A letter at Christmas from America

Charles Reilly

THE LETTER FROM AMERICA at Christmas was always looked forward to in the homes of rural Ireland even not that many years ago. Not alone was it a seasonal greeting, it was also a life-line. The records show that Irish emigrants were sending millions of pounds home to Ireland just 30 years ago. Christmas was a time when the Irish emigrants made a special effort to send home as much as possible to their families back home. America was seen as the El-darado of the world but the reality was very different. In the 19th and 20th century the Irish in America started on the lowest of the ladder as they worked hard to reach a level of acceptance and comfort.

Everyone knows or heard about Ellis Island off the coast of New York, the song goes on, The first day of January in 1892 they opened Ellis Island and let the people through and the first to cross that threshold of the Isle of hope and tears and so on, a young girl from Ireland called Annie Moore who was just 15 years old, one might ask if there is some exaggeration in that song. Would a 15 year old girl come across the Atlantic on a long voyage on her own. The answer is they did, they had no education either which was a great disadvantage.

A lot of emigrants settled in south Boston. In a land of liberty, courage is your passport when you worlds disappeared because there is no future in the past when you are only 15 years. The bulk of emigrants came from the western seaboard counties which the Irish have in that country today. It has to be said that the Irish never lost the thread that linked them to their homeland, indeed our memories would be very faulty at Christmas time if we forgot that.

Into the last years of the 1800s there was a full tide of emigrants to the United States and today there are over 50,000 people who do not have legal working status and since the September 11th tragedy its much more difficult for undocumented Irish people to travel and few of them will come home for Christmas.

Christmas in Olden Times

Not that very long ago at all in the times before electric light, central heating, television and mobile phones, Christmas was celebrated very differently from today. It began seven weeks beforehand, it was also the age of the turf fires, oil lamps and candles to provide light and a ceili around the hearth fire for amusement, wood and hedges were scoured in search of holly with berries, of course entwined with ivy which was hung around the kitchen along with coloured paper.

Men took their sacks of oats and potatoes to the market in the local town while the women brought the turkeys in the cart all to get extra cash for the festive season. The postman would arrive laden down with parcels and letters from America, he was treated to a hot whisky in every house and the aroma from the cooking turkey made him more thirsty. Well what a good innocent time it was then, no random breath test in those days.

The Ghost of Christmas past

The old saying, which is true when you get up from you Christmas dinner on Christmas day, well Christmas is as far away as ever, because one of the signposts to the year, the turkey, the ham had been done a serious injury. Long ago it wasn't Christmas day without the turkey and ham now you can get turkey all the year round.

People nowadays seem to live with a resignation that joy comes at a high price. The ghost of Christmas past is the entirely welcome spirit which conjures itself up at this time of year, and Christmas dosen't begin until one hears O Holy Night on the radio. No one can ignore putting up those decorations, the smell of Christmas cakes baking, endless jostling in the streets and shops in our towns. Christmas Eve Mass was big long ago, full churches including seasoned sinners who skipped into the back of the church after a few pints and you could smell the mixture of Gold Flake cigarettes and Arthur Guinness too.

We all become a push over for a few days at Christmas and are the better for it for a brief time, even the most intolerable people become bearable, the greatest knave will be given the benefit of the doubt so Merry Christmas everyone.