The Coffin Ships

by Kevin Haman

In the 1830s, 40s and 50s Limerick sometimes looked like a thriving tourist centre, though the people who created that illusion had no money to spend. Large numbers of strangers, burdened with their personal belongings, were to be seen here and there in the city, but especially around the quays. They were mostly country folk waiting for a ship to take them away to the land of hope across the ocean, where, according to legend, a new and better life awaited them. Such hope eased the tension of so radical an upset in the regulation of their daily lives, and may have helped to prepare them for the great adventure, with its long and dangerous voyage ahead.

Intending passengers always had to wait. It was only on very rare occasions that passages could be arranged on the day of sailing. The general movement of ships was governed by tides and weather, and the time required for fitting out.

The following shipping advertisement which appeared in the Limerick Chronicle in June, 1842, is typical of the kind of notices that emigrants had to look out for:

Emigration to America
Notice to Emigrants

The splendid British built ship, "Watchful", has arrived, and will be dispatched without delay for Quebec. As no other opportunity will offer until late in the year, persons disposed to emigrate at this favourable season should not lose the present conveyance. She is a splendid new British built oak ship, with great accommodation. Most of the passengers being already engaged, a few more only can be taken, so that no time should be lost in securing berths.

Francis Spaight.
At his office, Henry Street

During the waiting period, intending passengers had to seek accommodation in cheap lodging-houses, of which the city abounded at the time. The price of a bed was sixpence and sometimes less. The condition of most of these beds, complete with livestock, can best be imagined.

We have all heard of the mass emigration to the United States and Canada in those trying times, but we have ever contemplated the horrors of the voyages in the 'coffin' ships? Under normal conditions a voyage to America during that period was an unpleasant and hazardous adventure (the time taken to cross the ocean averaged ten weeks) but sometimes adverse weather conditions extended this time. But during the Great Famine and the following years shipowners and shipping-agents were on a bonanza, and some were not too particular about overcrowding or providing adequate food. Thousands of impoverished and frightened people crowded into the sea ports in the hope of getting away from the hunger and the cruelty of landlordism.

Though sixty miles from the sea, Limerick was one of the chief outlets for wheat, oats and barley being exported to England - food that would have kept all the emigrants at home! It has been calculated that one-third of the country's grain exports was shipped from Limerick at a time when tens of thousands were dying of hunger.

From the many contemporary accounts of the appalling conditions on board the coffin ships we find that most of them were overcrowded. A space of six feet by six feet was allowed by law to four adult steerage passengers. In this small space four bunks, with a passage in between, were fastened to the bulkhead. Headroom would allow only persons of less than average stature to stand upright in the steerage area below decks; those of average height developed a stoop if they were lucky to complete the voyage and those over six feet could never even stretch their limbs while aboard. Thomas Gallagher, in his splendid work, Paddy's Lament: Prelude to Hatred, tells us that "Mattresses were not supplied by the ship, so each steerage passenger had to bring one aboard or sleep on the raw wood of the berth itself. Hair mattresses, being harder than most, were not recommended, because the person sleeping on one could too easily fall off during stormy weather. Feather mattresses, on the other hand, although light and receptive to the weight and contours of a person's body, became worthless once wet - a condition almost impossible to avoid when heavy seas splashed down into steerage from the main deck above. The mattress considered most serviceable for the voyage was one made of coarse ticking and packed with straw. It was the cheapest and could be thrown away at quarantine by all those whose 'nice habits' would preclude their wanting to use ashore a bed used in the steerage at sea".

Ellen Davis, a very old resident of St. Mary's parish, told Rev. Fr. Moloney, in 1946, that her mother told her of several families waiting around Arthur's Quay for days, with all the belongings they could carry, including mattresses.

