonfiction and is beyond plain journalism which purports to be objective (although often it isn't). Creative nonfiction is writing that is factual but it also has narrative elements. Think of the true story you are writing as having a setting, a central character and a plot.

Unlike plain journalism you can use descriptive language and metaphors if you like and you can express emotion.

DEATHS. Death is the end of someone's life but not necessarily the end of their story. You might want to end the story with a description of a famine girl's legacy whether that is descendants, the Irish Famine Memorial, or a reflection on her life.

DATES. Dates can be rubbery. One source will give one date and second source gives another. Accurate dates can help you find specific documents in your research but in story terms what happened is often more important than the exact date, so don't get too hung up. Keep working on the story.

DEADLINE. Set a deadline, otherwise you will never finish. There will always be one more piece of information you are chasing. Set a date to have a finished version of the story that stands alone.

DELIVERY. You may want to set a date when you will deliver the goods, whether it is a printed story or a bog post. This will reinforce the deadline and help you to progress. Don't make the delivery date Christmas. Even if family members are looking forward to reading what you found, Christmas is too busy for everyone, including you. Maybe make it the date your Irish famine orphan arrived in Australia. The dates are on the database.

DISTRIBUTION. Give copies to people and organisations who helped as a thank you and because it can add to their information base. Give copies to family networks. Also send a copy to the Irish Famine Memorial. You can publish your work as a blog or in print.

ENDING. While you are researching and writing, keep an eye out for a satisfying end to the story. It may be information you come across, or it may be original writing that sums it up. Once you have an ending it can be easier to build towards it, to know what should be included and what is extraneous, and the tone to take in telling the tale.

FACEBOOK. I found the descendent of one orphan within a day by posting on a community page relevant to the locality where the orphan had lived. That is how I learned family members still lived there. I also found Irish community pages on Facebook to be informative and full of insights into the famine and local conditions at the time. It is a simple matter to look up the name of the county on Facebook and look for local pages then ask to join. There is also an Irish Famine Girl Facebook page for descendants in Australia.

FACT OR NOT FACT? Sometimes it can be hard to tell if information you find is a fact or untrue. If you want to include it, you can deal with this by using words “maybe” or “possibly” or “the family believe that...”. That does not confirm nor disprove but leaves it open.

FAMILY LORE. This can be fertile ground for finding gold. One woman told me there is a story in her family that when Grannie, with her tribe of kids, arrived in the remote bush setting where she was to live, she sat on a log and cried. This is a telling detail. She didn't just sit down and cry. She sat on a *log* and that tells us there was nothing but bush. Ask family members for any stories they may remember.

FAMILY MEMBERS. Keep a list of family members who help and send them a copy of your finished story. Keep their names in both your Acknowledgements list and your Bibliography and you have twice the chance of not forgetting anyone.

FAMILY HISTORY. Previously researched family history may contain furrphies. Or maybe whoever wrote it had access to records that no longer exist. It can be hard to tell. All you can do is try the best you can and remember you can write about anything questionable in a way that makes it clear it is a possibility and not rock solid fact.

FINISHING. You will never finish, there will always be more information. You need to reach a point, or points, when you produce a written story that feels complete in the sense of being a satisfying read.

FREEMAN'S JOURNAL. This is a Catholic newspaper published in Sydney from 1850 and is found on Trove.

FRIENDSHIPS. One of the frustrating things is that we cannot find much information about friends. They don't leave certificates like marriages and births do and they don't make themselves known in census records. You can look out for the same names popping up in different records and explore further. This is one reason why it is good to go back through the records and documents with a fresh eye looking for different information.

GENEALOGICAL SOCIETIES. Whether you are looking for family members who came before your famine girl or after, genealogical societies have a lot of information and expertise.

HISTORICAL SOCIETIES. These, and the people who run them, are often worth their weight in gold. Historical societies may or may not have a presence on the internet. The nearest library to the locality where your Irish immigrant lived, should be able to direct you to local historical societies.

