

**Ireland and Panama: The Building of the Panama Railroad,
1850-1855**

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Abstract: Little is known about Irish migration to Central America in the nineteenth century. This paper sheds light on a forgotten episode of Ireland's history which has hitherto been overlooked by students of the country's nineteenth-century diaspora. It has two main objectives. Firstly, to show that there was substantial Irish involvement in building the world's first interoceanic railroad across Panama in the 1850s. My research, using primary and secondary sources, has brought to light the participation of approximately 3,700 Irish labourers in this pioneering project. Most were immigrants in the United States, but a minority was recruited directly in Cork. Secondly, by using a methodology adapted from the French attempt to build a canal across Panama in the 1880s, I challenge the myth that virtually all of the Irish workers who went to Panama died there.

Keywords: Panama, railroad, Irish, emigrants, mortality, New Granada, Cork.

The word "Panama" brings to mind the Panama Canal, one of the world's great infrastructural achievements. Sixty years before the Canal's opening in 1914 however, work on another pioneering transportation scheme was drawing to a close – the Panama railroad. Conceived by a New York shipping millionaire, William Aspinwall, the building of a railroad across almost fifty miles of Panama's swamps and jungle was one of the great engineering accomplishments of the nineteenth century. This rail link, started in 1850 and completed in 1855, was the world's first interoceanic railroad, the first to connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. It was the first railway to be built in Central America and in terms of cost per mile was the most expensive to be built anywhere in the world at the time.² The story of how it was built and of the thousands of men, one fifth of whom were Irish, who battled climate, disease, and geography to construct it, deserves to be more widely known.

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² Wolmar, *Blood, Iron and Gold*, 126.

In 1847, the completion of the transcontinental railroad in the United States was still a distant dream and Aspinwall realised that a railroad crossing the Isthmus of Panama would act as a vital land bridge between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.³ This rail link would transport passengers and freight between America's east and west coasts, and stimulate trade with Pacific and Asian nations, avoiding the long and dangerous sea route around Cape Horn. After securing a concession from New Granada's government, Aspinwall established the Panama Railroad Company in New York in 1849.⁴ His timing was perfect. From early 1849, news of the discovery of gold in California set off a tidal wave of migration to America's new Pacific territories. In the following decades, thousands of prospectors and settlers would swarm across Panama, as it was the fastest route to the new goldfields.⁵



Map of Central America and the U.S.

³ The Transamerica rail route was not completed until 1869.

⁴ Panama was then a province of New Granada, known as Colombia from 1886.

⁵ Between 1848 and 1860, more migrants used the Panama route than the overland trail across the United States. McGuinness, *Path of Empire*, 7, table 1.

What role did Irishmen play in building this rail link in Panama, a part of the world with few obvious Irish connections?⁶ This project employed about 17,500 men from over a dozen countries scattered across several continents.⁷ In addition to men from Ireland, there were workers from the United States and several European countries, as well as an estimated 7,000 Central and South Americans, 3,000 West Indians, 1,000 Chinese, and several hundred from the Indian sub-continent and the Malay Peninsula. These men formed what was probably the first multinational labour force to be employed by an American corporation outside the United States.

About 6,000 of the railroad's employees were white, nearly all of whom were hired in the United States. Despite a widespread assumption that these men were Americans, my research suggests that approximately 60 per cent of the total were Irish-born emigrants who had settled in the United States. Because of their skin colouring, their general appearance, and the fact that they were largely English speaking, these workers were frequently referred to as "Americans" in newspaper accounts and sometimes in the company's documents. However, my investigations suggest that around 3,300 of these recruits were actually Irishmen. Most were recruited in the immigrant ghettos of New York City, Boston, and New Orleans, and in the regions surrounding these urban centres. Similarly, my research has uncovered the previously unknown fact that the railroad company also recruited 360 Irishmen directly in Cork and shipped them to Panama.

The Irish and Irish-American component of the workforce, amounting to an estimated 3,700 men, constituted about 21 per cent of the total labour force.⁸ Irish newspapers were aware of the participation of workers from the home country in this project but in at least one case overestimated the numbers involved. "Tens of thousands of Irishmen, unable to obtain employment here, have within the last few years been induced to emigrate from the United States to the Isthmus of Panama, to build the railroad there, upon which none but natives and blacks ought to have been employed."⁹

⁶ Brehony, "Irish Railroad Workers in Cuba" has shown that there was earlier Irish involvement in railroad construction in the Caribbean area in the 1830s.

