

From Ross Willmot,
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WHY THE COMBER CROSSENS CAME TO COBOURG IN THE EARLY 1800's

The answer may be partly supplied by Angus Baxter in his *IN SEARCH OF YOUR ROOTS* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1978), p. 259, referring to a comparable Irish family he researched:

...the early 1800's when the first of the great potato famines came, and the mass emigration to North America commenced. In the early part of the nineteenth century (between 1830 and 1850) the situation in Ireland could not have been worse. There was little or no industry and ninety per cent of the population depended on casual work on the farms. At that time eighty-five per cent of the working population was unemployed--victim to absentee English landlords and a complete lack of economic planning.

The small part of the land in Irish hands had been divided and subdivided so that the average small-holding was less than one acre. The Irish peasant never ate meat and was dependent on potatoes grown on his small patch and eked out with meal. Starvation came in the summer when the old crop was eaten and the new crop was not yet ready. June, July, and August were known as the "meal months."

The meal was imported from overseas and had to be bought for cash. The Irish worker---with no money to his name---had to borrow against his pay in the fall when the potatoes were harvested on the lands of the big landlords. Every village had its "gombeen man," or money-lender, who would lend at twenty-five per cent interest and then collect his repayments directly from the landlord. Few workers ever saw the money they earned in a fifteen-hour day in the fields at a wage of one shilling a day!

In those days the population of Ireland was eight million---double what it is today. In the early 1800's one million Irish emigrated, mostly to the United States and Canada.

The fare to New York or Quebec was £7. In 1845, 103,000 people sailed from Ireland in the first three months of the year. They sailed in "coffin ships" ---ancient, leaking, overcrowded, and badly provisioned. Passengers were supposed to get seven pounds of provisions per person per week, but rarely saw any of it. A ship licensed to carry two hundred passengers would squeeze four hundred aboard. Passengers slept on floors, and there were no sanitary arrangements. The voyage across the Atlantic took from six to eight weeks and hundreds died of cholera, dysentery, exposure, and malnutrition.

Even this appalling voyage, with all its death and suffering was better than conditions back in Ireland. The potato crop failed in 1832, 1836, 1837, 1839, 1842, and 1844, and utter starvation was widespread in the country...