Circle after Circle: Border Crossings
Dr Emily Mark-FitzGerald

On Christmas Day 1849, the passenger ship *Thomas Arbuthnot* rounded the Cape of Good Hope in rough seas. On board were 194 girls from Irish workhouses, part of more than 4,000 girls sent to Australia between 1848 and 1850 on the Earl Grey-assisted emigration scheme that sought to alleviate poverty in Famine-stricken Ireland. Sixty-five of these girls came from Poor Law Unions in Galway. Eventually these women began new, often difficult, lives in Australia: escaping the horrors of one colony, they met with suspicion in another – some were described as 'dirty brutes' in Adelaide following their arrival.[1] Many entered domestic service, whilst others married and began new families—joining the long, slow process of the continent's colonisation.

Yet all this belonged to an unknown future, and on Christmas Eve the ship's surgeon Charles Strutt (responsible for the girls' welfare and safe passage from Plymouth to Sydney) observed the extraordinary sight of the girls' gathering on deck as they began to keen[2]:

> *… little circles of seven or eight each, assembled together, and began to lament their fate; their expatriation from 'Ould Ireland', their loved country, and their 'frinds.' Soon their lamentations degenerated into the real Irish howl, of which apparently there was no end – circle after circle rapidly formed, and the shrieks of grief and woe resounded through the good* Thomas Arbuthnot *from stem to stern.*[3]

The image of these young women moving concentrically, collectively voicing their heartbreak and sorrow, in the midst of a churning sea, viscerally evokes the disorientation of crossing from one world to another. Indifferent to the watchfulness of officials who otherwise regulated their every step, the women here performed an unforgettable act of resistance, memory, and lament.

Theirs was but one passage of many undertaken between Ireland and Australia over the past three centuries. Circle after circle, such shocks of displacement and the unspeakable yet uncontainable grief of losing one's point of anchor resonate throughout the artworks in *Border Crossings.* In the exhibition's Adelaide presentation, performances by Michelle Browne, Sandra Johnston, and Dominic Thorpe embodied such encounters with traumatic excisions. Browne's ripped fabric recalls a devastating sequence of a mother's choices and their unforeseen consequences. Mary Reilly's desperate bid in the 1820s to reunify with her husband

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[1] Richard Reid and Cheryl Mongan, *A Decent Set of Girls? The Irish Famine Orphans of the Thomas Arbuthnot, 1849*-1850, Yass; Yass Heritage Project, 1996, p. 3.

[2] A keen (from the Irish 'caoineadh') is a traditional Irish sung lament for the dead, usually performed by women, either singly or in groups.

[3] From 'Female Emigration', an article based on the Journal of Surgeon-Superintendent Charles Edward Strutt, 10 October 1849 – 8 May 1850; La Trobe Library, Melbourne. Reprinted in *A Decent Set of Girls? The Irish Famine Orphans of the Thomas Arbuthnot, 1849-1850*, p. 123.

and child, hideously thwarted, rendered by Browne as an unraveling that brutally severs the warp and weft of family. Johnston poises herself amidst waste and torpid decay gleaned from the desert surrounding the Warlukurlangu Artists Art Centre in Yuendumu where she spent a short residency. Honey, glass, ash, staples and old deflated basketballs were used in a series of dream-like, delicate gestures, laced with apprehension and expectations of violence. Thorpe's repetitive and simultaneous re-writing of words in Irish and Kaurna—translations of remembering, forgetting, and their transitive/intransitive variations—performs iterative and cyclical acts of recall. The past here is a wound that is picked at, exposed, and made raw over and over again—evoked by Thorpe's wooden dresser, pockmarked with teaspoon-dug holes.

In comparison with most nineteenth-century Irish emigrants, we know a remarkable amount about the girls aboard the *Thomas Arbuthnot*, but their experiences and circumstances are predominantly mediated through workhouse documentation, immigration records, period newspaper accounts, and other archival sources. Direct knowledge of their lives, before and after their border crossings, and the presence of their own voices is more elusive. The works by the Australian artists each materialize how we encounter the past by such proximate means, through relics, photographs, objects, and namings. Although Sue Kneebone, Yhonnie Scarce, and Julie Gough all bear Irish connections of one kind or another, their installations speak to the long shadow of colonialism and its Antipodean dispossessions.

Kneebone's installations reference the conditions of 19th century Ireland from which her own ancestors emigrated, assembling natural and domestic objects in evocative and jarring juxtapositions. The blight and its somatic degradations are recalled by copper-painted potatoes are heaped on a sagging, industrial bed in *Inferior Lumpers*; a chandelier composed of wine corks and chains in *Rebel Party* offers a wry take on the 1848 Young Irelander rebellion, whose leaders transported to Van Diemen's Land (and later emigrated to the United States) indelibly shaped nationalist memory in exile. Scarce's work *Dinah* centres on a remarkable archival photograph of her Indigenous great-great grandmother Dinah Coleman, who bore a son in 1890 with a white Irish immigrant named Patrick Coleman. The piercing gaze of Dinah, flanked by delicate blown glass sculptures of bush plums native to Australia, evokes a sense of unflinching self-possession yet vulnerability. Gough's contributions flux between her Irish and Tasmanian heritages, using fabrics imprinted with the faded impressions of ancestral names and tombstone rubbings. Works like *Exiled* record the names of Aboriginal ancestors on solar-printed calico, suspended in silent motion within the gallery—a cascade of words torn from their natural context and rendered fragmentary and ephemeral.

Each of the artists in *Border Crossings* offers an opportunity, through performance and presence, to commune with fragile, unknowable, and interconnected histories. Throughout 2016 we in Ireland have been compelled to revisit the ghosts of rebellion; to chart the rise and fall of revolutionary dreams; to make sense of the slippery chimera of national sovereignty repeatedly deferred, both in our ancestors' time and in ours. We gaze outwards to a Europe (and wider world) unsettled by the refugee crisis and weakening solidarity, and inwards to a nation bruised by recession

and the return of high migration.The past has never seemed so omnipresent in public space.

Yet each of the works presented here refuse the sentimentality that often afflicts recollection of traumatic pasts. Instead they ask: how can we begin to know, or empathise with, turbulent histories of migration, colonization, dispossession? Is this a right, an obligation, or an obfuscation? They do not collapse the historical specificities of migrations, nor do they lay claim to a universalized history of suffering and displacement. Rather, they suggest how *'the real Irish howl, of which apparently there was no end'* reverberates down the centuries into our own time, echoed by others across oceans whose voices must also be heard, and reckoned with.

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