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City's maritime families left high and dry by history's tides of change

RACHAEL KEALY

OVER the centuries, a number of names have become part of the fabric of Limerick city, found on street signs, quaysides and faded storefronts. They include Roche, Pery, Arthur, Barrington, and Spaight, the focus of today's feature.

Originally from England and Scotland, the Spaight family grew wealthy through marriage, military service and key connections with the aristocracy. By the late 18th century, they owned thousands of acres in counties Tipperary and Clare. These lands were worked, in the custom of the time, by tenant farmers and sharecroppers.

William Spaight was a captain and deputy quartermaster in the 65th Regiment of the British Army during the American War of Independence. He fought for the British at the Battle of Bunker Hill in the Siege of Boston, and was lucky to escape with his life during the bloody fight, which resulted in a pyrrhic victory for the Redcoats.

William and his wife Millicent Studdart, the daughter of the High Sheriff of Clare, lived on an estate

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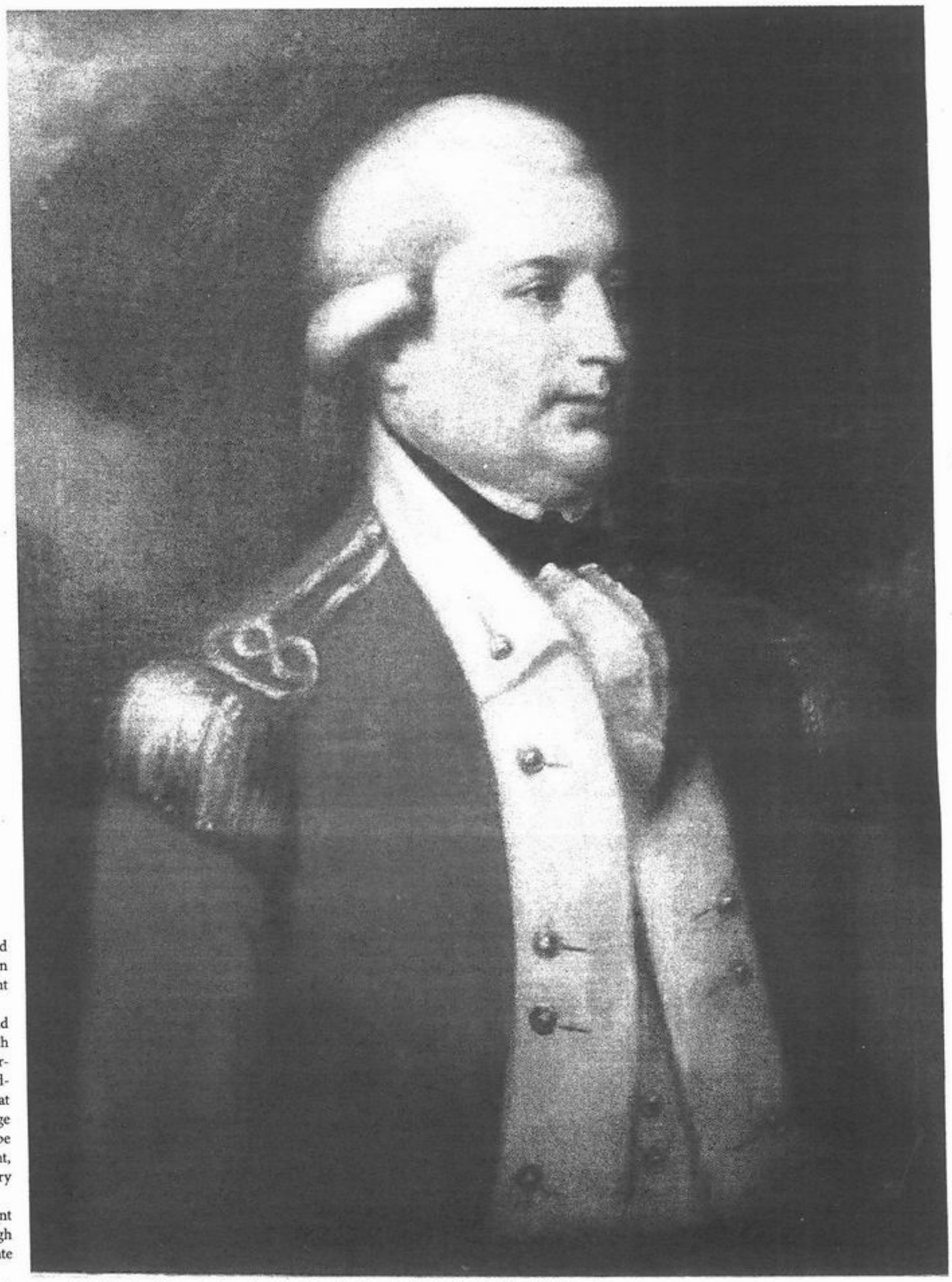

