A Scotch-Irish Emigrant Writes Home

by William Doak

Introduction by Jacqueline Sardi and Paul Roberts, Pittsburgh History

Historian Kerby A. Miller, in his landmark book on Irish emigration, writes that in letters to families by voluntary, even eager emigrants, most expressed a sadness upon leaving and a good many doubts about the American experience to come. "For most emigrants even the process of emigration — their decision to leave, their methods of financing the journey, their poignant leave-takings, and the ocean itself — only reinforced a worldview which encouraged the exile self-image and its transportation across the Atlantic." 8

The emigrant letter that follows was penned in 1848 by William Doak, a Scotch-Irishman. This means that he was a descendant of Presbyterians from Scotland who settled in Ulster, the northernmost province of Ireland, in the 17th century. The term Scotch-Irish is an Americanism — in the British Isles it is hardly known. There anyone who describes Ulstermen of Scottish origin would use the term Ulster Scots. But the compound name does reflect a historical reality; the people to whom it refers were culturally distinct from both the Irish and the Scots.9

Pittsburgh, since the early eighteenth century, was a frontier haven for successive generations of Ulster emigrants, many of whom chose to settle in Allegheny City. Pittsburgh was an industrial hearth while Allegheny City was a hive of family workshops and its emergence as a light manufacturing and processing center attracted a population that was different from that of Pittsburgh.
The primacy of the textile industry and the artisan character of Allegheny City lured many of the Ulster emigrants. These farmer-artisans and small traders brought with them a variety of skills, a modicum of capital, and an independent frame of mind. Ulstermen helped to make the cotton-weaving industry the pride of Allegheny City from 1830 to the Civil War.

Seeking opportunity, William Doak was one of the young Scotch-Irishmen from Ulster who eventually made his way to Allegheny City. Doak was from Dromore, County Down, from the region of Ulster, and presumably the family had been in the textile business. Doak’s words, however, are inconclusive; it is possible, for instance, that he was simply serving as a manufacturer’s representative, but his knowledge of the industry is clear, for he describes bringing a cargo of cotton goods from Ireland to sell. Disappointed, Doak found Irish woven “Cotton Socks much too heavy for this country.” The 1880 census of Allegheny City shows many Doaks listed and Doak’s only son William was a longtime employee of Boggs & Buhl’s on Federal Street — Allegheny’s first department store which opened in 1869.

According to the dates given in the letter, Doak had been in America 60 days when he wrote. So this is an account of the voyage done after the fact, though judging by its detail, Doak may well have kept notes while on board. Although he settles down to a fairly direct narrative of the voyage, he leaves no confusion as to what he would do if had to make the decision again to cross the Atlantic. Modern-day Americans can only guess at the turbulent feelings of these emigrants who faced such cultural transitions between the old ways and new patterns and behavior.

William Doak’s great-grandson, Frank Doak, lives in Ligonier, Pa., today with his wife, Pam. Frank Doak transcribed the handwritten letter, which had been passed along through several family hands to him, and he made a number of changes; his great-grandfather did not use periods or commas, capitalize first words of sentences, or use paragraphing. Minor spelling and grammatical corrections were made as well. Doak intends to bequeath the original letter to the Archives of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. Additional information about the family, as well as some gauge of its collective sense of humour, is available from Doak’s own book (see right).

Pittsburghers can be especially grateful that William Doak made the cultural transition from Ireland to America because in being the great-grandfather of Frank Doak, he would make possible the Doaks’ daughter: Pittsburgh-born, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Annie Dillard.

Notes

1 Kerby A. Miller, Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America (New York, 1985), 8. Miller has synthesized practically all of the previous study of Irish emigration and added to it a provocative analysis utilizing new materials he has gathered from emigrant correspondence.


4 In his letter, Doak tells of “Catholics from Conaught” being on board. Miller, in Emigrants and Exiles (239), writes that “emigration rates were highest in south Ulster, east Connaught, and the Leinster midlands; that is, in districts which were poor but not so generally destitute that relatively few could afford passage overseas.”