There was absolutely no privacy on
board. All were crowded together, with little or no chance of movement without pushing others out of the way. Even bodily needs had to be met in community. Again I quote Thomas Gallagher:

Women and girls had to undress and sleep without any assurance that decency would be respected. Single men were complete and uninterrupted communication with the passengers, including single women, who, being Roman Catholic and from a country where illegitimacy was virtually unknown, were virgins. I have known cases where girls had to sit up all night on their boxes in the steerage, said one eye witness, 'because they could not think of going to bed with a strange man'. Most parents kept their single daughters in their berths with them, sleeping with them if necessary, rather than exposing them to the dangers of bunks so inadequately divided. Some young girls never before expected the rudiments of sex became hysterical when caressed in the middle of the night by men who did not have to reach far to touch them. The girls often ran screaming from bed, racing and tripping through the crazy aisles to some other part of the ship, where they found themselves within arm's reach of other men.

It can be safely said that all the concerns of privacy and sexual encounters were as nothing compared with the rigours and horrors of being incessantly tossed about on a tempestuous sea, the illness and death of passengers, and the throwing of bodies overboard.

Perhaps the most appalling feature of the coffin ships was the unknown, unseen and calamitous contagion. Almost all the vessels were infected with many diseases, especially typhus and cholera. Many healthy passengers contracted fever during the voyage and found a grave at the great cemetery. Thomas Gallagher asks an emigration officer in Boston once stated.

Then there were the ships, many of them unseaworthy, that never made it to the coast. Amazingly, she was driven in the worst gale in living memory. In a short time every vestige of canvas was left the quays in great style and 440 passengers, and 150 of the remainder to make for the Shannon, but when he lost all his sails no alternative remained but to drift ashore.

The above account was written by Richard Russell, of the prominent Limerick firm of J.N. Russell and Sons, who was a guest at the home of his friend, Mr. Sykes, which was only a short distance from where the Edmond grounded.

The splendid Fast Sailing, Copper-fastened First-class BRIG, Mary and Harriett, Burton, per Register 322 Tons, JOHN SHANNON, COMMANDER, T H I S fine Vessel is now in Port, and will positively Sail about the above-mentioned period. Emigrants would lose no time in securing their Berths, a great many having already engaged. The MARY and HARRIETT has fine height between Decks, is commanded by a Master well acquainted in the Trade, and is admirably adapted for the conveyance of Passengers. She will be fitted up in a manner to ensure comfort and accommodation, and abundantly supplied with Fuel and Water, together with Flour and Oatmeal, agreeable to Act of Parliament. Application to the Captain on Board, or to JOHN SEIDLEY, Ship and Emigration Agent, Grafton Street, Limerick, or to any of the undermentioned:-

George Taylor, Kilm诊治 Joseph J. Bromnell, Gas Works, Nenagh; McNamara and Son, Ennis. March 24.
coming in, every soul on board would have been saved. Fifty coffins have been ordered from Kilrush, and the ship is a total loss.

The carpenter, who saved many lives, might also have saved his own if he had not gone below in an effort to retrieve his sea-chest just as the vessel parted in the middle.

But the unsung heroes of the drama were the women who died with their children. Among the list of those who perished are Nellie Hogan and her three children; Nancy Hurley and her three children, all from Meelick, and Mary Carmody and child, from Limerick. The list contains the names of people from all over Counties Limerick and Clare.

In the days after the tragedy old people were saying it was the worst sea disaster out of Limerick since the loss of the Intrinsic in 1836, though the tragedy of the Astrea must have been worse still. She went down in the ice off Halifax in June, 1834. Maurice Lenihan tells us that this fine vessel left Limerick for Quebec, with 240 emigrants aboard, all of whom perished. No doubt most of these victims, and the victims of the Intrinsic, were fleeing the dreadful cholera epidemic that decimated the population of Limerick in the eighteen thirties.

