H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Cian T. McMahon. *The Coffin Ship: Life and Death at Sea during the Great Irish Famine.* New York: New York University Press, 2021. 315 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4798-0876-2.

Reviewed by Erin Becker-Boris (Huntington Learning Center)

Published on H-Environment (October, 2021)

Commissioned by Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

In *The Coffin Ship: Life and Death at Sea during the Great Irish Famine*, Cian McMahon discusses the Irish Famine-era diaspora in the wider context of human migration and maritime history. He poses an important question: "What would happen if we used the words and experiences of the Irish emigrants themselves to recreate, and thus more fully understand, that epic moment in modern history?" (p. 2). *The Coffin Ship* is a response to the one-dimensional portrait of Famine-era vessels as "coffin ships," which, he argues, has long overshadowed any hope for a true understanding of Famine-era voyages; through this work, he aims to challenge accepted truisms and look at human migration and the Irish diaspora more broadly. His core argument is that "the migratory process was not merely about enabling individuals to move here or there. In fact, by encouraging transnational exchange of money, tickets, advice, and news, the voyage itself fostered the development of countless new threads in the worldwide web of the Irish diaspora" (p. 3). McMahon's work enters into a conversation with other maritime historians, human migration scholars, and others and gives ample credit to those whose work he builds upon. He was particularly moved by Marcus Rediker's treatment of the sea in *The Slave Ship* (2008). He states, "By analyzing the wooden machines that brought enslaved Africans across the Atlantic, Rediker aimed to show one way in which the sea has shaped human history" (p. 239). McMahon wanted to bring that fresh perspective to Irish studies.

The Coffin Ship is organized into five chapters, plus an introduction, conclusion, and essay on sources and methodology. Chapter 1, "Preparation," examines the ways people marshalled their resources to be able to leave Ireland during the Great Famine; in this chapter, McMahon examines the remittance system, landlord-assisted migration, government-assisted migration, and the convict vessel as an emigrant ship to argue that "by successfully exploiting both transnational and local circuits of exchange, emigrants and their friends and families fortified transnational links of community and power" (p. 15). Chapter 2, "Embarkation," argues that emigrants embarking on their journey "employed the same local and transnational networks of community and exchange that had enabled them to gather the resources to leave. From instructions on how the shipping system worked to suggestions on what to wear, friends and family at home and abroad proved crucial in enabling emigrants to get out the door" (p. 57). McMahon discussed the process of

traveling to the port city, dealing with delayed departures, passing through Liverpool, and settling into the ship.

Chapter 3, "Life," focuses on life aboard emigrant vessels; it looks at the beauties and dangers of life at sea, power and resistance at sea, resilience through relationships, and emigrant solidarity at sea. McMahon argues that relationships were a key part of the emigrant experience and that "emigrant vessels were unique environments where everyday structures of solidarity and control were both duplicated and defied. They thus served as floating links in the transnational chains of Irish diasporic life" (p. 99). Chapter 4, "Death," aims to clarify our understanding of mortality rates; McMahon argues that mortality was an everyday part of the emigration process and while it tore families apart, it could also bring them closer together. He draws from quantitative analysis by Raymond Cohn, Ralph Shlomowitz, and Robin Hayes, plus surviving statistics in primary sources from the period, to paint a more nuanced image of mortality at sea in the mid-nineteenth century. He ultimately asserts that over 97 percent of Famine-era emigrants probably made it to their destination alive and that "it is only when we zoom in on one port in particular (Cork) for one year in particular (1847), however, that we see an average mortality rate close to 20 percent" (p. 193). He also examines the reality of death and dying at sea and interprets maritime mortality on land. Chapter 5, "Arrival," argues that, upon arrival, "migrants established connections within their new worlds.... [T]hey also used various strategies to restitch their transnational communal bonds" (p. 194). McMahon discusses the preparation to disembark the ships with other passengers, social authorities and emigrant relief, the popular press as an emigrant resource, and friends and families in the New World. He asserts that newly arrived immigrants used letters, newspapers, and remittances to begin "rebuilding broken bonds of community as soon as they arrived in their new worlds" (p. 230).

The Coffin Ship builds upon McMahon's previous research. McMahon received his PhD from Carnegie Mellon University in 2010, his MA from University College Dublin (2002), and his BA from the University of Manitoba (2000). In his first book, *The Global Dimensions of Irish Identity: Race, Nation, and the Popular Press, 1840-1880* (2015), McMahon examined the effect of the Irish diaspora on Irish ideas about nations and nationalism.

His attention to methods and his nuanced analysis in *The Coffin Ship* adds strength to his argument. McMahon outlines his methods in a short essay after the conclusion of the book. His work builds on the scholarship of many historians working in different fields, but especially on recent advances in Irish migration studies; it responds to a trend in which "the maritime historians have analyzed the sea journey itself" (p. 243). McMahon uses various primary sources to construct his narrative. He draws from immigrant letters from Kerby Miller's personal collection and the open-access DIPPAM electronic database (hosted by the School of History and Anthropology at Queen's University), shipping records of the Cope family's line of packet ships and letters/diaries in New York, passengers' and surgeon's journals in the state libraries of New South Wales and Tasmania, British Parliamentary Papers, and microfilmed and digitized newspapers. He notes that the "wide range of primary sources simultaneously provided firsthand accounts of the migration process along with a sense of the social and cultural milieus in which the voyages occurred" (p. 244). His work is strengthened by the attention he pays to the areas where his analysis might overgeneralize or be limited in scope. McMahon acknowledges that to "synthesize the experiences of those who headed north, south, east, and west does come with certain intellectual jeopardies" which risk flattening differences between those headed to

North America and those headed to Australia, free emigrants and convicted emigrants, and distinctions within the Irish population (p. 244). McMahon notes that while he did not purposefully limit the collection of emigrant letters and diaries, he has learned that surviving records are not perfectly representative of emigrants. For example, illiterate travelers made up a sizable fraction of pre-Famine Ireland's rural population, but they could not write their own letters. He states, "The ways in which socioeconomics, region, gender, age, and linguistic differences correlated with illiteracy in mid-nineteenth-century Ireland present a significant epistemological quandary, which—if impossible to resolve—ought at least to be acknowledged" (p. 246).

McMahon's work ends with a reflection about the significance of the Irish diaspora and the meaning of human migration. He muses that the migration process was a critical circuit in interpersonal networks of the Irish diaspora during the Famine era, stating, "The human drama of Irish migration during the Great Famine was … part of a wider story about the ways in which global networks of communication and exchange reshaped the world in the nineteenth century" (p. 234).