(Letter begins next page.)

Frank Doak’s Something Like a Hoagie

FRANK DOAK sent a handwritten letter with his book to my office in early October. He is gravely ill with cancer, and asked that his curvy letters be excused. “My disease seems to have affected my fingers — or else it’s just plain old age.”

I thought it was amazing that he could make such a comment. I’d met him once, so I didn’t know much about him. It was before I had read his book.

But with this book, Doak may have invented a new genre — the popular humorous genealogy. At 79, he writes, mainly about his family and his own crazy life, like America’s oldest frat boy, an easy-as-you-go wise-cracker intent on extending adolescence as long as possible. You can practically picture him holding the bar up in Topsiders and chinos that wrinkle the way only a rich kid’s can; but of course he lived a lifetime, too, so his taste for irony and hyper-cleverness seems bottomless.

On the book’s back cover, daughter Annie Dillard calls this “storytelling at its finest,” which is absolutely true and which is more than you can say about much writing on back covers by non-relatives.

A few Doak examples:

• In the chapter mostly about himself, “Frank E. Doak,” he writes that for the first 20 years of his life he used the middle initial. “Then my mother read about a numerologist who spoke favorably of having two short, pithy names. I believe the outstanding example cited was Henry Ford. So with the exception of the alumni offices of my school and college, and the IRS, I have carried to the rest of the world the hard-driving, successful, immensely wealthy name — Frank Doak.”

• His parents’ first home on Brighton Road in Pittsburgh was at the corner of Academy Lane. He was born there and they soon moved to nearby Diploma Street, which ran off Stanford Road into Campus Street. “The neighborhood must have been developed by a Californian with educational leanings.”

• His people came from Louisville, and he was taught to swim in the Ohio River by the cousin of “Johnny ‘Tarzan’ Weissmuller.” His family kept cottages on the river, and his first cussing lesson came watching his grandfather try to skin an eel he’d caught for dinner. Lesson #2 came watching Grandpa after a storm with “tornado-like winds, and he went out in the dark to inspect the damage on the muddy, slippery river bank.”

There are good one- and two-liners, too:

• “Uncle Ed Speer was in the Secret Service which, evidently, did then what the FBI does now.”• “One night I came home from a night of speakeasy-crawling. We had ostensibly been attending a polo match at Hunt Armory.”• “For about three straight Christmas vacations at the Cherokee Road apartment, my only clothing requirements were pajamas and a set of white-tie-and-tails.”

And so it goes. If you tire of laughing, there’s some substance as well. Details on his childhood days as a German fraternal “Turner,” the gymnastic meets that Doak dubs “Turnfests,” the sing-alongs with broad ethnic overtones, and the earthy ribaldry of his German relatives are all like ethnologist’s dream sequence. Doak interned in various New York jazz clubs in the early ’40s, and his recollections of the transition at those clubs from 2-beat Dixieland to “dreaded be-bop” and to strip joints is fascinating. There is a good deal of first-hand accounting of Pittsburgh-area history, and the story of his wife’s family from Somerset, Pa., is a valuable chapter on that county’s history.

Early on, Doak admits to an early interest in theater, and he never lets you forget it. It could perhaps be his only book, nicely printed by a small press, but the few who find it win a lively afternoon with Frank Emil Doak. — Editor
A Scotch-Irish Emigrant Writes Home

Albany  May 15th 1848

Dear Mother Brothers and Sisters:

