

CHAPTER I

Famine and Farewell – A New Life in China

Our story begins in Ireland during the bleakest period of its history and concludes in better times. In 1845 Ireland had a population of eight million people, compared to England, Wales and Scotland's sixteen million. This large population was sustained by the potato, an easy to grow crop that required little attention and during the early 1840s no less than three million people depended on this single food source.

On the 20th August 1845 Ireland was struck a devastating and disastrous blow when the first signs of potato blight were noticed on plants at the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin near Dublin.¹ The cause of the disease was then unknown but investigations later proved it to be the result of a minute fungus, *Phytophthora infestans*. This tiny agent turned the crop of 1845 into an evil-smelling, rotten mush and by August of 1846 the entire Irish potato crop had been lost. The consequences were catastrophic. A million people died of starvation and disease and the disaster was soon followed by mass emigration of millions more to England, Australia, Canada and the United States.

By 1848 Ireland had lost a quarter of her population and in May of the same year, Bernard Henry, an eighteen-year-old Derry lad, boarded one of the many "Famine Ships" destined for a better life in America. The Henrys were farmers of Roman Catholic background and had lived at Tyanee, a townland to the north of Portglenone in County Derry, since about 1650.

Bernard Henry arrived in New York on the 5th of June 1848 having crossed the Atlantic on board the *New Zealand* from Newry in County Down. News had broken earlier that year of the discovery of gold in California and in 1849 Bernard joined a stampede of other hopeful emigrants to those western goldfields. From his base in New York, young Bernard took a steamer to Central America and crossed the Isthmus of Panama on foot before sailing on to San Francisco which had been transformed almost overnight from a small, sleepy village into a substantial town. In 1851 gold had also been found in Australia and having had little luck in California, Bernard Henry set sail for the goldfields there in 1854. Henry's stay in Australia was a brief one however. He returned to Ireland a short time later without a fortune.

In 1855, while visiting his sister in Dundee in Scotland, he met a local girl called Mary MacNamee and later married her. Mary's mother was the daughter of the Provost of Banff and she had eloped with Mary's father, an army Sergeant.

Mary Henry was said to have inherited her mother's independence of character. Born a Protestant, at the age of 18 she converted to Catholicism. The Henrys lived on Hillbank Road in central Dundee for a year or so where Bernard Henry established a grocery shop. In 1856 their daughter Matilda was born and the 2nd of July 1857 saw the birth of their first son, Augustine.

When he was just a month old, Bernard and Mary Henry brought young Augustine and his sister back to Ireland. There they settled at Cookstown in County Tyrone where the family kept a grocery shop and where Bernard Henry became a successful merchant in Ulster's booming flax industry. Augustine was soon followed by four brothers (Edward, Joseph, Thomas and Daniel) and three sisters (Annie, Mary and Agnes). The family had become relatively prosperous and were closely-knit, though this happy circle was shattered by the death of Mary Henry in 1871 (very soon after giving birth to Daniel), when Augustine was only fourteen. The loss of their mother must have been a cruel blow to the Henry children. She was just one of a number of people to touch Augustine Henry's life briefly and die all too early. From then on Henry and his siblings spent much of their time with their grandmother, Anne, in the rolling countryside of Tyanee in County Derry.

Augustine Henry was a brilliant scholar and gained a place in Queen's College, Galway (now University College, Galway), where he studied natural science and philosophy. In 1877, aged 20, he graduated from Galway with a first-class degree. In the following year he obtained a Master of Arts degree from Queen's College, Belfast. One of the conditions of the scholarship Henry had gained at Belfast was that the holder must spend a year in one London's teaching hospitals and the following year was spent doing just that.

At the end of his resources, bored with examinations and not particularly keen on practising as a physician, Henry returned to Belfast in 1879, where one of his Professors at Queen's College told him of a vacancy in the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service under another Irishman, Sir Robert Hart.² Hart had returned to Europe to oversee the Chinese exhibit at the Paris Exhibition and while visiting his former College, he let it be known that he was looking to recruit a well educated man and,

if possible, one with some knowledge of medicine. Henry's medical qualifications at this time were not sufficient, but he obtained his degree quickly in Edinburgh by taking a special examination at double fees. He was accepted into the Chinese Customs Service on August 10th 1881. The Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service was a remarkable organisation directed from Beijing (then Peking), yet almost entirely run by Europeans, and at its head was Sir Robert Hart (1835-1911) from Portadown in County Armagh.

China opens her borders to the west

Henry was not the first Irishman to collect plants in China. One of the most remarkable expeditions to China during the 18th century took place between 1792 and 1794. The embassy was sent by King George III to the Emperor Qianlong, one of the most able rulers China has ever known. The ambassador leading the expedition was Lord George Macartney (1737-1806) from Lisnoure in County Antrim. The secretary of the legation was another Irishman, Sir George Leonard Staunton (1737-1801), from Cargin in County Galway. Also travelling in the retinue was Staunton's eleven-year-old son, Master George Thomas Staunton who learned Chinese during the ten-month voyage from Europe.

