Throughout the nineteenth century, Irish people had been leaving their homes in search of work and a better standard of living in England, Australia and America. But in the 1850s, Irish families left in their thousands, fleeing the wretched conditions of post-famine Ireland. Most of these made their way across the Atlantic in overcrowded vessels which came to be known as the ‘coffin-ships’ because of the numbers who died on them. With Eily engaged to be married and Michael in relatively secure employment, Peggy O’Driscoll, now thirteen, seized the opportunity to leave Castletaggart. Arriving in Boston after a harrowing journey, Peggy finds work as a domestic servant. Homesick and lonely, over-worked and poorly paid, life is still difficult, but as she settles in and makes friends her natural optimism re-asserts itself; Peggy is, after all, ‘a born survivor’.

Fortunata was ‘the finest meal she had eaten since leaving Ireland’ (p.132), she continued to support her through her illness. She also realised that in Mrs Madden she had received some schooling and attended classes in English and French, and was taught to dance a donkey on it’ (p.88).

How did this compare with the education provided by Roxanne and her peers (p.114)?

Feasts and festivals in the past: Thanksgiving is usually celebrated on a Thursday in November, traditionally guests wear simple, plain clothes in honour of their pilgrim ancestors. For Peggy, the holiday was a chance to sample ‘strange tastes and new things’ and it was ‘the finest meal she had eaten since leaving Castletaggart’ (p.172). Compare Peggy’s feelings of being ‘at home’ with those of the first celebrants of Thanksgiving.

Creative: ‘She looked around at the six eager faces, all wondering what lay ahead of them’ (p.80). We are told something of Sarah’s life in Boston, write the stories of the other four girls. Follow them from Mrs Halligan’s lodging-house and describe their first year.

Four women in America found opportunities to improve their situation. The men found work as labourers on the building sites and railways (pp.84–85) and the women were usually employed either as domestic servants or in clothing factories (pp.132–133). Those who found work saved their money and sent some of it home to Ireland (p.171) and this money was often used to send other family members to America. Find out about famous American men and women with ‘roots’ in Ireland and record their achievements. Visit the Ulster-American Folk Park near Omagh (Tel: 048 82256330) and experience life of that time in the New World.

Creative: ‘Other fish to fry’ (p.131), ‘life in the old dog yet’ (p.69), ‘butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth’ (p.105), ‘you could dance a donkey on it’ (p.88).

Discussion: The landlady in the Queenstown lodging-house was ‘surly’ and only reluctantly agreed to provide porridge in the morning ‘for a small extra contribution’ (p.43). The house was filthy and the over-cooked food of poor quality, yet she gave the Molloys good advice for which they were later grateful. Discuss the feelings of this landlady. Was she sad! Envious?

Discussion: On Grosse Isle, in the Gulf of St Lawrence, is a monument to those who, flying from pestilence and famine in Ireland in the year 1847, found in America but a grave. Discuss how the conditions on board the Fortunata contributed to the number of dead. Consider the treatment received on first landing: Did the emigrants benefit from proper facilities?

Discussion: Peggy often read the biblical story of Noah and the Ark during her forty-day journey to America. Read the story in Genesis and say why she might have enjoyed it.

Discussion: Peggy is known for her fondness for wildflowers (see Under the Hawthorn Tree, pp.24, 137) and we see her gathering flowers just before she leaves Ireland (pp.34–35) and again on a free day in Boston (p.122). What might be the significance of these colourful flowers for Peggy?

Discussion: On the eve of her departure, Nano gave Lena’s Bible to Peggy. Peggy ‘realised that it was more than just a Bible ... It was her history – the keeping of a tradition’ (p.33). How significant was this gift and what might it have meant to Peggy in future years? What might be an appropriate gift to an emigrating family in 2010?

Creative: ‘She looked around at the six eager faces, all wondering what lay ahead of them’ (p.80). We are told something of Sarah’s life in Boston, write the stories of the other four girls. Follow them from Mrs Halligan’s lodging-house and describe their first year.