I have too long neglected writing to you but you will please excuse me when I tell you that when a person is thrown on these shores they are so put about that they can hardly find either place or time. I will without further preface give you some account of my voyage. I left Li'pool (as you know by Hugh) on Monday ev'n Mar. 13 and anchored in the river Mersy that night. Tuesday 14th early in the morning were took in town by a Steam Boat which left us at 12 o'clock. We proceeded smoothly along the remainder of the day with light wind. It to us seemed very pleasant sailing. This night at 12 o'clock we were thrown into dreadful consternation by a shock we received by coming in contact with another American vessel which came across our bows carrying our Jibboom and our fore Sails away. The greater part of the passengers were to be previous to this, but on receiving the shock which caused the anchor to fall, the passengers that were on deck uttered a dreadful cry. The alarm spread to those who were below. Then such dreadful cries as were then raised I have never heard before. A general rush was made to get on deck. All was confusion and uproar which lasted some time until a voice fell on our ears with the joyful news that all was right. We supposed him to be one of the sailors sent down by the Captain to allay our fear but in the morning he proved to be one of the English passengers. So ready are we when surrounded by danger to lay hold of any ray of hope. These simple words “all right, all right” had its desired effect. It was thought we would have to return to Li'pool to get righted but towards morning the anchor was lifted and we proceeded on our voyage.

Wednesday 15th we had a favourable gale this day. Very little Sea Sickness amongst us. Thursday 16th. This day much as yesterday. Passengers in high spirits singing and dancing on deck. The greater part of them are Catholics from Conaught. They are expecting to have a great day tomorrow. Towards midnight the wind changed to our stern and rose very high which caused our vessel to roll or rock like a cradle. Everything that was loose tumbled about. This being our first storm it filled us with fear. Friday 17th, St. Patrick's Day ushered in with high wind astern. Great deal of Sea Sickness amongst us. Those persons who had promised themselves a happy day and were to have drowned their Shamrock were not able to get out of bed as the day advanced. The wind continued rising. The rolling of the ship increased to an alarming degree so that we were unable to go on deck nor were we able to cook any this day.

Saturday 18th. This day much as yesterday. We are getting better enured to the roll of the vessel. Some cooking went on this day. Towards evening the wind fell. There is not such a swell in the Sea. The rocking of the vessel is much abated. Sunday 19th. Great washing this day. Wind moderate in the morning but rose very high in evening. We got a great rocking causing a great deal of sickness. Monday 20th, Wind still high, sea much agitated, unable to put up much sail. The Captain and Mate forced all the passengers that were in bed to on deck which was necessary as great numbers thought they were unwell which illness is caused by over-indulgence in bed in a close confined space.

Tuesday 21st. Very high wind which continued all night tossing us so much that it prevented us from sleep. Wed 22nd, Happily the wind has changed and blows moderately. A beautiful day and quite warm. Passengers all made to go on deck and take air which many of them require.

Thursday 23rd, We had a comfortable night rest. Wind continues favorable. At 12 o'clock we had a sudden squall. It came on whilst the passengers were recreating themselves on deck. A wave suddenly broke over, giving them a good wetting, rushing down the Hatchways, wetting the whole place. Friday 24th. This morning the wind still proves favourable, fine clear day. Two ships passed this day going to Europe. This day whilst a Man was walking the deck, the Ship gave a sudden heave which pitched him against her side, the next heave to her contrary side pitched him down the hatchway head foremost. We thought surely he was killed, but through the interposition of God he received little injury.

Saturday 25th, Beautiful morning but wind ahead. The Captain has ordered all passengers on deck. The beds are all brought up to be aired. There is general washing and cleaning of the ship. Every box that can be spared is put down in the hold. There is more regularity established than I expected. Sunday 26th, Very fine morning with light wind. The Captain will not allow the passengers to stop below. He is acting wisely and enforcing cleanliness. He wishes to land them in good health. At 5 o'clock pm he read prayers to as many as assembled before his cabin door.