As the demand for passages grew, the emigrants were often the unsuspecting victims of heartless and fraudulent emigration agents, ship-brokers, speculators and touts. Many of the ships in which they were forced to travel were old, inadequate and totally unsuitable for the numbers carried. In the overcrowded conditions, fever and dysentery were rampant, and there was a lack of food and water. An official report, 'Papers Relative to Emigration', had this to say:

The ships used were of the cheapest and worst kind. However, more responsible landlords were concerned by alarming reports of the dreadful deprivations and terrible suffering endured by the emigrants during the voyages, which took ten to twelve weeks, and indeed after their arrival. One such landlord, Sir Stephen de Vere of Limerick, travelled steerage on an emigrant ship in order 'that he might speak as a witness respecting the sufferings of emigrants'. He reported that 'hundreds of poor people, men, women, and children of all ages, were huddled together without light, without air, wallowing in filth and breathing a foetid atmosphere, sick in body, dispirited in heart; fever patients lying in sleeping places so narrow as almost to deny a change of position - their agonized ravings disturbing those around them, living without food or medicine, dying without spiritual consolation and buried in the deep without the rites of the Church'.

In the book, Population and Emigration, P.A.M. Taylor gives an overview of the scale and pattern of emigration from British ports during this period:

The 1820s saw very small numbers, in the 1830s much larger ones; but the first great bulge occurred with the Irish famine of the next decade; two and a half million people emigrated in eight years. A decline set in during the later 1850s; there was some revival in the 1860s; and a new peak was reached in the years immediately either side of 1870. The biggest numbers of all went during the 1880s, and the decline that followed lasted until the century's end. As to the emigrants' origins, Ulster was very prominent in the early decades, just as it had been in the eighteenth century. Catholic Ireland dominated the century's middle years. From about 1870, England and Scotland were consistently in the lead. As for destinations, British North America was especially prominent in the 1830s, and led the United States, by a narrow margin, for the period 1815-40 as a whole. With the Famine, however, the United States went far ahead, and thereafter the proportion between it and Canada was likely to be five, or even as high as nine, to one. The Australian colonies took many emigrants in the very early 1840s, in the 1850s after the gold rush, and again in the early 1860s. Emigration, too, underwent changes in technology and organisation. It saw growing specialisation of passenger vessels - on the North Atlantic, principally American vessels - in the 1850s; growing concentration at Liverpool and New York; then, in the 1860s, the triumph of steam on the North Atlantic, and on other oceans in the next quarter-century.

The Colonial Land and Emigration Commission was set up in 1840 in an effort to regulate the flow of emigrants and to provide accurate information about prospects in the colonies and especially about colonial land. The commissioners organised large-scale emigration to Australia and other colonies, collected information for parliament and gave evidence before select committees; while most of the emigration can be attributed to decisions taken by individuals and families, the commissioners sought to pass on information to these emigrants, as well as trying to regulate conditions at the ports and promoting safety and welfare on the high seas. Though the commissioners were not successful in enforcing all of
their regulations, under their general supervision, six and a half million emigrants embarked at British ports, most of them bound for the United States. But a million and a half went to Canada and two-thirds of a million to Australia. P.A.M. Taylor has written:

As applicants appeared, the Commissioners began to charter ships. Owners had to agree to certain standards of construction, ventilation, manning and vessel's outfit. They received an advance sum for every emigrant landed alive, and half for any who had died, once it had been established by investigation in the colony that all provisions of the charter-party had been complied with. Emigrants had to pay their fare to the port, equip themselves with a prescribed outfit of clothes, and produce birth and marriage certificates, proof of vaccination, and testimonials from householders, doctors, magistrates or clergymen. Each applicant had to be supported by two householders (neither of whom was to be a publican); a doctor was to certify health and vaccination; and the magistrate or clergyman was to assure that the regulations had been established by investigation in the colony that all provisions of the charter-party had been complied with.

