

Irish Immigrants and Amherst in the 19th Century



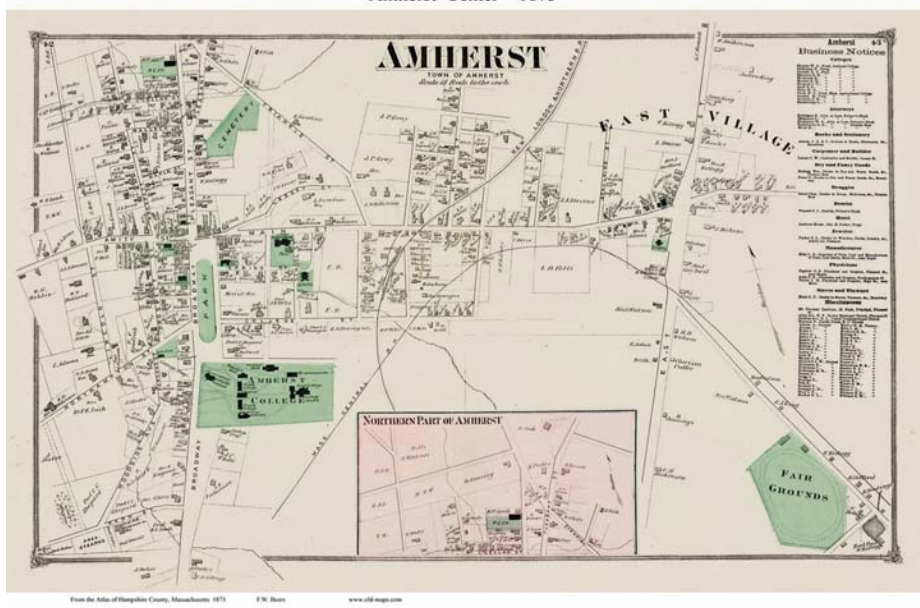
Kelley Square

In Amherst, many Irish immigrants and their family lived in Kelley Square. Many of the residents in this small neighborhood worked as domestic servants and laborers, including in the nearby Dickinson household. An 1896 history of Amherst traces the first arrival of Irish Catholic immigrants to John Slater 1840. The authors claim the first Catholic service in Amherst was held in his home shortly after.

Kelley Square sat along the railroad tracks between what is now Main Street, Dickinson Street, and Railroad Street. From 1850 to 1860, the population of Irish-born residents in Amherst almost doubled, from 81 to 156 residents. Amherst as a whole only added 200 people during that same decade, growing to 3207 residents when Abraham Lincoln was elected president.



Amherst Center 1873



Despite this vibrant part of the community, official maps and histories of the town of Amherst omitted Kelley Square during the nineteenth century. These blank spaces are what awaited the passengers of ships such as Star of the Sea—vibrant yet overlooked communities of fellow Irish immigrants.

Dickinson & the Amherst Irish

Domestic Servants

The Dickinson family frequently hired Irish workers from nearby Kelley Square to work as domestic servants. Scholar Daneen Wardrop counts at least fifteen workers of both genders who worked in the house alongside Emily Dickinson. They did work including cooking, gardening, and laundry.



"Little Emerald Mack is washing, I can hear the warm suds, splash. I just gave her my handkerchief – So I cannot cry any more"

--1852 letter to her sister-in-law Susan Huntington Gilbert Dickinson

Emily Dickinson felt a clear connection to the Irish workers around her. When Dickinson passed away in 1886, her coffin was carried by six Irish pallbearers she had chosen.



Maggie Maher

Of all the Irish servants who worked in the Dickinson home, Dickinson may have been closest to Margaret "Maggie" Maher. It is believed that Maher is responsible for saving the vast majority of Dickinson's poems. Instead of burning the manuscripts upon her death as Dickinson instructed, Maher kept them in a trunk well after the poet's passing. As a result we have hundreds more poems than would otherwise be known.

