

## Eating Abroad, Remembering Home: Violent Disruption, the Irish diaspora, and their Food Parcels, 1845–1960

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Disruption, like change, is a constant in human history. So is food, a component of survival so vital that it, and the ecosystem which produces it, becomes as ‘invisible’ as breathing (Symons, 1998, p.185). Arguably, when the wellbeing of self, friends or family is at stake, food becomes a primary concern and we get innovative, no matter what role is imposed by the disruption, especially if violent. At a fundamental level, violent disruption redefines what food is, and how and when it is available (Mulcahy, 2019, p.24). In this regard, food parcels have been significant, particularly for both troops and prisoners in the World Wars; the Dublin Lockout strikers in 1913; the significant contribution from CARE (Committee of American Relief to Europe), and many more. Nonetheless, this paper has a single focus: the phenomenon and use of food parcels by Irish emigrant families.

Ireland has an especially strong familiarity with manifestations of violent disruption, often many at once - wars, imperialism, colonisation, famines, migration. One, emigration, has been described as ‘one of the defining features of Irish life ...’and ‘embedded in Irish society’ over the last three centuries (Whelan, 2015, p.900 - 901). During the subsequent global diaspora, Ó Gráda estimates almost one million people left Ireland between 1815–1852 (1983, p.118), while Glynn (2012) calculates arrivals in the USA between 1845–1855 at 1.8 million, and estimates that since 1800, about 10 million emigrated from the island of Ireland. In Britain, the Irish were recorded as the largest ethnic minority since 1841, when census records became available (Kneafsey and Cox, 2002, p.7). Similarly, ‘at least 8 million emigrated between 1801–1921, and ‘roughly one in two people born in Ireland in the nineteenth century emigrated’ (Whelan, 2015, p.900).

Whelan highlights some unusual aspects of Irish emigration: first, net female emigration was higher than that of males between 1871–1971; for every 8 men who left, 10 women (uniquely, mostly single and under 30 years old) also left. Second, more Irish crossed the Irish Sea than the Atlantic Ocean up to 1830, but this reversed for the next 100 years until the Great Depression of 1929 made America less attractive, so that the bulk of emigration traffic reverted to Britain again (2015, p.901). Therefore, two very large cohorts of Irish emigrants, mostly female, were in North America and Great Britain. Studies have shown that, consistent with traditional Irish family values and well defined gender roles, the female emigrants took responsibility for establishing and maintaining networks of ‘reciprocal dependencies’ and mutual support between Ireland, Britain, and North America (Kneafsey and Cox,

2002, p.10; Whelan, 2015). Whether at home or abroad, despite much disruption, they adapted to prevailing circumstances particularly when technological disruptors enabled efficient transnational postal systems from the 1880s on. Specifically, they used food parcels to friends and family as a means of support and relief, either from America to post Famine Ireland, or from a new Irish State emerging from civil and economic war to an embattled Britain, both subsisting on rations. Food was a foil for community building and socialising, a means of expressing their Irishness and personal identities, and adding to the quality of life of distant relatives and friends (Mulcahy, 2014, p.161). The food parcel, therefore, came not only with food for tomorrow, but also as nostalgic gastronomy (Slocum, 2011, p.308), fused with hope, renewal and a sense of solidarity.

### How disruption enabled the use of food parcels

Together, two key technological disruptors facilitated the use of parcels to send food long distances – the establishment of a public postal system, and transport development. Originally, the transmission of documents tended to be the sole preserve of the Church, via their monks, and as government commerce systems developed, private networks (e.g. rulers, banks, universities) emulated that (Feldman and Kane, 1975, p.2). Although the first postmaster of Dublin was appointed in 1562, it wasn’t until 1657 that one Post Office system was established for England, Scotland and Ireland (Ferguson, 2016, p.5). Unsurprisingly, 18th and 19th century post was primarily written, read and administered in English, so post addressed in the Irish language was rare. But with improving literacy, widespread use followed the introduction of uniform penny postage, demonstrated by the exponential post-Famine increase of emigrant post to friends and family (Ferguson, 2016, p.4). Indeed, the Irish Post Office was an atypical national system - more items were arriving than leaving (Ferguson, 2016, p.31).

