

# The Coffin Ships

by Kevin Hannan

**I**n 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

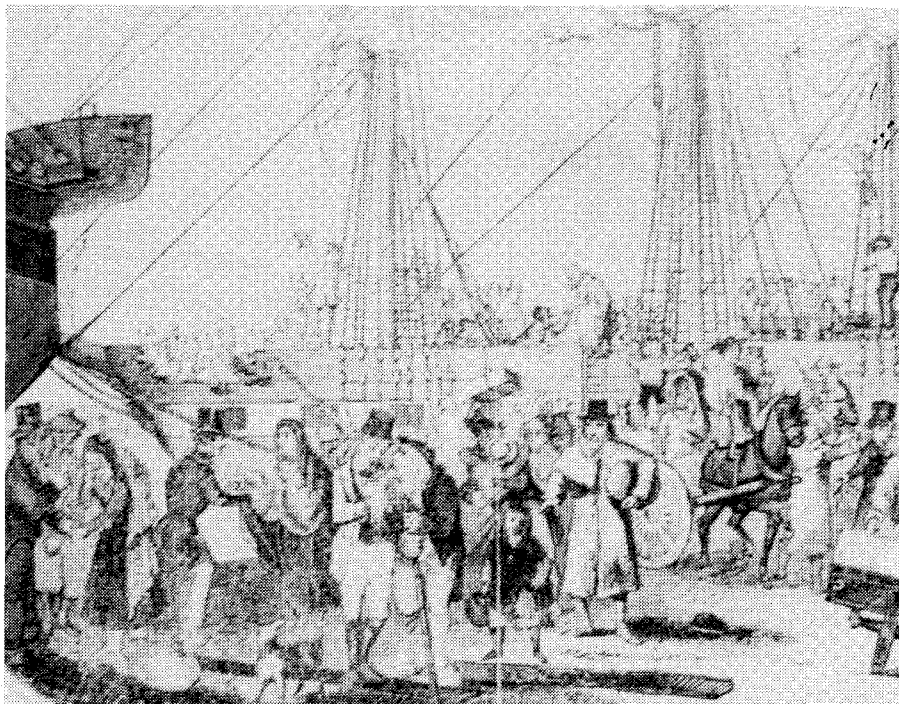
*The splendid British built ship, "Watchful", has arrived, and will be dispatched without delay for Quebec. As no other opportunity will offer until late in the year, persons disposed to emigrate at this favourable season should not lose the present conveyance. She is a splendid new British built oak 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. According to Griffith's Valuations (1854), there were hundreds of lodging-houses in the old parts of the city. These were mainly patronised by beggars and ballad singers. The numbers of emigrants fleeing the cholera epidemics of the 1830s and during and after the Great Famine proved an unexpected bonanza for the lodging-house keepers.

In many cases the fares of the rural



Irish emigrants landing at Boston. Engraving in *Gleason's Pictorial*, early 1850s.

travellers were paid by the landlords, some for purely humanitarian reasons, and others to improve the quality of their estates, but in most cases the fares were realised through the sale of their possessions.

We have all heard of the mass emigration to the United States and Canada in those trying times, but have we 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 ship-owners 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 emigrants. Paradoxically, it was also 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 had 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 exposed to even 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 bottom of the Atlantic. Others, who barely made the journey, staggered or were carried ashore at the ports of embarkation, to find a grave in the land where they had such hope of starting a new life. An emigration officer in Boston once stated that if headstones could be erected on the ocean on the route of the emigrant ships from Ireland the sea would look like one great cemetery. Thomas Gallagher asks us to consider a few "of these British ships making the crossing in 1847: the brig *Larch*, from Sligo, buried at sea 108 of its 440 passengers, and 150 of the remainder were seriously ill when she reached the quarantine station; the *Lord Ashbourne* from Liverpool, with 475 passengers, buried 107 at sea, and 60 were still sick with fever and dysentery on arrival at Grosse Isle; the *Verginius*, with 596 aboard, when she set sail, buried 158 during the passage and arrived with 186 more very sick and the remainder so feeble and tottering they could hardly disembark under their own power; the *Sir Henry Pottinger*, from Cork, reported 106 deaths and 112 still sick out of 399



### FOR QUEBEC,

To Sail on or about the 10th of APRIL instant,  
Wind and Weather permitting,  
The splendid Fast Sailing, Copper-fastened First-class  
BRIG,

### Mary and Harriett,

Burthen per Register 322 Tons,  
JOHN SHAXSON, COMMANDER.

THIS fine Vessel is now in Port, and will positively Sail about the above-mentioned period. Emigrants should lose no time in securing their Berths, a great many having been 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 SIDLEY,  
Ship and Emigration Agent, Henry Street,  
Limerick, or to any of the undermentioned:-  
George Taylor, Kilrush; Joseph J. Brommell,  
Gas Works, Nenagh; McNamara and Son, Ennis.  
March 24.

