



## THE JOURNEY OF CONCEPTS AND THOUGHT

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When the *SS Nevada* docked at Ellis Island on January 1, 1892, it had been twelve days since the ship left Queenstown (now Cobh) on the coast of County Cork, Ireland, having previously departed from Liverpool. It was the usual route for an emigrant ship, but there was something distinctly extraordinary about this particular journey.

The Nevada exited the soft tranquillity of Cork Harbour and entered the Atlantic Ocean on December 20, 1891. With the *City of Paris* and *Victoria* also due to spend Christmas at sea while bound for New York, and Ellis Island not yet operating as an immigrant landing station, it is very probable that those on board had no idea they would be the first to be processed at the new facility.

The first immigrant to pass through was steerage passenger Annie Moore from Cork, a rosy-cheeked girl of fifteen years, who, along with her two younger brothers, was joining her parents in New York City. The elder Moores had arrived four years previously at Castle Garden, which was neither a castle nor a garden but a squalid crime-plagued immigrant station at the southern tip of Manhattan.

To mark the occasion, an American Official presented Moore with a \$10 gold piece, a sum of money that was greater than any she had

ever previously owned. It is fitting that the first immigrant off the Nevada was an Irishwoman, as people of Celtic origin were playing an increasingly prominent role in social, economic, and political life in North America. It was a time when women, particularly young women, were entering the workforce in increasing numbers, and it would not be long until they achieved the right to vote.

Annie Moore's story is usually told in this happy-go-lucky way, but it is often forgotten that every immigrant is, by definition, an emigrant too. The song *Isle of Hope, Isle of Tears* – a staple of the Celtic Thunder repertoire – evokes the more nuanced, bittersweet reality that was no doubt felt by every emigrant setting foot on foreign soil for the first time. For them, every feeling of hope was balanced with pangs of sorrow, each enthusiastic thought compensated with melancholy. Rather than being exclusively a feel-good story, the reality of the Moores and others like them – \$10 coins notwithstanding – was much closer to what the Ancient Greeks called *pathos*, more heartbreak than joy. Even with the exciting prospects of her new life, the song reminds us that, for Moore, the 'isle of home is always on your mind' and one 'you'll never see again'.

The Celtic Thunder set for this tour is filled with songs that poignantly elicit those same feelings, in doing so reminding us that, in spite of the material comforts and opportunities offered by the modern world, missing home is a human constant. A rendition of Michael Bublé's *Home* reinforces almost identical emotions to those experienced by Moore, the only real difference being that in Bublé's more

contemporary ballad the narrator knows that his pathos is but a temporary glitch, not everlasting.

It is a decisive distinction that differentiates the late nineteenth century mode of thought with its early twenty-first century counterpart. While *Isle of Hope, Isle of Tears* is in many ways a prototypical *Home*, its heart ways heavier owing to the fact that the world was a far larger, less accessible place than it is today.

What is so captivating about this collection of songs, however, is that it does not reference bygone days just for its own sake, but rather it sets down a vision of the past – our past – that has the potential to be hugely relevant, even helpful, to how we live our lives today. Tacitly or otherwise, what one sees and hears is all influenced by something that came before.

All art is like this. Taking only songwriting, there are millions upon millions of songs and probably billions upon billions of lines. Encased in all these are trillions and trillions of ideas and concepts. To top it all off, there are quadrillions of phrases and words, in countless languages, used to express those ideas. We pull material from the same well, but the real excitement comes from those moments in time when we discover the potential of building our own well. And yet it is still a well. It is the paradox of originality.

Some artists wear their inspiration squarely on their sleeve while others are more esoteric, but success comes from the humility of

recognizing that creativity is far closer to innovation than it is to invention. Michael Bublé did not inaugurate the idea of writing a ballad on the subject of missing home, nor did he discover a new musical note never heard before, but ultimately something original and poignant was composed.

The chef creates a delicious new dish out of traditional ingredients. The painter strokes her brush in way that resembles the work of somebody she admires. The metalsmith makes a new type of weapon that is stronger than any other, even though he is using the same metals he has always used. Allusions are made, and creativity forever invents itself. The great American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson put it best when he wrote, "Only an inventor knows how to borrow, and every man is or should be an inventor."

What Celtic Thunder offers in this regard is exceptionally rich. Not only are allusions made between songs written in different ages – as in the case of *Isle of Hope, Isle of Tears* and *Home* – but the performance itself pulls from a profusion of wells while also building its own. In that sense, it fulfills Emerson's challenge and more. It is personal and universal, momentary and perpetual, intellectually challenging yet thoroughly accessible. Behind tales of material voyages such as that of Annie Moore, it further reveals a voyage of the mind and of art – the journey of concepts and thought, commodities that belong to the commons of humanity across every epoch. More than anything, it is a richness that belongs to you as much as anybody else.