Recognising the demand for postal services, and railway development which improved speed and capacity, the Regulation of Railways Act (1873), obliged railways to accept mail for carriage without prior notice or delay, and the Post Office Parcels Act (1882), extended that remit (Ferguson, 2016, p.169). Sustained development, including the use of rail carriages as mobile sorting offices, meant that, up to World War Two (WW2), overnight delivery was standard, driven by collection and delivery of Irish post at least twice a day, seven days a week, including

Christmas day delivery, which continued up to 1937 (Ferguson, 2016, p.311). Effectively, a food parcel with fresh food could be put in the 3.15 PM Cork collection and be in London by 11.00 AM the following morning (Ferguson, 2016, p.176).

Similarly USA post was swift due to innovation in shipping and the establishment of an American parcel office in Queenstown (now Cobh), Cork (The Cork Examiner, 1905). By the turn of the 20th century the fastest voyage from Cobh to New York was under six days. Consequently US mail to and from Britain was routed by rail to Holyhead (Wales), then by ship to Kingstown (Dublin), and then by rail to Cobh, which was serviced by six shipping companies handling 40,000 sacks of mail in 1924 (Ferguson, 2016, p.189; The Irish Times, 1926, p.5). Canadian mail used a similar route, but via Derry. For the more affluent or impatient, air parcel post to USA commenced in July 1949, dispatched daily on the 5:15 pm train to catch a flight from Shannon to New York and the US postal system (Ferguson, 2016, p.423).

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### Food Parcels to Britain

When Post Office parcel delivery started in 1883, they budgeted high volumes for the whole system - 27 million parcels in year one (Ferguson, 2016, p.236). Specifically in Ireland, 750,000 parcels were posted in the first 8 months of 1883, followed by a Christmas peak of 131,139. This had risen to over 2.7 million annually in 1888 (Ferguson, 2016, p.236). By 1909, the London Great Central Parcels Office complained that it didn't have enough room in their 'cold storage safe' for all the poorly labelled turkeys, now lost (The Irish Times, 1909).

Awkwardly for those sending parcels, the economic war between the Irish Free State and Britain resulted in unilateral trade restrictions specifying what could, or could not, pass between the two countries. Likewise when Britain entered WW2, their Ministry of Food told the Irish Press that rationed commodities, like bacon, meat or butter, sent by parcel post from Ireland would be confiscated (1939, p.1). Later, they required senders to write the importation licence number alongside the address (The Cork Examiner, 1940, p.4). Non-compliance was expensive - Mrs Nora Donovan, in Swansea, was fined a substantial £2 for 'obtaining butter, sugar and bacon otherwise than by means of a ration book' (The Irish Times, 1940, p.6).

The British appeared to recognise the benefit of Irish food parcels to the war effort in 1942 with approval for the '5 lb Food Parcel' which permitted tins of meat, fruit, vegetables, spiced and corned beef, honey - provided each was no more than 2 lb (lb is the abbreviation for a pound weight, an imperial unit of measure equal to 453 grams). Fresh beef or mutton was also allowed, or a dozen eggs - 'if a good case is made out for them' (The Cork Examiner, 1942, p.2). After the end of the war in 1945, British

restrictions on Irish parcels were relaxed - the maximum weight was raised to 11 lb of which no more than 7 lb could be food and the same article limit as before (The Irish Times, 1945, p.1). However, quantities had to be reasonable, for personal use, and not for resale - in the view of the Customs officers. Nevertheless, the restrictions stood in stark contrast to thresholds applying to other destinations - a maximum of 50 lb and a 10 lb single item limit, even though wartime rationing of sweets and sugar in Britain wouldn't be lifted until February 1953, and meat in 1954 (Corless, 2011, p.105).

Previously, it wasn't allowed to post 'gift fowl' to Britain, but in November 1948, recognising the public desire to help relatives, the Irish Minister of Agriculture changed the rules for families who had sons or daughters working there (Ferguson, 2016, p.237; Flynn, 2013, p.59). It had an immediate effect. Between December 6th - 22nd 1948, 56,000 parcels, mostly food gifts, were sent to England, compared to 25,000 in 1946 (The Irish Times, 1948, p.7). In terms of turkeys, 116,000 licences to send gift turkeys were issued, significant when total exports were 446,000 birds (The Irish Press, 1949, p.7).

