

“Suffer for About the First Six Months After Leaving Home”: John Doyle Writes Home to Ireland, 1818

by John Doyle

In the years after the Revolution many immigrants to the United States were political radicals, including John Doyle's father, who participated in the Irish Republican revolt against Great Britain in 1798 and later emigrated to Philadelphia. Like John Doyle, the author of this letter, many migrants brought craft skills and looked for work in the workshops and manufacturies of the new nation. When Doyle crossed the Atlantic in 1818 he quickly learned that small-scale entrepreneurship was more lucrative than sticking with his printing trade. Later immigration swelled as some two million Irish came to the United States between 1820 and 1860. The catastrophic Irish Potato Famine of 1845–49 sent hundreds of thousands (250,000 in 1851 alone) to disembark in cities where they faced economic hardships and ethnic discrimination.

We were safely landed in Philadelphia on the 7th of October and I had not so much as would pay my passage in a boat to take me ashore. My distress and confusion for the want of three or four pence was very great, and such was the jealousy and miserableness of the passengers that there was not one who would lend another even that sum. I, however, contrived to get over, and God is my witness that at that moment, I would as soon the ground would open and swallow me up. It was not long till I made out my father, whom I instantly knew, and no one could describe our feelings when I made myself known to him, and received his embraces, after an absence of seventeen years. The old man was quite distracted about me. He done nothing that entire day but bringing me about to his friends. Their manner of receiving me was quite amusing; one would say you are welcome, sir, from the old country; another, you are welcome to this free country; you are welcome to this wooden country; you are welcome to this free country—you are welcome to this land of liberty. Pray sir, are you not happy to have escaped from the tyranny of the old country? When you would deny the tyranny and give the preference to home, they would look amazed and say, “What sir, would you not rather live in a free country than in slavery?” In short they imagine here that we can not act or speak in Ireland but as the authorities please. Their ignorance and presumption are disgusting, their manners worse. As to politeness and good nature, they are totally unknown and though they all pretend to be well acquainted with the affairs of Europe they are utterly ignorant of all transactions there, or at the best know them imperfectly. If my father's love could do me any good I did not want it, for it amounted to jealousy.

The morning after landing I went to work to the printing and to my great surprise I found that my hand was very little out. There is an immensity of printing done in America, still it is not as good as other businesses, and I think a journeyman printer's wages might be averaged at 7 1/2 dollars a week all the year round. In New York it may not be so much as

they are often out of work. The bookbinding may be put upon a footing with the printing; they execute their work here remarkably well.

I worked in Philadelphia for five and one-half weeks and saved 6 [pounds], that is counting four dollars to the pound (in the currency) of the United States the dollar is worth five shillings Irish at all times. They give the name of shillings to one-eighth of a dollar which are common here, but which is only equal to our 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ d. This name is what blinds many immigrants to the value of their money here and about the price of dollars and flatters them with the idea of such enormous wages.

I wrote to poor Lewis who gave me the most pressing invitation to come to New York where I now am, and where I every day experience from them some fresh kindness. My father put every obstacle he could in my way to prevent my going to New York but when he found that all he could do would not change my mind and that his entreaties to stay with him were in vain, he parted with me drowned in tears to such a pitch that he was unable to speak and since my arrival here he is every week writing to me to go back.

I found the printing and bookbinding overpowered with hands in New York. I remained idle for twelve days in consequence; when finding there was many out of employment like myself I determined to turn myself to something else, seeing that there was nothing to be got by idleness. The trifle which I had saved was going from me fast. I drove about accordingly and was engaged by a bookseller to hawk maps for him at 7 dollars a week. This I done much to his satisfaction but when the town was well supplied he discharged me and instead of paying me my entire bill he stopped 9 dollars for maps which he said I made him no return for. I had to look for justice but was defeated for want of a person to prove my account. I lost the 9 dollars which I reckon to be 45 shillings. However I got such an insight into the manners and customs of the natives whilst going among them with the maps as served me extremely. I now had about 60 dollars of my own saved, above every expense. These I laid out in the purchase of pictures on New Year's Day, which I sell ever since. I am doing astonishingly well, thanks be to God and was able on the 16th of this month to make a deposit of 100 dollars in the bank of the United States.

Thus you see, my dearest Fanny, God has at length done something for us; every penny of it is my own hard earnings and I am now convinced that it is only by deserving His blessing that we can hope or expect to merit His favors; apropos, I must inform you that I made a solemn promise to God while at sea that if it was His goodness to spare my life till I get ashore I would make a hearty confession of my sins, which I thank Him for having granted me time and grace to perform, and this I mention, my love, because I know that it will be a source of pleasure to you; though living happy in the midst of my brother's family whom you know that I always loved and being as yet very successful in dealing in the pictures and indeed I may say in everything I have taken in hand since I came to America, I feel, particularly in the evenings, when I return home, a lonesomeness and lowness of spirits which oppress me almost to fainting.

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There are poor houses charity schools and even soup houses here which shows that there are a number of destitute poor; of course there is misery in every part of the world, but none of the real actual poverty and distress which is in all parts of Ireland.

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One thing I think is certain that if the emigrants knew before hand what they have to suffer for about the first six months after leaving home in every respect they would never come here. However, an enterprising man, desirous of advancing himself in the world will despise everything for coming to this free country, where a man is allowed to thrive and flourish, without having a penny taken out by government; no visits from tax gatherers, constables or soldiers, every one at liberty to act and speak as he likes, provided it does not hurt another, to slander and damn government, abuse public men in their office to their faces, wear your hat in court and smoke a cigar while speaking to the judge as familiarly as if he was a common mechanic, hundreds go unpunished for crimes for which they would be surely hung in Ireland; in fact, they are so tender of life in this country that a person should have a very great interest to get himself hanged for anything!

It is I think an observation of your own that there is no love without jealousy, thus I often think my dearest love that you should not have parted with me with dry eyes or giving me some token of your love, which of our faults was it, my forgetting even to get the little gold heart which hung so long on my neck placed there by your own hands or your neglecting to restore it on that breast from which for its safety it was taken. Oh my dear fanny what would I not now give for that precious little heart which would constantly remind me of my first ardent affection for you, and which you hung on my neck in token of your purest love for me. Thus my dearest jewel my whole life is employed in thinking of you and I suppose I may now say of my little angels, kiss them a thousand times for me, keep my name familiar with Ned. If anything should happen [to] him I could never after do any good.

I can not say any more but for ever and ever your loving husband.

John.

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