HOLE. There will be holes in your story - big gaps and leaps of years you can't account for. If you can't fill these holes, move on. No-one expects you to find information about every phase of someone's life. You will find enough information about some phases to tell a great story.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLE. Too many pioneer stories ignore indigenous people. During my current research, I was dismayed to find settler history and Indigenous history to be largely separate instead of shared - even though in the years 1848 to 1850 people of a variety of

cultures shared the same spaces, perhaps not fairly but it would be wrong to assume the traditional inhabitants have nothing to do with your immigrant's story. Check with the local cultural centre and/or land's council for information and gain an insight into what the locality was like from an Indigenous perspective at the relevant time.

IRISH FAMINE MEMORIAL DATABASE. This is a great resource that has some information on over 4000 Irish famine girls. From the data base you can see first name, surname, native place, age on arrival, names of parents, religion and ship name. If you click on the surname of the girl more details come up.

IMMIGRATION CORRESPONDENCE. The details on the Irish Famine girls data base may refer to "im cor" followed by numbers. This refers to Immigration Correspondence which is held on microfiche at the NSW State Library.

INTERPRETATION. All history is interpreted. The past happened - and that doesn't change - but any story we tell about the past is not an exact replica of that past. It is an interpretation.

INTERVIEWING. You may need to interview people who have important information. If the word "interview" is daunting use expressions like "talk to" or "have a chat". Know what it is you are after and have specific questions ready, so you don't waste the person's time while you try to figure out what to ask next. Two questions I ask that sometimes provide new insights and telling details are, "What interests you most about the famine girls/ the locality at that time/ the treatment of the Irish...". And a similar question that sometimes yields surprising and valuable results is, "What surprised you the most about..."

LIBRARIES – LARGE. The NSW State Library has lots of information of use to family historians and you can ask librarians for assistance in finding what you want. You can apply for a library card online or in person. The National library also has great family history

resources and again you can apply for a library card which allows you to access online resources.

LIBRARIES – LOCAL. You might not be able to join the local library where your famine girl lived if you live out of the area but it is worth visiting. Let them know you are coming and make an appointment. Tell them you would like to look at their historical collection and give them information about your particular interest. Your own local library can arrange interlibrary loans if there is material held in other libraries that you'd like to borrow. Unfortunately this often does not apply to historical collections as often there are materials that are fragile and irreplaceable.

LIFE WRITING. Life writing means writing from life. It does not mean writing a whole life. Do not think you need to show all phases of a famine girl's life in the same amount of detail and length. If one phase really fascinates you, you might want to write just about that.

MAPS. Try to find old maps of where your famine girl came from and where she settled. There are plenty of maps on line. It helps to visualise places and gives insights for example on how isolated she may have been.

MUSEUMS. There are many museums that can help with your research. Before visiting larger museums do some research to know what it is you want to see in their collections. Go looking for smaller museums too. These are varied but can give insights into lives and times. Some of these museums may be in localities you are interested in but others may be elsewhere but have themes of use such as pioneering.

NEUTRAL TONE. There is no need to adopt a neutral tone. Your interests will show up anyway. You are an individual. The famine orphan you are writing about was an individual. If everyone wrote their stories in the same neutral tone, there would be a sameness to their stories and what we want is richness and that comes from a variety of voices. So be yourself.

NOTEBOOK. I am old fashioned and keep a notebook just for this project and I jot down everything from research ideas to contact details. I like paper and pen and can carry the notebook around with me. Others may prefer to keep everything on their computer.

ORGANISING INFORMATION. Keep your research in chronological order. It will help you find it and you can see where everything fits in. With the writing chronological order may not be imaginative but it works and it does not confuse readers. If you have a better way of organising the material and it works, go ahead, if you don't stick to chronological order.

PERMISSIONS. You may need permissions to use items such as photographs. It is best to ask as you go and keep a record.

PHYSICAL RESEARCH. It is useful to walk in a famine girl's footsteps. On a site visit to the Kiah River I discovered how quiet it was. There was nothing to hear except birdsong and the breeze in the trees. Mary Rattigan had come from the Parramatta hospital which would have been busy and noisy. Before that she was on the *Digby* with 200 other girls. Before that in an overcrowded workhouse. Before that in a small community where land holdings were tiny and neighbours were close. I doubt she had previously ever experienced such quiet.

