



The Great Shame: And the Triumph of the Irish in the English-Speaking World

Thomas Keneally

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In **The Great Shame**, Thomas Keneally--the bestselling, Booker Prize-winning author of **Schindler's List**--combines the authority of a brilliant historian and the narrative grace of a great novelist to present a gripping account of the Irish diaspora.

The nineteenth century saw Ireland lose half of its population to famine, emigration, or deportation to penal colonies in Australia--often for infractions as common as stealing food. Among the victims of this tragedy were Thomas Keneally's own forebearers, and they were his inspiration to tell the story of the Irish who struggled and ultimately triumphed in Australia and North America. Relying on rare primary sources--including personal letters, court transcripts, ship manifests, and military documents--Keneally offers new and important insights into the impact of the Irish in exile. The result is a vivid saga of heroes and villains, from Great Famine protesters to American Civil War generals to great orators and politicians.

The Great Shame: And the Triumph of the Irish in the English-Speaking World Details

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Matt Dunn says

Brilliant historical work, examining the Irish diaspora.

Tony says

I really wanted to like this book and thought it would be great but...in a word - boring. I think there should have been more of a story developed instead of the authors intent to make it as historically accurate as possible. It was obviously painstakingly researched but in the end the research took over and prevented it from being a good read. The Hugh Larkin part was interesting and a book on his life up until he died would have made a good first book. The American Civil War part was like reading an old school history book. The book is over 700 pages long and it is a real commitment to read it.

Cyndi Mitas says

Very long and dry book. If you LOVE Irish history you may enjoy this book. I found it difficult to maintain interest.

Wyktor Paul says

Really in depth book about the struggles on the Irish.
Tough reading in places as it's so heart-wrenching at times.
Not for the faint-hearted.

John Fanning says

Great stories. From the same guy who did Schindler's List - ironically he's Irish-Australian.

The stuff on John Boyle O'Reilly and Thomas Francis Meagher was amazing (the latter: from Irish revolutionary, to Australian convict, to celebrated General for the Union forces in the Civil War, and finally to an acting governor in the Mid-West.)

Melissa says

It reads a bit like a textbook, but if you're looking for an in-depth account of the Irish diaspora of the 19th

century, look no further. Keneally spends a great deal of time talking about Australia, as that's where his Irish ancestors ended up, and I found it interesting, as I knew nothing about the Irish in Australia. He also made a careful note of the Irish involvement in the American Civil War. Unfortunately, due to school constraints, I never finished it, but I hope to pick it up and finish some day.

Adam Szczepanski says

I love these kinds of books, but *The Great Shame* became just too tedious for me. I only finished about a quarter, and I hope to revisit in the future. Keneally absolutely did his research and writes with authority, but in my eyes, this is also *The Great Downfall* of a potentially great book.

Colleen says

Ok - I didn't finish this book. It started out great. The guy is a gifted writer and he wove together more personal stories and political goings on very well. But, alas, he got terribly bogged down in the Irish exile to Australia of the many key political figures during the mid 19th century. Nothing happened at that time! So, you don't have to convey real time with page after page of "nothing happened". I may come back to this one...

Amy says

When I began *The Great Shame* I really enjoyed it. The depth of study into the lives and exploits of the persons depicted - especially the story of Hugh Larkin, Keneally's own ancestor. This story had the most energy, but when Hugh's tale was done, so was my enthusiasm. I found the escapes and releases of the transported Young Irelanders interesting, but their move into the American politics of the Civil War era lost me and I couldn't do more than skim the last third of the book. Perhaps if this wasn't the third historical text I've read in the past three months I might've been able to sink my teeth in a bit more.

Nancy says

It seems almost unimaginable that something as small as a spore could bring a nation to its knees and change the face of two continents, but that is exactly what happened after the potato famine in Ireland in the 1800s. The potato was the mainstay of Irish tenants, who were evicted by English landlords when they couldn't pay their rents. The potato, the cash crop and their personal dietary mainstay, had rotted in the fields year after year.