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P.A.M. Taylor gives details of the exploitation and abuses suffered by emigrants on land and sea:

Governor Fitzroy's despatch of 31 October, 1848, for example, enclosed Agent Merewether's report from Sydney on 'Subraon', which had carried inadequate food and medical comforts, whose master had sold liquor from his private store and at high prices and had had a girl 'consistently in his cabin', whose seamen had mingled freely with emigrant women, and whose Surgeon, though innocent of charges entered against him in the ship's log, had been guilty of conniving at officers' misconduct and had falsified his own medical journal. Earl Grey's reply enclosed the Commissioners' regrets about the Surgeon, and an explanation about selecting the owners. The report sanctioned the payment of a reduced gratuity to him and the refusal of all gratuity to the ship's officers. A later report censured the shipowners for their choice of officers, and reduced the passage-money to be paid to them. Later still, the Commissioners can be found rejecting the owners' protests. The Commissioners did not, however, conceal the difficulty of enforcement. Their Reports regularly listed prosecutions, and the sums recovered out of court by the Emigration Officers. The Select Committees of 1851 and 1854 revealed how ignorant people were exploited by runners and keepers of lodging-houses, who overcharged for lodging and food; how they were bereft indiscriminately on board ship; how difficult they found it to cook their food; how debilitated they became through seasickness; and how exploitation was likely to be repeated as soon as they landed at New York. It was indeed difficult to protect emigrants effectively. The Orders in Council on the conduct of the voyage were mere gestures. There could never have been enough men to permit the appointment of Surgeon-Superintendents on the North Atlantic, men could not be found to serve even as simple ship's doctors. If fraud or violence occurred at a British port, or in a vessel driven back by weather, then indeed prosecution was possible, with the Emigration Officers prosecuting, or acting as expert witnesses. For misdeeds on the high seas there was usually no redress. It was reckoned impossible to proceed under British law, for such offences, against the American vessels which made up four-fifths of the carriers of emigrants across the Atlantic in the 1850s; and unfortunately American courts were far from zealous in enforcing their own law. When, with the Civil War, British ships almost overnight came to carry half the traffic, British courts had jurisdiction beyond dispute; but the witnesses were all on the wrong side of the ocean.

Most of our evidence demonstrates that the Commissioners took their duties very seriously, though their efforts did not always meet with success. In the greatest crisis they faced, however, they seem to have been overwhelmed by events, to have been guilty of some degree of lethargy before and of some degree of complacency after it. The point can be proved by setting against the Commissioners' pronouncements on the Irish Famine emigration the detailed reports of Buchanan from Quebec. Their Seventh Report, dealing with 1846, admitted the existence of distress in Ireland; but it insisted that government regulation must remain limited, if the emigration of poor people was not to be deterred.

Whatever else that may be said about the famine and emigration, it can most certainly be said that government regulation did remain limited and that the emigration of poor people was not deterred during and after the 'distress' in Ireland. In the midst of all this human misery, exploitation and horror there were some heroic acts of bravery, honesty and kindness, most long since forgotten. One local man, deeply involved in the terrible trade of the transportation of the emigrants, deserves to be remembered. Captain Daniel O'Gorman was one of Francis Spaight's most renowned sea captains, and worked right through the famine period in bringing emigrants to Canada and the United States. He was highly spoken of in all circles as a humanitarian, always placing the welfare of his passengers before all other things. As a sailor, he was universally esteemed for his abilities as a seaman that always meet with success. In the greatest crisis they faced, however, they seem to have been overwhelmed by events, to have been guilty of some degree of lethargy before and of some degree of complacency after it. The point can be proved by setting against the Commissioners' pronouncements on the Irish Famine emigration the detailed reports of Buchanan from Quebec. Their Seventh Report, dealing with 1846, admitted the existence of distress in Ireland; but it insisted that government regulation must remain limited, if the emigration of poor people was not to be deterred.

According to the death notice which appeared in The Limerick Chronicle, in July, 1870, no less than ten thousand emigrated in the ships under his control, and such was the confidence reposed by emigrants on his abilities as a seaman that they always crowded on his vessel in preference to others lying at the quay in St. Munchin's churchyard. His grave memorial, with a real cast-iron anchor protruding from the top of the tombstone, was one of the most interesting features of the churchyard for more than 120 years, until it was removed during repairs to a retaining wall behind the grave, some years ago. The monument is known as the 'anchor tomb' and it had a special attraction for visitors to the cemetery.