QUOTES. Quotes enliven writing. As you research make notes of great quotes you come across that you would like to use. A couple of Irish people I found on Facebook gave great quotes about conditions during the Famine in the localities where my famine girls came from. I asked for and was granted permission to use them. These quotes were far more colourful and deadly than any description of the Famine that I could have written myself.

RACISM. The English in Australia looked down upon the Irish and Catholics. If this aspect interests you will find a lot of information.

READ ALOUD. It is very important to read your written work aloud before you show it to someone else. You catch many typos and clumsily expressed phrases this way. It is far more effective than reading silently. I rely on the Read Aloud function on Word which is found under the Review tab.

REFERENCING. Do you have to use references? It depends on the audience for your written work. Certainly keep up with referencing during the research. Later you will want to check something and it is really frustrating when you can't figure out where you got certain information from. The easiest way to keep information and details of where you found it together is to put the details in brackets immediately after the info.

REFLECTIVE WRITING. Writing about your experience of researching can be revealing. You can reflect on your thoughts and feelings and it can help you to clarify and focus. It is up to you if you use reflective writing as a tool or include it, or some of it, in the story you are writing. See Voice.

RESOURCES – PRIMARY AND SECONDARY. Primary sources are documents like birth, wedding and death certificates, shipping and census records, and any other records from the time of the life you are writing about. I would include Trevor McLaughlin's books and blog as primary resources too. Secondary sources are what other people have put together from primary sources. Blogs, family history websites and previously compiled family histories are secondary resources. If you have a primary and secondary resource with conflicting information, rely on the primary.

REVIEWING and RE-READING. Along with researching and writing, reviewing is an important task. Don't store your records away from sight assuming you know what's in the documents and images. You may think you've got the information you wanted from a baptism certificate, but it is extraordinary how many details hide that later pop out. I had

that happen when family members and I wondered what help, if any, Mary Rattigan had when giving birth. I looked again at the birth certificate of her son and spotted a squiggle next to the witness's name. A magnifying glass showed the squiggle said "Nurse".

SCHOLARLY WRITING - Unless you are a scholar or aiming at a scholarly publication, don't try it. Scholarly writing is written for scholars, not general readers. It is tedious and avoids surprises. The surprising twists and turns of someone's life are going to be a feature of the story you write and does not suit scholarly writing.

SHIPPING LISTS. The Irish Famine Site database has information about which ship each girl arrived on.

SKIMMING. Develop skimming skills for looking through masses of information. You develop these skills by doing it. For electronic sources you can use the search function but many old records are not digitised. It was by skimming that I learned the ships surgeons the girls travelled with were not employed by the ship but were hired to look after their health. They were not answerable to the captain.

SOCIAL MEDIA. If you have social media skills, use them. Social media is a great way to network. I found it helpful to use Facebook to contact people living in the Irish communities Mary Rattigan and Brigid Callery came from. For these people in Ireland, the past and the Famine was still fresh in memory and they gave me insights.

SOUND LIKE YOURSELF. Your writing will be stronger if you sound like yourself. Try not to write the story in the way you imagine a family historian should write. You want the story to be engaging and fluent. You don't have to sound authoritative; sounding interested or passionate about your subject is fine.

SPECULATION. It is fine to speculate but make it clear that is what you are doing. To say your orphan was heartbroken at leaving Ireland may make a strong impact but, if you don't

have any evidence for this, you have strayed into fiction. Some girls lied about their age and even their marital status in their eagerness (or maybe desperation) to be accepted in the Earl Grey scheme. Use words like “maybe”. “Maybe she was heartbroken, or maybe she was relieved that she was escaping starvation and a hopeless future...”. In Mary Rattigan’s story, I quote a descendent saying she liked to think Mary had a friend because she could not bear to think of her all alone. She and I speculated about who such a friend could have been, a couple of possibilities having turned up in the research. This does not mislead anyone but the speculation raises the important issues of loneliness and friendships.

STARTING POINT. Start the research with whatever information you have. The database on the Irish Famine Memorial was the start for my research. I suggest you start the writing sooner, rather than later. There are three reasons for this. The more you write, the more writing skill you develop. Secondly, as you find more information you can fit it in into the framework of the writing you have already done. Thirdly, writing is a form of thinking. Writing forces you to find the words and make sense of what you are learning.

