Owen Peter Mangan, ‘Memoir’


Owen Peter Mangan’s unpublished memoir has been accurately described as a virtual ‘case history of the forces which pushed Irish persons out of Ireland, and the energy and enterprise necessary for survival after emigration’.¹ It is also a wholly unsentimental record of a life of continual adjustment to the disorientations and depredations of displacement on both sides of the Atlantic. Mangan was born in the parish of Kilcoo, County Cavan around 1838, the youngest of a family of five boys. The early death of their father, a drover, caused the older sons to scatter and left young Owen in the care of an abusive foster mother, from whom he eventually ran away to seek his birth mother. Further childhood hazards lay in wait, however, including smallpox, famine and harsh treatment at the hands of his stepfather, Francis Mullen, to whom he alludes in the following extract from his ‘Memoir’, written in Massachusetts and dated ‘January 3, 1912’. At the age of 12 Mangan found work in a cotton mill near Drogheda, where he learned the skills of weaving that enabled him to emigrate to Preston in 1853, following a dispute with his mother over money. It was here that he met and married a girl from Maynooth, with whom he ran a successful grocery store until Fenian activities in northern England in the late 1860s drove customers away from Irish-owned businesses. With a growing family to support, Mangan emigrated to Philadelphia in 1869. There he secured a loan to pay for the passage of his wife and children the following year. Despite irregular employment and the absence of financial support from his ‘rich relations’ in Philadelphia, he succeeded in making a good living and eventually settled in Lynn, Massachusetts, where he died as a result of an unsuccessful prostate operation in June 1924 in his late eighties. The typescript he left behind bears many hand-written corrections and marginal marks, some of which obscure the legibility of individual words and sentences. There is also a marked unevenness of punctuation and spelling, including the liberal, random use of parentheses.

March of 1853 a little trouble started up between Mother and I that caused me to leave home for good. Seventeenth of March, of course, is always a strict

holiday in Ireland, and, of course, the factory closed down. The cloth that I was weaving was paid for at eighteen pence a cut. Well, through being off on St. Patrick’s Day, I missed a cut of each loom, which made three shillings (less) for the week. Just half of the week’s pay. Mother could not see how I could loose three shillings for one day when I only earned six shillings per week. She was very angry on Saturday when I brought my pay home although I did my best to explain. My stepfather happened to be home that week. When Sunday morning came, Mother was getting breakfast ready. Mr. Mullen was dressing in his room. Mother began to complain about the three shilling shortage. She said something that made me angry and I retorted saucely back. What ever I said I do not remember, but my stepfather ran out of his room to chastize me but I happened to be near the front door, I cleared out and slammed it after Mr. (Mullen). He never saw me again till 1860, he came over to England to see me and staid a month. At this time his boys had learned trades and they had all moved to Dublin. His old employer, Johnny Oats, had failed, and the factory was stoped. I never met Mother till 1869 when I met her in Philadelphia. That Sunday morning when I missed the wallop from my stepfather I went derict to one of my Chums’ house named Andy Heeney. Andy was a big good natured fellow. And I had breakfast with him. I told them why I left home (and they said I would be back in the evening). We all went to Mass (and) after dinner Andy and I went and hunted up two more chums and we all maid up our mind we would go to England that evening. The fare was only two shillings (and) we had all been saving up a little money with the intention of going to England sometime. And now was the time. So we started off that Sunday evening on board the Linster Lass and arrived in Liverpool on Monday morning at 5 o’clock on the 27th of March 1853. We went straight to Preston. It is about 18 miles from Liverpool. We heard of it being a cotton manufacturing town. That was what we wanted. After a few unsucful attempts to get a Job, we finely struck it rich at a Factory owned by a man named Humbers. We got only 2 looms to start with but we could earn 10 shilling and a penney per week. That was 4 more that I could earn in Ireland. I was then in my sixteenth year and must now shift for myself, in earnest. I and my chums remained there for about one year and during that time I only wrote home to Mother once, just to let her know where I was. We had a good time just the same as boys do have. Nothing of any consequence occurred till one of the boys began to keep company with a young lady and was called out to be married. When his Mother in Ireland heard of it, she came right over and stopped it, as he was under age. He was so mad he went and listed in the East India Company and that was the last of poor Andy Heeney. I never seen or heard tell of him after. Peter Curtis went to America shortly after so there was only Tom Lawless and I left out of the Inarlett. After the Boys went I got four looms and that nearly doubled my pay. We had to have helpers for four looms. Those helpers was little boys or girls who went to school a half day and worked the other. And you had to pay