

Emigrants as ballast:

Francis Spaight (1790-1861), ship-owner, magistrate and merchant of Limerick played a part in this great exodus. His ancestors had migrated from Woolwich, Kent in the mid 17th century and settled in Clare where one Thomas Spaight is recorded as acted as steward for the Earl of Thomand estates. William Spaight, father of Francis, was a Captain in the 65th Regiment of the British Army and served at Bunker Hill during the American War of Independence and dies in 1801 at his seat at Corbally in Clare. At the age of 22 years, Francis married Agnes, daughter of Lieut. James Patterson RN who established a shipping company partnership with his son-in-law in 1812. They introduced the first paddle-steamer ferry "Lady of the Shannon" on the Lower Shannon in 1817, just one year after the first steamboat ferry was inaugurated across the Irish Sea. Francis Spaight moved to Limerick and quickly became a leading merchant and shipowner. In the late 1820s he entered the emigration trade. His social contacts with the Protestant Ascendancy landlords provided him with an opportunity to further his interests. The landlords wanted to clear their overcrowded estates of paupers who were becoming unable to pay the "rack" rents on their tiny holdings. The landlords saw forced emigration as the "solution". Francis Spaight saw profit. In a celebrated and much quoted statement, he gave evidence, both as landlord and shipper to the Select Committee on Emigration in 1847: He was asked if emigration was "a profitable" sideline for his ships. Spaight replied:- "Most certainly, because our ships would otherwise go out [to Canada] in ballast; and the result is that whatever we get in the way of passengers is so much gain to us". As the new owner of the 4,500 acre estate at Derry Castle, near Killaloe, he had improving its profitability by evictions and bluntly told the Committee that "I have got rid of all the paupers from the Derry Estate". In 1850, as a Magistrate, he complained openly in Court of the nuisance of country paupers who were cluttering the streets of Limerick. The Limerick Chronicle noted approvingly that he was the "most extensive shipowner in the South of Ireland, and in whose vessels more emigrants have sailed than from any other port in Ireland". And if Francis Spaight had little compassion for the plight of evicted Papist paupers; he had none whatsoever for those "do-gooders" of his own Protestant class. In 1846, as trustee of the Limerick Philosophical Society at Havergal Hall, he bankrupted the Society into oblivion; evicted the intellectuals and seized their assets. The chastened ex members reformed themselves in 1853 into the Limerick Athenaeum. His second son, James Spaight (1818-1892), was more politically minded and became a subscriber and council member and President of the Athenaeum in 1869. He was Mayor of the city in 1856, 1877 and 1883 and was briefly MP for the city in 1858. He finally conceded all hopes of re-election to Parliament in 1871 by yielding to the popular Isaac Butt. In 1887, he was elevated to a knighthood by Queen Victoria to become Sir James Spaight.