

KIRSTY MURRAY

www.kirstymurray.com



IN SEARCH OF THE LOST GIRLS

by Kirsty Murray

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A passing mention of orphaned Irish girls triggered Kirsty Murray's interest in the stories of child migrants. On a return to the source, she found inspiration in a graveyard.

From little things, big things grow. Sometimes a stray thread can turn out to belong to the richest tapestry. For two years now, I have been gathering up the strands of an epic tale, a quartet of novels for children about Irish child immigrants to Australia. Each novel is linked to the one that precedes it and collectively they span the years 1850-2000. I happened upon the first tendrils of information while I was researching my novel *Market Blues*. I was stumped for historical material on how girls lived in the Melbourne of 1900 - boys were in evidence everywhere, but girls were invisible.

An aside in Janet McCalman's *Sex and Suffering* - a history of the Royal Women's Hospital, Melbourne set me on track. A passing mention of 1300 Irish orphan girls who had become mothers in the 1860s sent me in search of more details. I discovered that between 1848 and 1850, 4000 girls between the ages of nine and sixteen were taken from the workhouses of Ireland and sent to Australia under what was known as the Earl Grey orphan scheme. Most of them had lost at least one parent to the Great Hunger, the potato famine of 1845-1850. It was compelling and irresistible; I had to go where that thread would lead me.

It led first to stories of other girl immigrant orphans and then, suddenly, everywhere I looked, I found stories about Irish child immigrants, from the famine orphans of the 1850s to the 'Orphans of Empire' scheme of the post-Second-World-War period. The orphan girls of the Earl Grey scheme have over 30,000 descendants. Current estimates indicate one third of the Australian population has an Irish ancestor. The initial idea of a single novel quickly metamorphosed into a saga for 10 - 14-year-old readers about the generations of Irish children who had made new lives for themselves in Australia.

Thanks to the Australia Council, I was granted the opportunity to follow that first slender thread across the world to where the orphans' stories began. In March of last year I flew to London and then travelled by train to Wales where I teamed up with my cousin Alice. Alice is an artist and regularly travels to Ireland on painting expeditions. We boarded a car ferry at Swansea and sailed by night across St George's Channel to Cork.

Alice and I both woke at five. We were like kids again, dressing quickly, pulling on our Blundstones to head up onto the deck. In the biting, cold wind, I could see the dark line of Ireland looming with a faint dawn glow above the hills. The arms of Cork harbour were lit up waiting to embrace us.

From Cork it was a five-hour drive through sleeting rain to the Dingle Peninsula, the south-west tip of Ireland. Twenty of the Earl Grey orphan girls had come from there.

Later that afternoon, we settled into our tiny seaside caravan on the beach at Ventry. When the sky cleared, we walked to a small cluster of tiny stone houses on the side of Mount Eagle. Every inhabitant of the houses had perished during the famine and 150 years later, they are still dark and empty. Our footsteps echoed as we turned away and stood gazing over the patchwork of

fields that spread beneath us. I started to realise how difficult it would be to retell these stories. What had the children who had escaped the nightmare of the famine taken away from Ireland and what had they left behind as they journeyed towards the Great Southern Land of dreams?

It was in trying to find an answer to that question, that I went to interview Father Patrick Fenton, a semi-retired priest and an authority on local history. Father Fenton had many stories to share - even his name had a story behind it. Fenton is his English name and meant 'people of the bog'. His true Irish name is Ó Fiannachta, which means 'travelling warriors of Fiann'. The Irish live with this sense of duality in every aspect of their lives.

I had asked for a half-hour interview, but an hour later we were still engaged in excited conversation and Father Ó Fiannachta invited me to spend the day with him. In this land of saints and scholars, Father Pádraig Ó Fiannachta is a professor of Celtic studies, a publisher of books in Irish, and part-time parish priest. That morning, he had to conduct a mass in Irish for the elderly patients at the local hospital. As we drove through the town, every second person waved at him.

While Father Ó Fiannachta readied himself for mass, I was shown around the top floor of the building. The hospital had been originally built as a workhouse and though the lower floors had been converted, the fourth floor had been used for storage and was in original condition, as it was in 1852. Inside the main room was a long walkway, almost like a trough, with raised wooden platforms along either side. During the famine, the platforms were strewn with straw and hundreds of bodies crammed alongside each other. When the straw became fetid, it was swept into the troughs and out through the wooden doors that opened above the yards. I stood looking out through the tiny panes of the windows. Across Dingle Bay, the Ring of Kerry lay shrouded in mist, a melancholy, beautiful landscape, and I thought of the children who had gazed out at this view.

After mass, Father Ó Fiannachta drove me up to the famine cemetery - a plot of land on a hillside behind the town where five thousand victims of the famine were buried. We walked down the narrow path lined with dry stone walls either side. Pale yellow primroses were just starting to bloom in the cracks of the walls. Father Ó Fiannachta had organised for the walls to be repaired, determined that the lonely cemetery wouldn't be forgotten.

The graveyard was not much bigger than a suburban back yard. The five thousand victims had been buried in trenches. Even after 150 years the tussocky ground was uneven, the trenches and mounds still discernable. A single small tombstone had been erected only recently to commemorate the dead.

Father Ó Fiannachta and I sat on the stone wall and talked until the cold wind from the Atlantic forced us to retrace our steps. We talked of what it must have meant for those orphan girls to bury their families in this lonely place and leave everything they knew to make a new life in a strange land. Of the things you take away, the things you leave behind, the things you carry with you forever.

For those that were left behind, there is still a sense of loss. Seventy million people around the globe could call themselves Irish, the descendants of all the lost children of Ireland. Some return but for many the links to the past are not as strong as the ties that bind them to their futures in their new lands.

I spent another three weeks travelling around Ireland, sometimes overawed by the task I had set myself. A year later, my office is awash with maps and notes and all the threads that I gathered in Ireland that I'm now weaving into the stories of my orphan characters; Bridey, Colm, Brendan and Maeve. Each of their stories starts around their eleventh year.

I can still recall what it was to be eleven, how hungry I was for the world, to know it, to understand it. Reading was part of that quest, a way of discovering where I belonged. All my childhood reading led me to imagine that life was elsewhere, perhaps in an English country garden, but never here, in Australia, a parochial backwater I dreamt of escaping. Now, instinctively, I write for the child I once was and for those who are in the heartland of childhood, between 9 and 14. I want to centre my writing where I and my readers belong, here, in Australia, this richly diverse immigrant nation. I'm learning from the lives of my Irish orphan characters as they make their way in a new world, discovering how I connect to their pasts and to the future of the Great Southern land, this land of dreams that we journey towards.