

# Irish Independent

## TV docudrama depicts misery of our desperate Famine refugees

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A HARROWING docudrama detailing how thousands of people fleeing the Famine completely overwhelmed a city in Canada will reach our screens next year.

'Summer of Sorrow' focuses on six months in 1847 when the population of Toronto trebled under a deluge of 38,000 sick, weak and desperate Irish refugees.

A major archaeological dig currently under way in Toronto is helping to shed more light on the refugees' fate, uncovering remains of the famine hospital where over a thousand people died.

Footage of the dig will help tie together the docudrama, which hopes to put names and faces to some of those who died.

"The famine and what surrounded it is obviously well-known in Ireland but what's new about this documentary is the discovery of the remains of the hospital in downtown Toronto where hundreds died after arrival," producer Craig Thompson said yesterday.

"Between May and October of 1847, 38,000 immigrants arrived to a town which had a population of just 20,000.

"That's over 1,000 people a week and the place was overwhelmed. The quarantine centre couldn't cope with the sick as they came off the boats so they were given a cursory wash down and sent on to this tiny, tiny hospital.

"At least 1,100 died, the place couldn't cope. It might have been many more that died, we don't know."

It is estimated that 100,000 migrants embarked for Canada in 1847, with officials in Canada grossly underestimating the problem.

The migrants sailed on reconditioned cargo ships on voyages lasting six to eight weeks, during which hatches would often have been closed during bouts of rough North Atlantic weather.

"Cooking times were restricted. If you couldn't cook above decks you ate it raw, so diarrhoea was common, as was 'ship's fever', or typhus, so it was pretty miserable," University of Toronto historian Mark McGowan said.

It is thought that a further 2,000 immigrants died in the area immediately around Toronto in the same six months.

Now, a decision by the Toronto International Film Festival to build a new centre has given archaeologists a rare chance to dig for remains of the old General Hospital, and given Mr Thompson a hook for his two-part series.

"We will be shooting in Ireland later this year," he said.

The two one-hour dramas, which are being made through Mr Thompson's Ballinaram Productions and the Irish Tile Films, are expected to be shown on RTE television next year.

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