As the Irish starved, grains and edible foods grown in their country were shipped to England. It was illegal for Irish tenants to eat food, not raised by themselves, on the estates. Fishing in streams that ran through the estates was punishable, too. It wasn't long before the starving time was accompanied by typhoid and cholera and the Irish began dying by the thousands. There were so many deaths entire villages were wiped out, people were buried in mass graves and, ultimately, there was no one to bury the dead.

For crimes of stealing a loaf of bread to murder, Irish were sent out to Australia in great numbers. Then famine ships began crossing the Atlantic to Nova Scotia, Canada and the United States. The Irish changed the faces of the countries to which they were exported as refugees and criminals.

Thomas Keneally's book follows some of these reluctant immigrants and "criminals." Thomas Meagher was sent to Australia, escaped and became a Union general in the American Civil War. Commanding the Irish Brigade, he led his men in many prominent battles including Bull Run, Sharpsburg, Antietam and Fredericksburg. He later became governor of Wyoming. Soldiers in these Irish Brigades from the East Coast fought and died hard for their new country.

Many of the Irish published newspapers and Keneally's ancestor operated a dry goods store in California. Their impressions, opinions and power of the vote changed the political face of America.

In their home country, attempts to establish Home Rule for all of Ireland failed. It failed first with Daniel O'Connell and later with the Easter Uprising of 1916, which does not fall within the scope of this book. The Republic of Ireland, which a few of these men saw, consists of all but six counties which today make up Northern Ireland.

"The Great Shame" is Ireland never completely recovered by the time of the founding of the Irish Free State in 1922. As the rest of Europe prospered, the Irish continued to lag behind, dealing with poverty, a national guilt of surviving the long famine years and failure by leaders to create a successful 19th Century state as was being done in other parts of Europe. Even today, there are certain foods the Irish prefer not to eat because of its association with the famine.

Keneally's book is a monumental work of a people, their history and their lives in a country blessed with a terrible beauty.

Elizabeth Quinn says

I very much wanted to love this book because I hoped it would be what Keneally describes in his preface as his hope as well: an Irish version of his masterwork, *Schindler's List*, focusing on the 19th century diaspora of the Irish to Australia and the Americas. But in *Schindler*, Keneally went micro -- telling the story of the Holocaust through the life of one man the 1,300 men, women, and children he rescued from the gas chamber -- while in *Shame*, Keneally goes macro -- telling a century's worth of stories about dozens of men and women spread around the globe. In his acknowledgements, Keneally compares the writing of this book to being locked in a cupboard with a T Rex, but for me, the reading of this book resembled being stuck in in the mud: I found it an interminable slog. As a frequent reader on Ireland, I've found that slog is a good way to describe many books dealing with Irish history and politics. Let's face it -- Ireland has produced far more than its fair share of fascinating characters and figuring out which ones to leave out is a problem for any writer. The heart of Keneally's book is the stories of two groups of Irish revolutionaries -- the Young Irelanders transported in 1848 and the Fenians transported in 1867. Keneally details their pre-revolutionary lives; their failed activism; their arrests, trials and imprisonments; their journeys to Australia; their lives as convicts; their escapes from Australia; their new lives in countries around the globe; their continuing interest in and work for Ireland's freedom; and their deaths. And he fleshes out each chapter of the lives of these

dozen or so men with a huge cast of characters -- parents, siblings, friends, wives, children, lovers, cops, lawyers, prosecutors, judges, ships captains, ships doctors, other convicts, etc. I found it difficult to keep everyone straight, and while there was much in the book that was interesting, there was far too much that was repetitive because it basically tells the same story over and over: an Irish freedom fighter's rise, capture, transportation to Australia and escape. However, two things really stood out for me. First, these 19th century folks did A LOT of traveling -- back and forth across oceans, back and forth across the U. S. via the isthmus of Panama or the Missouri river, back and forth across Australia, and back and forth across Europe. Talk about globetrotting -- despite the hardship, expense and time involved in travel in the 19th century, people traveled a lot more than I ever imagined. Second, a group of American Fenians outfitted a New Bedford whaler for a bogus whaling trip whose actual goal was to free Fenians imprisoned in Australia. The story of that successful caper is fascinating.