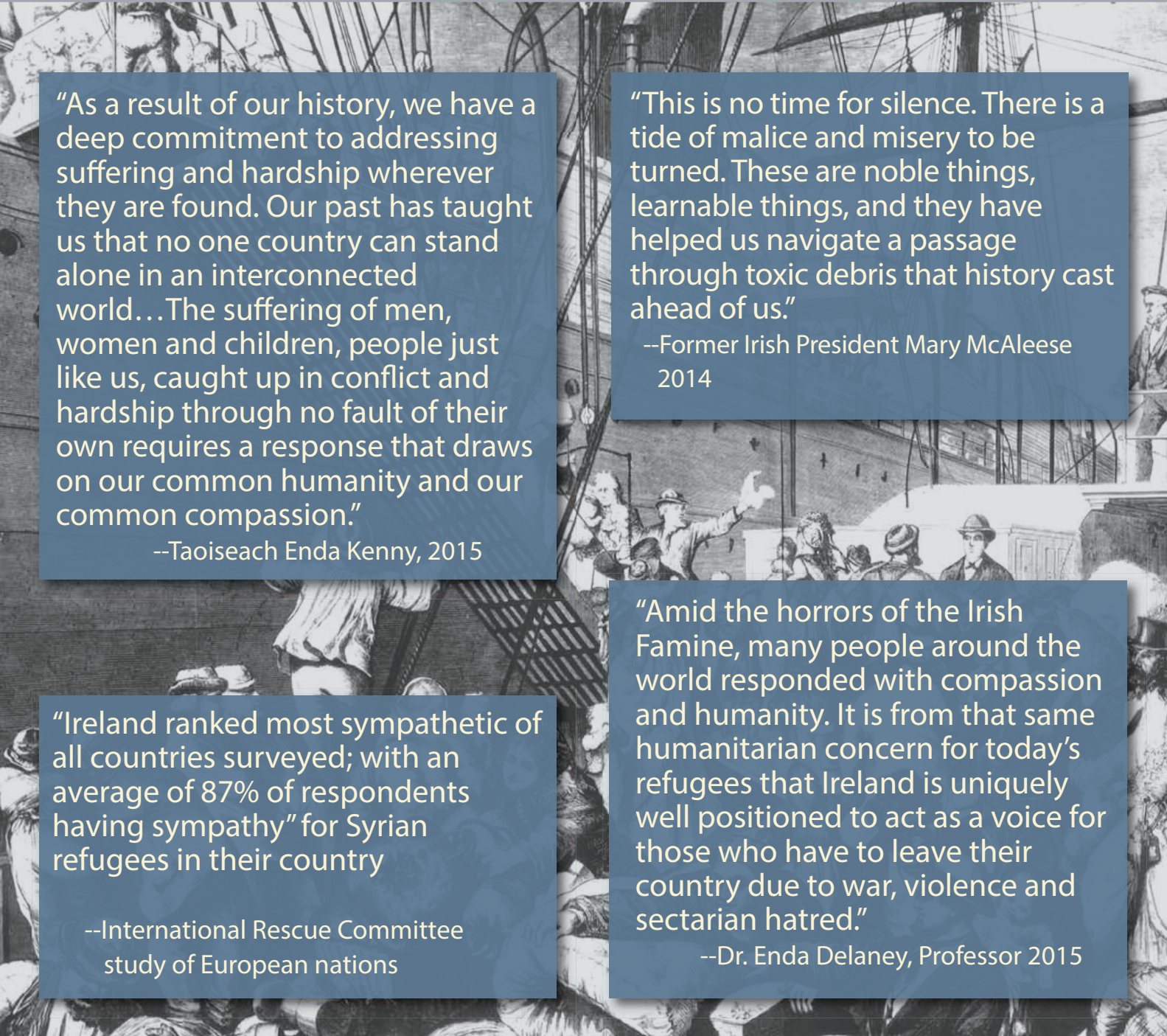
The scholar Aífe Murray set out to learn more about this mysterious Irish immigrant responsible for us knowing Emily Dickinson's poetry. She found Maher was born in 1841, in the midst of the famine depicted in "Star of the Sea". In the 1850s she traveled to America with her family and by 1869 she lived in Kelley Square in Amherst while working practically across the street at the Dickinson home.

Refugees

*These Strangers, in a foreign World,
Protection asked of me –
Befriend them, lest yourself in Heaven
Be found a Refugee*

--Emily Dickinson (FR 805)

The experiences of Irish citizens depicted in “Star of the Sea” continue to resonate in Ireland to this day. Irish politicians and citizens have recognized the struggles undertaken by refugees who must cross the sea to flee their homeland. Refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and other nations try to seek safety and better lives in the European Union. Amidst the debates over how to respond to this influx, some Irish leaders have pointed to the experiences of their own population fleeing hunger and suffering. Their words remind us that the story of “Star of the Sea” takes place today as well.



“As a result of our history, we have a deep commitment to addressing suffering and hardship wherever they are found. Our past has taught us that no one country can stand alone in an interconnected world...The suffering of men, women and children, people just like us, caught up in conflict and hardship through no fault of their own requires a response that draws on our common humanity and our common compassion.”

--Taoiseach Enda Kenny, 2015

“This is no time for silence. There is a tide of malice and misery to be turned. These are noble things, learnable things, and they have helped us navigate a passage through toxic debris that history cast ahead of us.”

--Former Irish President Mary McAleese
2014

“Ireland ranked most sympathetic of all countries surveyed; with an average of 87% of respondents having sympathy” for Syrian refugees in their country

--International Rescue Committee
study of European nations

“Amid the horrors of the Irish Famine, many people around the world responded with compassion and humanity. It is from that same humanitarian concern for today’s refugees that Ireland is uniquely well positioned to act as a voice for those who have to leave their country due to war, violence and sectarian hatred.”

--Dr. Enda Delaney, Professor 2015