In August 1793 the embassy reached China and a short time later both Macartney and Staunton met the emperor at his summer palace at Chengde (then Jehol) near Beijing. Their route from Beijing to Chengde took about six days and meant having to cross the Great Wall before finally reach the summer palace. During this meeting Staunton's son was presented to the emperor. Both conversed in Chinese and the emperor was 'so charmed with the converse and elegant manner of this accomplished young gentleman, that he took from his girdle his areca-nut purse ... and presented it to him in his own hand'.³

Two gardeners travelled with the expedition and alongside Staunton they managed to gather over four hundred dried specimens and seeds of a small number of plants. Most of this material was collected on the Beijing plain and from there south through the eastern provinces as far as Guangzhou (then Canton).⁴ Staunton presented some of these seeds to the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and among the many seedlings raised there was the Macartney rose, *Rosa bracteata*. This lovely rose, with its large single cup-shaped white flowers has grown at the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin for over two hundreds years now and was perhaps the most beautiful plant discovered by Staunton. The plume poppy, *Macleaya cordata* was also introduced to cultivation by the same embassy and it was to be reintroduced to cultivation by the second Glasnevin expedition to the Three Gorges region exactly two hundred and ten years later. George Staunton is commemorated in the climbing genus, *Stauntonia*.

Staunton and Macartney arrived in China at a time when it was virtually impossible for a westerner to travel far inland. For centuries China had closed her great bamboo curtain to the outside world and travel in the Middle Empire remained only for a privileged few. Isolated from the western world, the Chinese were proud of their ancient civilisation and regarded themselves as a highly cultured race and foreigners as barbarians. Seafaring Europeans, however refused to be held back by the Great Wall and slowly but surely made an entrance. At first merchants were restricted to limited trade at a few chosen ports. The Portuguese were the first to gain a permanent foothold in 1557, when permission was granted to them to set up a base at Macau. Over the following century the British, Dutch and Spanish were equally vociferous in their calls for diplomatic relations and trading rights with China. By 1685 the Emperor Kangxi opened trade in the port of Guangzhou on a limited basis to foreign merchants, though there were tough terms for those who wanted to trade with China. Foreigners could only live in restricted areas in Guangzhou and had to leave once the trading season ended. Ships began arriving from the British East India Company, and in 1700, the company (then the world's largest commercial organisation) received permission to build a storage warehouse outside the city.

Augustine Henry's arrival in China

At the time of Augustine Henry's arrival in China virtually nothing was known of the flora of Central China and the bulk of the dried specimens in the herbarium at Kew came from the eastern coastal regions. At this time it was presumed that the flora of China had been thoroughly explored and little remained to be discovered. That opinion was about to be changed!

In the summer of 1881, having gained his medical degree and passed a routine examination for the Customs Service, twenty-four year old Henry bid farewell to Ireland and set sail for a new life in China. He first arrived in Hong Kong, then in its heyday of British colonialism. In 1842 the Treaty of Nanjing had ended the Opium War and placed the island of Hong Kong under British control. In a matter of decades the barren rocky outcrop had been transformed and by the time of Henry's arrival there in July 1881 it had become one of richest cities in Asia and its deep, wide harbour was one of the

busiest ports in the world.

Augustine Henry's stay in Hong Kong was brief. After only two days he boarded a small coasting steamer and sailed for Shanghai. On approaching the city it was possible to discern the mud of the Yangtze River discolouring the sea a hundred miles or more from its mouth. The city itself lies not on the Yangtze but on one of its tributaries, the Huangpu River, which is wider than the Thames at Westminster and can handle large ocean-going vessels.

Situated at the centre of China's vast eastern coastline and at the mouth of its most productive river system, the Yangtze, Shanghai had been ideally placed to develop as a major international trading port. The Opium War had opened up several concessions and an international settlement had been established on the banks of the Huangpu River in 1863. Spurred on by massive international investment, Shanghai had rapidly developed into a busy port and an industrial city.

In Shanghai Henry was trained for the various duties he would soon carry out on behalf of the Customs Service. Office hours were between 10 and 4 o'clock, though he would rise at five in the morning and head off with his pony outside of the foreign settlement. Shanghai was full of graduates from several Irish Universities and Henry soon fell in with Shanghai society. The city's social outlet was the Shanghai Club where men met before lunch and dinner. Leisure time was passed playing tennis, racing Mongolian ponies or making evening visits to hear bands play in the public gardens where a notorious sign near the entrance stated 'No dogs or Chinese allowed'. Henry soon grew bored of this lifestyle. A welcome change came in March of 1882 when he was posted to Yichang (then Ichang), a treaty port on the Yangtze River in remote Hubei province.