Lisa Houlihan says

I did not think much of the writing in *Schindler's List*, which I recently read, and here I found that the style was not due to Keneally being cajoled into writing that book but that it really is his own. He drops the "and" from a series of three when the conjunction would clarify and he uses fragments without intention. Not like this. Where they do not add to his point. But detract.

Plus I just finished *Governess* about miserable C19 people so maybe I should take a break from miserable C19 people before facing more, especially in a voice I don't like.

(He writes -- in the 1990s! -- that in the 1830s the "droit de seigneur" was still in effect in Ireland. I'm sure peasants suffered rape aplenty but I'm surer that this "right" was neither codified nor regularly practiced.)

Owen says

The story of what happened to the Irish political prisoners known as the Young Irelanders and the Fenians, in the 1850s and 60s, is expertly told by Australian writer Thomas Keneally in "The Great Shame." Sticking firmly to documented history, about the only thing Keneally leaves out is the nastier side of Fenianism, with its secret vendettas and occasional underlying brutality. But that all lies in the misty past, and Keneally has done a first-rate job of bringing much of this truculent history out into the light.

This is an epic journey, just as the formation of the Irish diaspora needs it to be. You never quite know where you are you going to go next, as ships sail back and forth from Ireland to Australia and from Australia to the Americas. It is the roaring days of sail just before steam, and gold is being discovered right and left on both sides of the Pacific, sufficient to lend impetus to various Fenian schemes through goldfields' fundraising.

One of the characters involved in the 50s was a man destined to become an American Civil War hero with the rank of general. He fought on the Union side while another Irishman who had fought the same battle as he had at home in Ireland, and had also been transported for it, fought with the Confederates. Such were the fortunes of war at that time.

The book also recounts how the Fenian forces tried on three occasions, prior to Confederation, to invade Canada in order to hurt the British in North America. They also had the long-term plan of mounting an

invasion of Ireland from a Canadian base. It was all a bit pathetic in the end, but for a time, it was in deadly earnest and who could have said what the result might not have been had the Fenian forces succeeded.

Perhaps the most interesting part of a very entertaining book is the retelling of an attempted rescue from Western Australia of the last group of Fenian "lifers," all soldiers who had been cashiered from the British Army for their part in Fenian plots in England and Ireland. These men had little hope of ever leaving their prison, and were mostly ailing by the time American Fenians had raised the enormous sum needed to buy a ship to go to their rescue. The hair-raising tale of what happened is one of the nineteenth century's best adventure stories, and Keneally relishes the telling of it.

So this is a book which has everything an Irishman, or an Irishman at heart, could wish for. I wonder what the reaction of the English might be to such a tale. The evidence is somewhat damning, to the effect that political repression of the most odious kind was used during and after the famine. Of course, this is only referring to the nineteenth century and does not go back in any detail to the awful story of Cromwell's men or even earlier, which might lead one to think that the English, when they came to Ireland, only did so to practice.

If you've got any Irish blood in you, (and if you didn't previously know one way or the other, this may prove to be a glorious occasion for finding out) you'll fairly quickly be learning to say the old war cry, Erin go bragh. Ireland forever! It's a strange tale and one that should make us reflect about the nature of power and its misuse. It all seems so long ago now but that's just a mirage of sorts, for it was really only just the other day.

Lastly I should point out that writing a book like this must have been a sheer delight. Keneally seems to have visited many of the sites he talks about and they are often in out of the way places. I imagine that it was an absolute pleasure for him to write a book like this and I look forward to the day when he finds time to do it again. I can't recommend "The Great Shame" highly enough.

Mike says

A deep dive into the 19th Century history of Ireland and the punishment of "transportation" to Australia. Keneally starts with the case of one of his ancestors and wanders all over the place from there. A lot of interesting information, but the lack of focus makes it all kind of a slog.

Guera25 says

Well-researched, but deadly dull after the first 200 pages. I began to eye the book with loathing near the end, as though it were an enemy to be conquered rather than an informative read. No triumph on view, either, just a long slog through faction, failure, and disappointment.