⁷ Pyne, *Panama Railroad*, 110-111.

⁸ Pyne, *Panama Railroad*, 210-212.

⁹ *Leinster Express*, 7 February 1857, quoting from *The European* (New York), n.d.

Evidence for Irish involvement on this scale is of two kinds. Firstly, indications of an Irish presence are scattered throughout a variety of sources, including the railroad company's documents, reports in newspapers in Panama, the United States and Ireland, travel accounts, and memoirs. Legal proceedings in New York brought by labourers against a railroad contractor provide additional insights into Irish participation. Unfortunately, most reports of Irish involvement fail to quantify the numbers involved.

There is also evidence based on geographical and occupational factors. My hypothesis is that 60 per cent of the "American" employees were Irish because the recruitment of labourers in the United States focussed largely on the cities of New York, Boston and, to a lesser extent, New Orleans. As confirmed by census data of the 1850s, these cities and their surrounding areas were home to large Irish immigrant populations, and Irish manual workers constituted the bulk of their unskilled labour force. Irishmen predominated in building the expanding American rail network, and were strongly represented in construction, canal excavation and public works. During the 1850s, "In New York [City] nine out of ten labourers were Irishmen."¹⁰ Approximately one in every four Bostonians had been born in Ireland in this decade, and 82 per cent of the city's unskilled male labour force was Irish.¹¹ Irishmen, cheap and expendable, were also disproportionately represented among New Orleans' labouring class and were frequently used as substitutes for more expensive slaves.¹² Transportation links and logistical considerations reinforce the argument for a considerable Irish presence among the railroad's manual workers. The railroad company's headquarters were in New York and that city and New Orleans were key embarkation points for men heading for Panama, as they were the only ports on America's Atlantic coast with scheduled steamship services to the Isthmus.

The first reference to hiring Irish workers occurred on May 30, 1850, when the company's executive and finance committee approved a proposal from a New Orleans labour contractor to provide one hundred Irishmen from that city and allocated \$20,000 to cover the cost.¹³ The railroad was then clearing a route through the mangrove swamps that extended inland from the Caribbean

¹⁰ Dolan, *Irish Americans*, 86-87.

¹¹ Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants*, 52, 60, 250-251, 253.

¹² Brennan, "Getting Out of Crescent City", 191; Niehaus, *Irish in New Orleans*, 44, 47.

¹³ Panama Railroad Company (PRC). Minutes of the Executive and Finance Committee, 30 May 1850.

coast for several miles. An Irish paper announced that a large force of labourers had left New Orleans on August 1 to labour on the Panama railroad.¹⁴ According to the *New York Evening Post* the following month, “there is a large number of Irish labourers employed on the Panama railroad”.¹⁵ George Totten, the chief engineer, noted the reaction of the new arrivals after they had been deployed in the swamplands. “The Irishmen are not pleased at being placed to work in the water ... Five or six of them have already deserted”.¹⁶



Mangrove Swamps, Panama

By mid-October, between three and four hundred men were at work, “most of them Irish from New Orleans”.¹⁷ A reference to possible Irish racial antagonism dates from this period. While awaiting the arrival of Jamaican labourers in September 1850, Totten wrote that they would have to be “put on a different part of the work from the other labourers ... if placed among the Irishmen, I should fear an occasional row.”¹⁸ As the Irishmen referred to were from New Orleans, it is likely

¹⁴ *Dundalk Democrat*, 24 August 1850.

¹⁵ 21 September 1850.

¹⁶ PRC. Letters from G.M. Totten (hereafter cited as Totten to recipient). Totten to Stephens, 9 September 1850.

¹⁷ Kemble, *Panama Route*, 191.

¹⁸ Totten to Stephens, 21 September 1850.

that they had been exposed to the racist attitudes prevailing in the American South. Totten made no further reference to this matter, and no reports of Irish racial antagonism appeared in company documents and newspapers during the remaining years of construction.¹⁹

Physically exhausting labour, together with daily soakings from the torrential downpours of the rainy season (April to December) took a toll on all employees and not just labourers. What was possibly the first confirmed Irish casualty occurred on December 10, 1850, when D. Knox Maunsell, a civil engineer, the eldest son of the rector of Castleisland, County Kerry, died. "His illness was of five days duration, produced by exposure to the climate, and being obliged to work in swamps up to his waist."²⁰ According to an American worker, the best excavators were Irish and Germans with construction experience. "With such men this road can be built and with no others."²¹ In February 1851, Totten sent a supervisor to the United States with instructions "to bring young, hearty Irishmen, from works where he has been engaged and is well known ... Let the graders be Irish or Germans, from New England or New York". The chief engineer warned against hiring his own compatriots for manual labour. "Americans are not fit for that work."²²