This substantial increase in volume, estimated at 15,000 parcels a week and at £1.5 million a year (equivalent to £53 million now) versus £185,000 in 1948, provoked an immediate response (The Irish Independent, 1949a, p.7; The Irish Independent, 1949e, p.7; Webster, 2020). Britain, concerned about 'illegal traffic in high-priced food stuffs' and 'fraudulent gift parcels from Eire', prohibited parcels from Ireland which contained canned fruit, dried fruit, table jellies, and chocolate and sugar confectionary with effect from January 1st 1950 (The Irish Independent, 1949b, p.4). When asked in Westminster why the restriction was limited to Ireland, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Food said that other 'dominions are not abusing the right they have to send gift parcels' (The Times, 1949, p.4). The Secretary may have had a point. Dublin grocers had grown a significant business providing 'gift' food parcels services to British customers, but this led to allegations of poor practice. In an Irish Times report, the comments of a Sussex Food Control Committee Councillor, along with reactions from the Dublin grocer trade, highlights the problem. Referring to the 'circulars canvassing orders', the Councillor complained that the price lists for what were rationed goods in England 'were a catch' and that the value of food received was only a fraction of what was paid for (1949, p.7). As the grocers were now in a different jurisdiction than the customers, those unfamiliar with relatively new realities had little recourse if they had a complaint.

Back in Dublin, according to the Irish Independent, where senders, keen to clear Customs on both sides before the deadline, dispatched 130,000 parcels to Britain between December 6th - 29th, double the 1948 figure, resulting in the Dublin sorting office handling 9,000 parcels in one day, and 3,000 parcels being sent from

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Mullingar post office in the last week before Christmas (1949c, p.5; 1949d, p.5). Restrictions aside, the Irish Post Office had a policy of only taking turkeys up to 11 lb, as otherwise they thought they would have had to deal with tens of thousands more parcels. Besides, any packages over the limit could now be sent by air (The Irish Press, 1949, p.7). Apart from turkeys, according to the same reports, the contents included the items about to be prohibited, and were regarded as a 'final gesture to British friends and relatives by the Irish, and as a last well-wish for a gastronomic fling' (1949c, p.5).

Despite the restrictions, sending food parcels appears to have become normalised. The Irish government issued guidelines in 1952 for Christmas parcels being posted or carried to Britain. Presents which could be sent to family and friends without an export licence included one turkey, one goose, one duck or fowl, fresh fruit, fresh vegetables, tinned vegetables, fish (other than salmon), honey, jams, cakes, sweets and chocolates. As the British 1950 restrictions remained in place, foods available in Ireland remained liable to being impounded by British Customs. It remained illegal to send cash from Britain in return for sweets or chocolates (Corless, 2011, p.105). By the end of the 1950s, sending turkeys remained routine. Oral history records show that on December 21st 1959, in the 9:30 PM post, 550 bags of turkeys were dispatched from Longford with an average of 5 turkeys (each around 12 lb) in a bag, to destinations such as London, Birmingham, Manchester and Crewe, while Irish women who emigrated to Coventry relied on a goose or a chicken by post at Christmas or Easter (Ferguson, 2016, p.237; Flynn, 2013, p.59; Kneafsey and Cox, 2002, p.11).

### The American Parcel

Compared to Britain, American parcel post was relatively simple and straightforward. The 'American parcel' was highly anticipated as it contained both food and goods. Whelan has shown how, in addition to sending money or tickets home so that family could join the sender, American parcels contained food as well as 'knitted gifts, photographs, rings, watches and clothes' at the end of the 19th century (Ferguson, 2016, p.237; 2015, p.909).

But far more parcels were received in Ireland (an average of 170,000) than sent to the USA (16,000) annually and the New York Times reported that Ireland was imposing a surtax on parcels received from the USA from September 1924 (1924, p.18). For a new economy, this is understandable. The Post Office accounts for 1924-1925 showed that parcels made a loss of over £104,000 (equivalent to circa £6 million now) against a profit of £231,000 on letters, and attributed this to the parcel volume from the USA (The Irish Times, 1926). Prior to the surtax, the total number of outbound parcels to all destinations (largely Britain) was over one million, and about 2.8 million were imported. By May 1925, while the

number of outbound parcels remained the same, the number imported had dropped by over 30% to 1.9 million. This was compounded by a further tax on incoming packages to Ireland in 1932, largely to protect Irish food production (Farrar, 1991, p.119). Notwithstanding the taxes, newspapers still noted the volume of mail. The Connacht Sentinel mentioned that 981 bags of mail were landed in Galway port from New York for Christmas in 1931 (1931, p.3). The Irish Independent, commenting that 'the depression in the Great Republic of the West does not extend to that proportion of its citizens having Irish affiliations', observed that 1,200 bags of 'parcel mails' arrived in Cobh (The Irish Independent, 1931).

