

THE DEATH OF A CABIN-BOY

Few Limerick people today will have heard of Patrick O'Brien. His name has not entered any of our major works of local history. There is not even a plaque or stone to his memory.

Patrick O'Brien had a short life. He died, aged 15 years on the 18th December, 1835. His life ended in the most appalling and terrifying of circumstances.

As a boy labourer Patrick O'Brien had worked at the local docks stacking timber. When the Limerick ship, "The Francis Spaight", sailed for St. John's, New Brunswick, on the 25th November, 1835, he signed on as a cabin-boy. The ship, which a few years earlier had taken 300 poor emigrants from Limerick to Quebec, was set to return with a cargo of timber.

The ship came to grief on the night of the 3rd December when, during a snow-storm, it was upended by strong gales, and three of the crew of eighteen were lost overboard. When dawn broke it was found that all provisions had been washed away, the fresh water fouled, and that only the cargo of timber was keeping the ship afloat.

Apart from the bottles of wine and what rain-water the crew could gather in the handkerchiefs, no food or drink remained. On the 18th December, after sixteen days of excruciating cold, hunger and thirst, the captain of the ship, Thomas Gorman, called the remaining members of the crew together.

With no sign of rescue in sight, it was decided that one of the crew should be killed to keep the rest alive. Lots were drawn, and it was found that Patrick O'Brien, a widow's son, had drawn the shortest lot. It was later suggested that the lottery had been rigged against him.

However, young O'Brien bravely bared his wrists but when the veins were cut the blood refused to flow. Eventually the cook was compelled to cut the boy's throat.

The rest of the story is equally gory. Three other crew members were similarly put to death, after two of them had become deranged, and they, too, were eaten by their shipmates.

On the 23rd December, the eleven surviving crew members were rescued by the brig "Agenora". The captain of "The Francis Spaight" was engaged in eating the liver and brains of his cabin-boy when rescued.

After their return to Limerick, the captain and crew were tried for murder and acquitted.

The ship owner, Francis Spaight, in a public appeal for the survivors and the relatives of those that had perished wrote:

"It is only necessary to state here that the surviving sufferers have arrived in Limerick in a state of abject wretchedness, and some of them are mutilated by the frost and otherwise rendered helpless, as to be unable not only to obtain bread, but to labour for it during the rest of their lives. Without food, without clothing, and without hope, unless from the present appeal, they and the families of their deceased shipmates, implore the bounty of the citizens

Francis Spaight, merchant prince, ship-owner, town councillor and magistrate, gave £10 to the fund.

Thomas Gray, in his "Elegy", wrote of "the short and simple annals of the poor". Patrick O'Brien's life was short and simple, and he was killed on Christmas week 146 years ago.

The little cabin-boy and his brutal death deserve a place in the memory of Limerick people everywhere.