**Limerick Chronicle advertisement,  
March, 1847.**

passengers". It can be safely assumed that these dreadful statistics are a fair criteria for all the coffin ships.

Then there were the ships, many of them unseaworthy, that never made it to the other side. Among these was the barque, *Edmond*. In November, 1850, an excited crowd boarded this fine vessel at the quays; they had been waiting around for ten or twelve days, and when aboard they must have felt they had made the first major step in their great journey. For 95 of the 200 hopeful passengers it was a step towards their final dissolution. The *Edmond*, left the quays in great style and had a pleasant run to the open Atlantic. However, when only about thirty miles outside Loop Head it encountered very rough weather which quickly developed into the worst gale in living memory. In a short time every vestige of canvas was torn from the masts and she was left drifting helplessly with bare poles towards the coast. Amazingly, she was driven in through the narrow opening of Kilkee Bay, and had she drifted straight towards the beach everyone on board might have been saved, but she was driven on to the cruel rocks at what is now Edmond Point. During this terrible ordeal, the crew acted heroically, especially the captain, whose only concern was the safety of the helpless passengers.

*A large, flat stone between the shore and the doomed vessel presented itself as a possible stepping-stone to safety. According to an eye-witness, the captain, a noble fellow, ordered the weather rigging of the foremast to be cut. By this move the passengers and crew were afforded some assistance to land on the rock. All the time gigantic seas broke over the rocks. But for the intrepidity and self-devotion of two of the coastguards, and an extra assistant, not one half of those*

*saved could ever have got to the rock. I and my servant gave assistance. The seas repeatedly dashed us down and it was with difficulty we saved ourselves. The brave coastguards were James McCarthy, commissioned boatman; Timothy Hannigan, boatman, and Patrick Shannon, extra assistant.*

*By the hands of these fine fellows, a hundred souls were rescued. When the tide rose it was impossible to land any more on the rock. In a short time the vessel broke up and parted amidships. Several tried then to get on the rock, but were washed off at once. The remainder hung on to the afterpart of the wreck, in which there could not be more than 50 souls; this part was torn by the fury of the sea and drifted into the strand.*

*It was at this moment the gallant Captain and his mate, who so ably stood by their passengers and who could not be prevailed on to desert them, were washed off the poop and, wonderful to say, got to land by the beach. Three other passengers were also equally fortunate. All was over now and the melancholy duty only remained of collecting the bodies of the poor victims.*

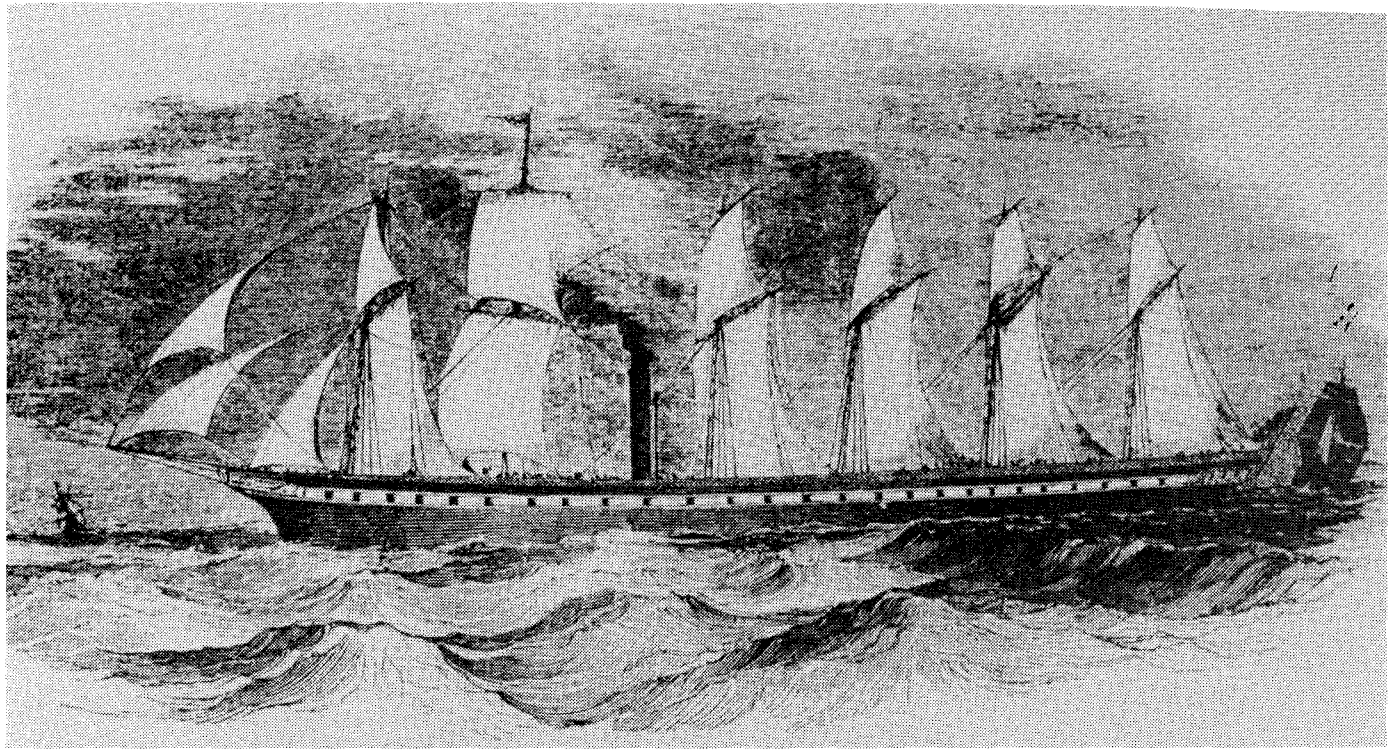
*From all I can recollect there was no fault to be laid at the Captain's charge. He had every stitch of canvas blown away in the storm, so he could only lay to or drift under bare poles. He thought to have made for the Shannon, but when he lost all his sails no alternative remained but to drift ashore.*