In early 1851, an Irish Catholic priest, the Reverend Richard Waters arrived in Panama. The priest celebrated Mass at locations where workmen were stationed which suggests that much of the labour force at this point was probably Irish. Totten was pleased with the clergyman's ministrations. "The Irish Catholic missionary, Revd. Walters [sic] has officiated at our different stations on the river a number of times, and his preaching has a happy effect upon a large portion of our labourers, quieting them and reconciling them to their duties."²³ In a letter to a local newspaper, Waters commented on his fellow countrymen's health. "As to the Irish labourers there has not one been sick since the commencement".²⁴ The priest remained in Panama, apparently acting as an unofficial chaplain to the railroad's Catholic employees, until his death in October 1851.

¹⁹ Allegations by Schott of Irish hostility to Chinese workers in 1854 lack documentary proof, as does much of his account of the railroad's construction. *Rails*, 178-179; Pyne, *Panama Railroad*, 5, 212-216.

²⁰ *New York Weekly Herald*, 11 January 1851; *Kerry Evening Post*, 1 February 1851.

²¹ George Bartholomew, letter to *New York Tribune*, 22 January 1851.

²² Totten to Stephens, 24 February 1851. Graders prepared the ground for track laying.

²³ Totten to Stephens, 24 February 1851.

²⁴ *Panama Star*, 14 January 1851. The priest was probably referring to the most recent contingent of Irish workers only, and not to earlier arrivals.

Irish involvement in building the railroad continued. In June 1851, the steamer *Falcon* landed 180 Irish labourers from New York. “Some difficulty occurred upon their landing, by the desertion of a number of them, who were subsequently secured and placed in irons.”²⁵ The deserters were probably hoping to get to California where the gold rush was in full swing. Robert Fuller, a former railroad labourer and a native of Killarney, maintained later that about five hundred Irishmen were employed during the early stages of construction.²⁶

Again, references to the Irish involvement in the building of the railroad abound, and from a variety of sources. Referring to the 1852-1853 period, Otis, the railroad’s first historian, wrote: “At times there was a force of several hundred men employed; but they were mostly Irish”.²⁷ Anthony Trollope, the eminent Victorian novelist who had visited the Isthmus, concurred. “The high rate of wages enticed many Irishmen here.”²⁸ Newspapers occasionally reported the deaths of railroad employees who were identified as Irish or who had Irish-sounding names. In April 1851, “The body of a man supposed to be an Irishman who had been employed on the railroad, was found floating in the Chagres River, a few days ago, since which we learn that two men have been arrested and charged with the murder.”²⁹ In another incident, “An Irishman, by the name of James Casey, a labourer on the Panama railroad was found dead yesterday morning ... This is the effect of continued drunkenness”.³⁰ These and similar reports were unsympathetic: they failed to mention that men toiling long hours in the punishing heat of isolated jungle encampments with no recreational facilities were tempted to drink their troubles away.

²⁵ *Panama Herald*, 16 June 1851. The company had secured the cooperation of the Panamanian authorities in punishing deserters with imprisonment.

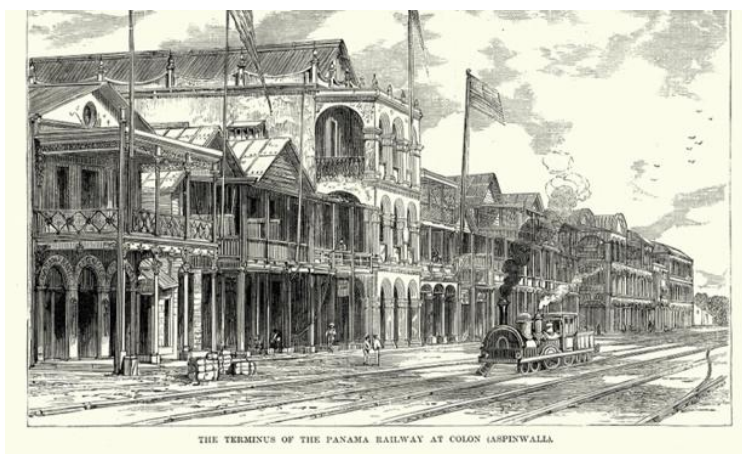
²⁶ *New York Times*, 3, 4 February 1857. Fuller also claimed that most were dead at the end of six months.