STICKING POINTS. There will be times when you get stuck either in the research or the writing. The solution is to work on what you can. You move on to something else. Later you can come back to the sticking point and decide what to do with it. No story is going to contain all details of all phases of someone’s life

STRUCTURE. Structure in writing is equal to architecture in building. It is going to work better if you have a plan, even if that plan needs to be re-worked. Stories have a beginning, a middle and an end. Readers expect this. The difference between a list of events and a story is structure. Develop an idea as soon as you can of where your story begins, where the middle is, and where it ends. Also look for turning points, places where the story changes direction, for example a move to a new location.

STORY. Try to have an idea of the story as soon as you can. That is, not just a list of dates and names and places, but some idea of how her life, or part of it, was shaped. Remember always that a story has a beginning, a middle and an end. Look for those beginnings and ends.

VOICE. Most stories are written in the first person voice, using pronouns such as “I”, or third person, using pronouns such as “she” and “her”. The big difference is that in third person, the person telling the story is invisible. It is up to you if you want to be part of the story, a path that allows you to reflect and explain how you found an important piece of research, or if you prefer to write in third person, in which case you don’t appear in the story at all. Some people will instinctively know which voice is right for them, other people might like to experiment and write a sample of each to decide.

VOLUNTEERS. Usually historical and genealogical societies are run by volunteers and often they are older people who may be frazzled by technology. They are incredible sources of information about particular and general research. Treasure these resources.

WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW – If you are a farmer and your Irish famine orphan was a farm servant, research farming methods at the time. What did they grow? How did they sell their produce? If you love the sea, maybe focus on the voyage. You don’t have to write what you know but it can be an interesting angle and add breadth.

WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? If you are a fan of this show or others like it, keep watching. If you are not, try viewing some episodes. They are good examples of what information is found and where it is found. Importantly they also use experts to interpret the material. You can follow this idea by asking historians (from the library or historical society) and genealogists (from a genealogical society) to interpret documents and explain context. These programs build a strong story about some information, rather than trying to find every

single detail. Also, importantly, they look at the relevance, how what they have found has importance and impact today.

WONDER. It was wonder that got you interested in the first place and it is wonder that can drive you forward and give you direction to tell a unique story. You can revive your wonder by writing a list of questions that begin with “I wonder...” Here are some examples. “I wonder how her diet changed from Ireland to Australia” - you could research this. “I wonder if she was religious” – church records may provide an answer. “I wonder if she left siblings behind in Ireland and if so what happened to them” – you could search for the answers.

Best of luck with finding and telling stories.

All the best,

Amanda

BIBLIOGRAPHY for MARY RATTIGAN

Local history organisations

Bega Valley Genealogists

Eden Killer Whale Museum

Bega Family Museum

Bega Valley Shire Library – local history collection

Monaro Pioneers

Towamba Valley History website

Pambula Historical Society

South Coast History Society

Electronic sources

Ancestry.com <https://www.ancestry.com.au/account/signin>

Baptism records in Ireland- <https://registers.nli.ie/parishes/1102>

Bega Valley Notice Board (Facebook)

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<https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/history>

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<https://www.facebook.com/groups/110392629601520>

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Miscellaneous

Church and civil records of births, deaths and marriages (here and Ireland)

Fairall, Jon. "Women Who Changed Australia" (Tippoo Saib) (GIFCC Oct 2019 newsletter)

GIFCC newsletters (Irish Famine Memorial).

Goulburn Diocese for church records.

Hunter River Steamship Co

Immigration Correspondence

McHugh, Sonia – podcast

Perry's reading list (mostly context)

Shipping lists inc. Aust shipping 1788-1968 passengers and crew -

www.blaxland.com/ozships/alpha/pass

Site visits – local places where they lived, worked, died.

Workhouse admission and discharge papers (Ireland).

Personal Contacts

Connie S----- (member of family of Mary Rattigan)

Gail G----- (local genealogist)

Angela G----- (local historian)

Trevor McClaughlin (email)

Trish Power (email)

Codie T----- (living on property where Mary lived and is buried)

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