Thirteen years later, WW2 had brought a revival of American Parcels, which brought 'loads of sultanas to almost every postal district in Connemara', and although only half a pound of tea was allowed in each American parcel, the restriction was avoided by sending a parcel to each member of the same family (1944, p.1). Similarly, large volumes of parcels arriving in Kerry and Limerick for Christmas 1945 contained dried fruit, oranges, tea and rice (Evening Echo, 1946; Limerick Leader, 1945, p.5). By Christmas 1948, the volume was such that 10,000 bags of mail had been cleared, with another 4,000 to be cleared that day (The Irish Times, 1948, p.7).

What was in a food parcel? Well, that depends

The 32nd Report of the Postmaster General (1886, quoted in Ferguson, 2016, p.236) gave some clues as to what people thought it was possible to post in a parcel, even if contrary to regulations: '2 hens, 8 mice, & 2 hedgehogs'. It helpfully observes that although one hen died (its destination was a London vet), the other animals were returned to their owners. Later, in 1925, there is a story of the public's habit of illegally hiding a pound of sausages or rashers in newspapers bound for relatives in Britain (Ferguson, 2016, p.368). Clearly, from early on, users had high expectations of what a postal service could do, and this continued until the mid-20th century.

The Irish Times attempted to clarify exactly what could, and could not, be sent to relatives and friends in England (1941b, p.1). The newspaper reported that:

- Ministry of Agriculture regulations specified the '5 lb Food Parcel', and of this, items (butter, bacon) were limited to 2 lb each.
- Rationed goods like tea, sugar and saccharine could not be sent. Sugar, in the form of sweets, was allowed, along with 'most other things'.
- Parcels must be 'bona fide', addressed to an individual, be unsolicited gifts and stated as such on the outside of the parcel. However, parcels were liable to seizure in Britain if sent too often to the same person.
- Parcels for America and Canada had no restrictions at all, although all had to have a completed Customs & Excise form.

Within a week, the newspaper had to clarify what 'too often' meant: 'is once a week too often to send butter?'



Dublin's GPO didn't think so. The 2 lb limit needed clarification: a provincial post office thought that a 4 lb Dundee Cake could not be sent, but the Dublin GPO view was that the limit only applied to things like butter and bacon, and not to fruit cakes (1941c, p.6). It appears the business community was confused as well. In Liverpool, Nobletts Ltd (a manufacturer of sweets and confectionary in Liverpool, with retail outlets in Dublin) was fined £2 (about £100 today) for buying rationed foods (butter, bacon) from Dublin grocers, Findlaters. By their own admission, Nobletts Ltd was sending 3,000 parcels a week from Dublin to England – 'too often' perhaps (The Irish Times, 1941a, p.14).

Just two months after the end of WW2, there was renewed demand for clarity on what could be sent in Christmas parcels to family in Britain. The Irish Times reported that there was a list of what could not be sent, but no list of what could be sent. A Customs House official is quoted, 'you cannot send anything except meat', while the Department of Industry and Commerce indicated that nothing could be sent without licence except books and magazines (1945, p.1).

Understandably, there was some concern about the advisability of sending fresh meat in the post. A correspondent's letter to the Editor of the Irish Times queried why it was forbidden to cook the meat first before sending it, having repeatedly sent fresh meat by post only to find it arrived 'uneatable' (Purcell-Fitzgerald, 1946, p.5). Waste was unthinkable. Wright (one of the "Two Fat Ladies" BBC2 cooking series, 1996–1999) narrated how, during WW2, an Irish food parcel arrived with a chicken in it. Although infested with maggots, rather than 'chuck it out', her mother boiled the chicken until the maggots floated to the surface and skimmed them off (2011, p.418). Stories like these demonstrate how, at one level, practical knowledge and culinary expertise were very ably applied, and on another level how emblematic food parcels were of the compassion and consideration which family and friends had for each other in difficult times.

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### Epilogue

Despite the macro issues and disruptions of the era, it appears obvious how important food parcels were to the Irish diaspora, and how they leveraged food parcels, at scale and over long distances for about 120 years, to maintain cultural imperatives such as family, hospitality and identity. Considering how parcels are even more pervasive now, as demonstrated by the ubiquity of global brands such as Amazon, DHL, FEDEX, TNT, and UPS, it is difficult to fully appreciate how economically and temporally viable sending fresh food was, particularly meat and poultry. Equally important, though, is that the recipients could make full use of whatever arrived. One wonders whether similar outcomes could be achieved today.

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