²⁷ Otis, *Illustrated History*, 34.

²⁸ Trollope, *West Indies*, 246.

²⁹ *Panama Herald*, 21 April 1851.

³⁰ *Panama Star*, 14 December 1853, citing *Aspinwall Courier*, 9 December 1853.



Running the Lines, Panama

Allegations of criminal behaviour by Irish railroad employees were made in a few cases. Several Irishmen were charged in February 1853 with breaking into a company storehouse and were imprisoned in Panama City while awaiting trial. They appealed unsuccessfully to both the British and American consuls for release.³¹ A more serious incident occurred in March when an Irish carpenter, John McHugo [McHugh], was punished for refusing to carry out instructions. McHugo swore vengeance on his supervisor but mistook his victim and stabbed to death an innocent man. He faced almost certain execution but died in prison before sentence was passed.³² References to Irishmen continued to appear in a variety of sources.³³ The Protestant bishop of California noted an Irish presence while crossing the Isthmus on his way to California. “Occasionally, too, we saw groups of the Irish, who were employed as workmen on the railroad. They looked pale and miserable ... It is almost certain death to them to be employed here ... and yet they are coming out by hundreds to complete it.”³⁴

Sickness, climatic conditions, and the physical obstacles posed by the terrain slowed the pace of construction from the start. The chief engineer, beset by health problems, conscious of his failure

³¹ *Panama Herald*, 18 February 1853.

³² *Panama Star*, 5, 6, 13 April 1853; *Panama Herald*, 5, 12 April 1853.

³³ See, for example, letter to *Cork Examiner*, 21 July 1854.

³⁴ Kip, *Early Days*, 26-27. The bishop repeated the myth that a labourer had died for every foot of the railroad which, if true, would have given a death toll of at least 132,000 by early 1854.

to meet construction targets, and mindful of the daunting challenges that lay ahead, advised the board of directors to transfer the project to an outside contractor. His suggestion was accepted and in June 1852, the company handed over construction to a prominent American railroad builder called Minor Story.

Story, with no experience of working in the tropics, underestimated the difficulties involved, as well as the number of workers required. He also experienced more than his fair share of bad luck. The 1852 wet season was unusually heavy and prolonged. An outbreak of cholera reduced the size of his workforce and debilitated its survivors. A Dublin newspaper reported that labourers had deserted by the hundred and “the mortality among those from America and Ireland had been most severe.”³⁵ The following year an outbreak of yellow fever hit the Isthmus. Story would have regarded Irishmen, particularly those with experience in construction and railroad work as ideal recruits for his labour-hungry project. The contractor attempted to remedy his shortage of workers by advertising for three thousand labourers in the *Boston Herald* and the *New York Herald* throughout the first half of 1853.

However, these attempts did not go unchallenged. The advertisements prompted the publication of a letter to the *Irish American* (the newspaper with the largest circulation among the expatriate Irish community), ominously headed “Irish Graves in Panama”, which was written “to prevent the fearful sacrifice of life which must ensue by using Irish labour on the Isthmus.”³⁶ The paper’s editor added an admonitory postscript. “We recommend it to the careful consideration of Irish labourers”, confirming that the advertisements in question were aimed mainly at Irish immigrants in Boston and New York.

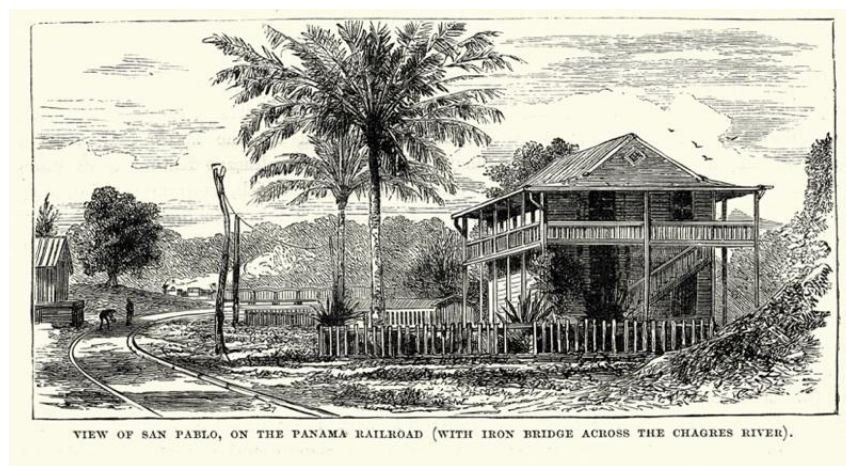
Story’s shoddy treatment of workers resulted in employees taking legal proceedings against him in New York’s courts. The surnames of some of those mentioned e.g. Monaghan, Murphy, Lyons, Harris, Cosgrove, Fagan, Shaw, Dalton, suggest they were Irish-born, though this was not explicitly stated.³⁷ The fact that some of these aggrieved labourers chose Michael Doheny to act