*Dr. Griffin, Mr. R. Studdert and Mr. O'Donnell (Coroner) were unceasing in their attention and kindness to the passengers, whom they took into their homes. I had over 40 of them in my house. The bay is covered with fragments of the wreck.*

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.

Captain G.H. Fitzgerald, Government Emigration Officer, wrote the following account:

*From the Captain, John Wilson, I learned that the ship, after being 30 miles at sea, the wind headed and blew a terrific gale, which carried away all the ship's canvas and was driven into Kilkee Bay without any damage until it struck on the rocks outside Syke's Lodge at 11.30 o'clock that night. She became a total wreck at 3 o'clock next morning. Out of 216 souls, 120 are saved, and, as far as we can at present ascertain, 96 are lost; 47 dead bodies have been washed in. The only member of the crew lost was the carpenter. The majority of the passengers lost were women and children. It is a miracle how the ship got into the bay, the only ship that was ever seen there, the entrance being very narrow and at all times dangerous. Yet, had the tide been on the ebb instead of*



The Great Britain steam ship. "British ships almost overnight came to carry half the traffic".

*coming in, every soul on board would have been saved. Fifty coffins have been ordered from Kiltrush, 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 victualling. They received an agreed 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 authenticate the other signatures. The Commissioners provided bedding and utensils, which well-behaved passengers were allowed to keep at disembarkation. Men were advised to take tools. Each adult's baggage could occupy twenty cubic feet and weigh up to half a ton. The voyage was not left to the management of master and officers alone. A Surgeon-Superintendent was engaged, who was given one-way cabin passage, ample baggage space, and a seat at the captain's table, in return for his exacting duties. He worked under a detailed code of rules, covering medical inspection and mustering before sailing, cleanliness and order at sea, education and religious services, and considerable supervision of disembarkation. He was required to keep a general journal and a medical journal. He acted as ship's doctor, maintained discipline among emigrants, but at the same time protected them against ill-treatment or neglect. On arrival, he could expect a gratuity of ten shillings per emigrant on his first or second voyage, and up to sixteen shillings for seventh and later voyages. This in itself points to what became an important feature of the Commissioners' policy, the building up of an experienced corps of Surgeons. To select them was far from easy; and the Report of 1850 discusses the rival merits of naval surgeons, accustomed to imposing discipline, and of country doctors, closer to the working class and far more accustomed to handling the leading medical problems of an emigrant voyage, children's diseases and births. In 1856-57, seventy-one men were employed, only one lacking previous experience and twenty with more than three previous voyages. In 1869, the last main year of their emigration operations, the Commissioners reported that*

*eighteen of their twenty-one Surgeons had made from ten to twenty voyages. Payments of the Surgeon's gratuity, and of those to master and senior officers (a small sum per head of all landed alive), depended upon inspection at the voyage's end.*

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 selection problems. Their 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 and tradesmen; how they were berthed 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 from Britain 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 the event and 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 whether on the shores of the west of Ireland or the Americas. Unlike many other sea captains, he insisted on the thorough cleansing of his vessel after each trip; this precaution must have saved many lives. He never took on board more passengers than could be comfortably accommodated, and always ensured an adequate supply of food and water.

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. He was buried 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 memorial was known as the 'anchor tomb' and it had a special attraction for visitors to the cemetery.