Monday 27th, This morning the wind is brisker with a little rain, damp and foggy air. It continues so all day. It relaxes our spirits but we have made a fine run which otherwise cheers us. Tuesday 28th. We have had a fine night with a continuation of brisk wind which is carrying us on very fast. We are going quite steady. It is a pleasure to be on deck this day. This day has closed fine. Wednesday 29th, a continuation of fine weather, light wind, smooth sea, warm air. Passengers in good spirits. Carpenter repairing damages sustained the night of the 14th. Everything is progressing favourably with us. We have one passenger Sick, an old man about 65 years of age who has left behind him a wife and family and is coming out to America to make a fortune. The Captain who is very kind to his passengers has been often to see him, administering to his bodily wants as much as he possibly could. The poor old man I understand has but One Shilling in his pocket. There has been a great many petty thefts committed against us. Thursday 30th, The old man who was unwell yesterday died during the night. At 9 o'clock his corpse was brought on deck, his head and shoulders sewed up in an old coat. He was then placed on one of the hatches which was rested on the side of the vessel. A bag of coal was tied to his feet. The Captain read the burial service. At the word we commit his body to the deep, the Sailors let the corpse slide down into the Sea there to await the general resurrection when the sea shall be commanded to give up its dead. It was a very impressive scene which I hope will not be reacted whilst we are on this voyage. What few things he had on
board were sold by the Captain for 6/2 which I suppose he will remit to the deceased’s family.

Half an hour afterward the whole occurrence seemed forgotten. It is a beautiful day, something like summer at home. Spoke to a Rotterdam vessel 23 days out bound for N York. Had sight of a whale this day. Friday 31st, There is a change this day from yesterday, wind high, rough sea, foggy cold air. I am informed we are approaching the banks of Newfoundland. April Saturday 1st, This day very fine. The Captain has ordered all beds to be brought up on deck to be aired and has set set the sailors to wash the ship. The wind is light but fair. The have put up additional sails this day. Since we left Lpool the Captain has neither spared himself, his sailors of canvas, while his attention to the health of his passengers surpasses anything I expected. Sunday 2nd, This is a continuation of fine weather. The greater part of the passengers put on their best apparel. Favourable wind. The Captain read prayers this evening.

Monday 3rd, Change of weather quite unexpected. It’s quite cold with a hall of hail and snow. High wind has continued all day.

In this manner passed our voyage from fine to stormy weather until we finally landed in NY on Friday Evening April 21st. On my arrival, I made out Thomas Walker who proved to me very kind. I stopped with him 3 weeks. He and his family are living very comfortably. I arrived in Albany 12th May. Made out Messrs. Battersby & McNeaghten with whom I have stopped since. I have experienced a great deal of friendship from both families. They are all in good health.

I intend to proceed to Troy today. It is as difficult to sell goods here as it is at home. The selection of goods I made will require longer time to dispose of them than I had anticipated. The Cotton Socks are too heavy for this country. Every kind of goods worn here are of a light fabric. Let brother Hugh write Mr. Hugh Lavery, Lpool. Say that I made every inquiry for his friend Fletcher of No. 6 Lewis Street near Grand Street but cannot make him off. The people here change their residence very often. The occupier of No. 6 Lewis Street has only been there 7 months. I made out the landlord but he knew of no such person. Should he write me any further directions, please direct my attention to care of Thomas Walker No. 94 West Broadway Rear. On my return to NYork I perhaps might get it.

Dear Mother, I greatly feel for your lonely situation. Had I to do the same thing over again, I would not come out here. There is most alarming accounts about the disturbed state of Ireland but I think they are greatly exaggerated. You will please to send this down to my friends in Belfast. I expect to write to them in course of a few weeks.

I am fatigued writing, reserving for my next progress through America. I will close hoping that I shall yet see you all, I remain,

Dear Mother

Your affectionate Son

Mrs. Battersby wishes to be remembered to Mrs. Kenedy & Son in the kindest manner. Either Mr. or Mrs. Battersby will write in a few days. Whilst writing this, Mr. McNeaghten has received a letter from his sisters [their last name could not be deciphered]. Mr. Mc stands high in the estimation of his employers and is highly respected by the whole body of Methodists who are a very influential body in this city.

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Building a Temple of Science: Pittsburgh’s Mellon Institute
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Page 152 From Behind These Columns (1937), in Pennsylvania Room, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, Oakland
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The Limberlost, Tinker Creek, Science and Society: Gene Stratton-Porter and Annie Dillard
Page 161 Left, courtesy of Pam and Frank Doak; right, courtesy Indiana State Museum, Limberlost Historic Site
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River Goods
Page 176 From Leland Baldwin, Keelboat Age on the Western Waters (Pittsburgh, 1941), 43.

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