³⁵ *Freeman’s Journal*, 19 November 1852.

³⁶ Letter from Thomas Antisell M.D., 30 April 1853.

³⁷ *New York Times*, 30 July 1853, 6 February 1854; *New York Tribune*, 20 August 1853; *Irish American*, 20, 27 August 1853; *New York Freeman’s Journal*, 20 August 1853.

as their legal representative strengthens the likelihood that they were Irish. Doheny, a former Young Ireland leader who had fled to the United States after the failed 1848 rebellion against British rule, was a founder member of the Irish republican Fenian movement.³⁸ The courts awarded damages and costs to the plaintiffs in a number of these cases.



View of San Pablo on the Panama Railroad

Following Story's failure to complete construction by August 1853, the railroad resumed control under George Totten, its chief engineer. Valuable time had been lost. After three years, the line reached just over halfway across the Isthmus. A rival route to the Pacific promoted by Cornelius Vanderbilt, the multi-millionaire shipping tycoon, through nearby Nicaragua now posed a threat to the railroad's viability. The company's directors decided to pour in thousands of additional labourers and conquer the remaining miles to Panama City by sheer force of numbers. Because the railroad's image as an employer had been damaged by Story's poor employment practices, the company was now finding it more difficult to recruit the increased number of men it required in the United States. According to an Irish-American newspaper, reluctance to volunteer for work in Panama had spread to the Irish immigrant community. "Since our warnings of the fatality of foreign labourers there [Panama], Irishmen cannot be found to go from the United States."³⁹

³⁸ Doheny wrote an account of the 1848 Rising and its aftermath, *The Felon's Track* (New York: W H Holbrooke, 1849).

³⁹ *New York Freeman's Journal*, 7 August 1853, reprinted in the *Waterford News*, 11 November 1853.

The need for more labourers, together with a slowdown in American recruitment, caused the railroad to look further afield, particularly in countries that it assumed were unaware of conditions in Panama. In July, the directors discussed importing two thousand men from Ireland, before reducing that number by half.⁴⁰ A decision was also taken to recruit a similar number of workers in mainland China.⁴¹ The chief engineer's opinion of workers from Ireland was revealing. "Irish labourers are not so efficient on the Isthmus as in cooler and healthier climates, yet, for a period from four to six months, which is the term of their engagement, they perform a fair amount of work."⁴²

The company's vice-president, Colonel Alexander Center, arrived in Cork in October 1853 to recruit additional labour. The railroad had already contacted Irish workhouses that might be interested in disposing of some of their male inmates.⁴³ These institutions remained crowded with thousands of poverty-stricken survivors of the Great Famine of 1845-1851. However, the Cork Union was the only one to respond to the railroad's overtures. When it seemed unlikely that he could get all the men he needed from this source, Center advertised in Cork newspapers seeking 1,000 labourers, masons, and quarrymen for a six-month period for wages of \$1 per day (4 shillings). This was a substantial amount by contemporary Irish standards, and additional inducements included free board, lodging and medical attention, and a steamer ticket to the United States at the end of the contract.⁴⁴ Center chartered a sailing ship in Liverpool, the *Ben Nevis*, to take the Irish recruits to Panama.

These advertisements sparked off a vigorous debate in the local Cork press. Unfavourable reports from Irishmen who had previously worked on the railroad had filtered back to Ireland and appeared in Cork's newspapers. Letters warned readers of the risks of labouring in a tropical climate and predicted a high mortality rate.⁴⁵ Unfavourable press coverage was largely responsible for Story's failure to recruit the expected number of volunteers, and when the *Ben Nevis*, left Queenstown

⁴⁰ PRC, Minutes, Board of Directors, 1 July 1853; Minutes, Executive and Finance Committee, 16 September 1853; *Estrella de Panama*, 24 August 1853; *Panama Star*, 25 August 1853, 4 October 1853.

