

Background to the Robinson Immigration

Tide of Hope

By Ed Schroeter © 2002

The play Tide of Hope takes place on the road to Mitchelstown in the Blackwater River district of County Cork, Munster Province, in southern Ireland in early spring, 1825.

It takes place 27 years after the 1798 uprising against English domination for a united, independent Ireland. The sting of this defeat was coincidentally mitigated by rising prosperity thanks to England's 22-year war against Napoleon and also its War of 1812 against United States. England became dependent on Ireland for grain crops, cloth, and soldiers. It was an era of relative prosperity. Social historians describe this as a protocapitalistic period in Irish history, their research revealing that increasing numbers of Irish workers were defining their goals in entrepreneurial terms such as "gaining independence."

However, the situation changed dramatically in 1815 with England's defeat of Napoleon. Suddenly, England no longer needed Ireland's products. Irish grain prices plummeted. Flour mills and textile manufacturers closed. This, combined with overpopulation and the potato crop failures of 1816-17 and 1821-22, resulted in chronic unemployment, poverty, starvation, and sporadic rebellion. The situation was exacerbated by a sharp increase in unemployment due to the decommissioning of many Irish soldiers who fought for the English as redcoats. The poverty was severe. People were living in ditches.

By 1822 the Blackwater River district, and indeed much of Ireland, was in open insurrection, called the Irish Agrarian Rebellion by some. The Irish agrarian rebels, known as Whiteboys or Rockites, fought pitched, daylight battles with the Landlords' garrisons. The Cork City jails were filled with rebels and thieves. Many rebels were sentenced to hanging.

At about this time, the British Government in the person of Robert John Wilmot-Horton, the under-secretary of state for the colonies developed a scheme to bring peace and prosperity to Ireland through the sponsored emigration of thousands of dispossessed tenant farmers. Their continued presence blocked agricultural improvement.

Wilmot-Horton had obtained the government's consent to a small-scale, experimental scheme for sending emigrants to Upper Canada. While he was creating the program, he met Peter Robinson from Upper Canada, and hired him as his superintendent of emigration.

Wilmot-Horton deliberately introduced his scheme in the Blackwater River valley of County Cork, a region where there was no tradition of emigration and where the Insurrection Act was in force. He sent Robinson there in the spring of three successive years. If nothing else, Robinson proved for Wilmot-Horton what a single personable interviewer with a few key introductions could accomplish.

On his first visit to the Blackwater Valley, Robinson found that many were willing to equate assisted immigration with transportation. In 1823 Robinson sailed from Cork with 568 individuals, bound for the military and Lanark settlements in the Bathurst District of Upper Canada.

Two years later, the would-be immigrants needed sponsorship even to get on a list. Robinson was besieged by applicants in every town and stated that there were 50,000 vying for 2,000 places. After the difficult task of selection in 1825, Robinson was satisfied that his candidates were “a better description of people than those taken out in [18]23 altho' they are wretchedly poor” – poverty being one of Wilmot-Horton's firm pre-conditions. A second immigration was postponed in 1824, but in 1825 Robinson took 2,024 immigrants to the Newcastle District.