⁴¹ Two shiploads of Chinese indentured labourers, just over 1,000 men, arrived in Panama in 1854.

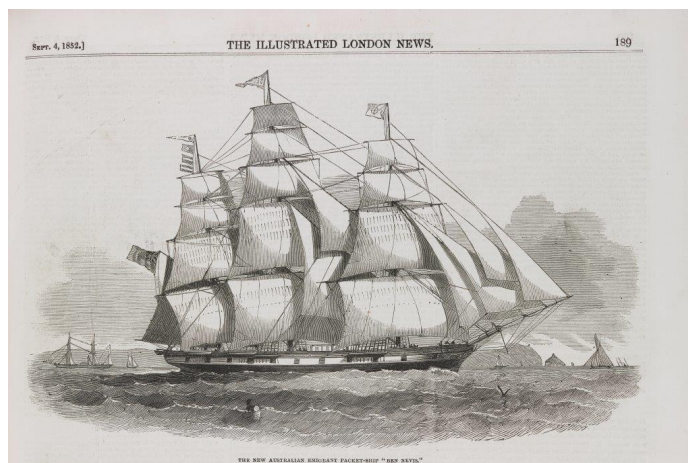
⁴² *Panama Herald*, 27 December 1853, quoting from Totten's report to the railroad's president and board.

⁴³ *Daily Express*, 1 November 1853.

⁴⁴ *Cork Examiner*, 14, 17, 19, 21, 24, 26 1853; *Cork Constitution*, 15, 18, 20, 22 1853; *Cork Southern Reporter*, 15, 18, 22 October 1853.

⁴⁵ *Cork Examiner*, 21, 24, 31 October, 2 November 1853; *Cork Constitution*, 20, 22, 27 October 1853.

(Cobh) on a foggy morning in December 1853, it had only 360 men aboard, 133 of whom were workhouse emigrants. My analysis of the Cork Union records revealed the likely names and some details of those inmates who had volunteered for Panama.⁴⁶



Ben Nevis Sailing Ship. Illustrated London News, September 4, 1852

Courtesy of the British Library Board

What fate befell the thousands of Irishmen who ended up in Panama? Many suffered from malaria or other fevers and were admitted to the company's hospitals. A traveller remarked that their windows "showed many fever-worn and saddened faces, among which I fancied I saw a few unmistakably Irish features and lineaments."⁴⁷ A visitor to the railroad's main hospital encountered a brawny Irish labourer, probably suffering from malaria, "with glaring eyes, a face glowing red like a furnace ... and his great chest heaving".⁴⁸ Numerous allegations were made of a catastrophic number of Irish deaths. The press in Ireland accepted the veracity of mortality figures emanating from Irish correspondents in the United States, or taken from American newspapers. However, in

⁴⁶ Pyne, *Panama Railroad*, Appendix 3, 292-296.

⁴⁷ "A pleasure Excursion on the Panama Railway", *United Services Magazine*, n.d., reprinted in *Cork Constitution*, 14 January 1854.

⁴⁸ Tomes, *Panama in 1855*, 207.

my view, based on an assessment of the evidence, these claims were invariably exaggerated and lacked proof.

The *Waterford News*, for example, published a letter from a woman in San Francisco alleging that only five out of every hundred Irishmen in Panama survived. “The railway that has been commenced across the Isthmus of Panama is literally paved with their bones ... the line of the railway was marked with small white crosses, the graves of Irishmen”⁴⁹ A correspondent of the *Freeman’s Journal* wrote in a similar vein: “We see lots of men working on the railway, every rail of which will be an iron monument over the grave of some unfortunate white man ... Here is the white man’s grave.”⁵⁰ The same paper later stated: “It is said that six thousand [Irishmen, aside from other labourers, perished in the construction of the Panama railroad.”⁵¹ Other provincial newspapers reprinted this unsubstantiated allegation.

The *Nation* went further, repeating a claim that the lives of 10,000 Irish had been sacrificed in building the railroad.⁵² The *Cork Examiner* warned readers: “Our countrymen should ponder over the vast sacrifice of the lives of Irishmen in New Grenada [sic], on the Panama railway ...”⁵³ This paper criticized the use of Ireland as a reservoir of labour by foreign railroads. “Far cheaper than slaves, a cargo of Irishmen costs nothing more than the freight of a ship and certain magnificent promises ...” It drew attention to “the fates of the poor wretches who perished for the sake of forming the Panama railroad.”⁵⁴ The *Carlow Morning Post* published a letter from an Irish immigrant, which claimed that a labourer’s life was lost for every two feet of the railroad, and that many of the dead were Irish.⁵⁵ If true, the death toll would have amounted to an incredible 125,000. This allegation echoed the frequently repeated myth that a labourer, or an Irishman, or a Chinese, died for every sleeper laid over the 47½ miles of track. “Shiploads of labourers for the railway died as fast as they came – or, as the saying was ‘An Irishman for every tie’”⁵⁶

⁴⁹ 6 August 1852.

⁵⁰ 7 June 1851.

⁵¹ 22 November 1855.

⁵² *Nation*, 28 May 1859, citing *Harper’s New York Magazine*, October 1854.

⁵³ 19 December 1859.

⁵⁴ 23 January 1860.

⁵⁵ 3 March 1855

⁵⁶ Tripler, *Tripler, Some Notes*, 106. “Tie” is the American term for a railroad sleeper.

Unfortunately, no reliable mortality figures for the railroad workers have survived. Labouring in the swamps and rainforest of the Isthmus was a physical test that few could withstand for any length of time. Toiling twelve hours a day, six days a week, under a tropical sun and in debilitating humidity, was bound to take a toll on men accustomed to working in more temperate climates. Furthermore, Panama was a fever-infested land. Malaria was endemic, while cholera and yellow fever made unwelcome appearances while the railroad was under construction.

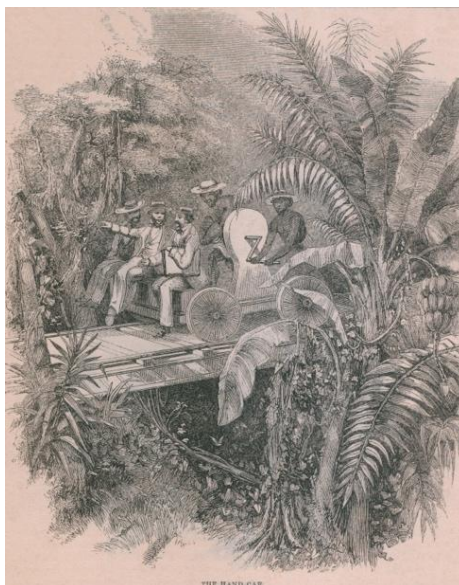
Incomplete statistical data from an unsuccessful attempt to build the Panama Canal under French auspices in the 1880s suggest that somewhere between a fifth and a third of white workers died.⁵⁷ My supposition is that the railroad employees, working in the same terrain and facing the same geoclimatic and disease environments, suffered a mortality rate in the region of 24 per cent.⁵⁸ The death rate would have varied over time and among the various ethnic groups, being lower in workers coming from tropical regions. White employees, including the Irish, who arrived in Panama with unprepared immune systems, suffered from a higher mortality rate, probably in the region of 28 per cent, rising to 33 per cent for those that arrived on the *Ben Nevis*.⁵⁹ If these tentative estimates are close to the truth, just over 1,000 Irish workers died in Panama or shortly after leaving it between 1850 and 1855.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Gorgas, *Sanitation in Panama*, 149, 157, 283.

⁵⁸ Pyne, *Panama Railroad*, 187-196.

⁵⁹ John Brien, a *Ben Nevis* emigrant who returned to Cork, claimed that most of his companions had died, though this was clearly an exaggeration. *Freeman's Journal*, 16 September 1854.

⁶⁰ See Pyne, *Panama Railroad*, Appendix 4, 297-300, for the methodology used to arrive at these figures.



Railroad through the Panama Jungle

The Panama Railroad, now known as the Panama Canal Railroad, was completed in 1855, and its total construction cost amounted to \$8 million. As I have demonstrated, there was significant Irish involvement in building the world's first interoceanic railroad. Irish participation in this pioneering project in the Central American tropics has until now been overlooked and forgotten. It deserves mention in the growing literature on the Irish diaspora in Latin America. The railroad still runs from coast to coast almost one hundred and seventy years after its inauguration and its continued operation is a testament to the blood, toil and sweat of almost 18,000 workers and the loss of approximately 4,000 lives.

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