Captain William Spaight, who fought at the Battle of Bunker Hill in the US War of Independence

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in Corbally, County Clare; Francis was the youngest of their four children, born on June 24, 1790. He would go on to become a highly successful Limerick merchant, a wealthy landowner and a magistrate of the city.

Francis is remembered in part for his activity during the Great Famine, but mostly, his name is tied to one of the most infamous cases of cannibalism in Western Europe.

At the tender age of 22 years, Francis married Agnes, the daughter of a naval officer, Lieutenant James Patterson. The young couple had several children, although few survived to adulthood.

Together with his father-in-law, Francis established a shipping company in 1812, concentrating on the importation of timber. The Spaights based themselves in Limerick for this endeavor and over the following years they purchased several ships, including the Borneo, the Governor, the Thetis, the Bryan Abbs, the Jane Black and of course, the Francis Spaight.

Recorded as a 'wooden, three-masted, square-sterned vessel, 108 feet 9 inches overall, of 345 tons burden' the Francis Spaight was built in Durham, England in 1835. The ship was registered in Limerick, and named after the owner or his son and namesake, who died tragically young. Her second voyage was set for Canada, commanded by thirty-six year old Timothy Gorman, from Kilrush, County Clare. He was an experienced seaman, having been apprenticed at the age of 13, and had earned a ship's captaincy by the time he was 20.

Having disembarked her 216 passengers in Quebec, the ship was reloaded with a heavy cargo of timber from St. John's, Newfoundland. There were 18 men aboard, including four apprentices. One of those boys was Patrick (Pat) O'Brien, aged just 14.

In his book, Cannibalism and Common Law, Brian Simpson traces the fate of young Mr O'Brien: "At 3am on December 3, when running before strong winds under mizzen topsail, the ship was broached to (and) partially capsized." The survivors would spend the next 16 days in knee-deep saltwater, growing weak from starvation, thirst and freezing conditions.

Eventually they decided to sacrifice one of their own, so that the others might drink his blood in a bid to survive longer. They resorted to drawing lots to decide who was going to be the victim of this accepted - if little-used - maritime practice. Whether rigged or not, Pat O'Brien himself drew the shortest straw, and bravely accepted his fate. His crew mates first slashed his wrists, but his veins had collapsed. Eventually, as the boy struggled against the assault, they cut his throat, and the ship's cook proceeded to dismember him.

Three days later, having lost – and eaten - three more members of the crew, the 11 survivors were rescued by an American ship. When they finally made it back to Limerick, the captain and his remaining men were in poor health, owing to injuries sustained during the frozen nights at sea. Francis Spaight instigated a public appeal for his employees and their families, himself donating £10. This was the equivalent of approximately one month's salary for Captain Gorman, or more than a year's wages for apprentice Pat O'Brien.

Spaight and Son specialised in the timber trade, sending empty ships across to Canada and the United States to retrieve their valuable wooden cargo. From the late 1820s they began to carry passengers on the outward journeys. There was a marked increase in emigration around this time, as large-scale construction works in Canada and America promised good wages and a new life. The figures varied depending on the prevailing economic climate at the time, but thousands of passengers travelled from Limerick port, with a large number coming from estates in counties Clare, Tipperary and Limerick.

James Spaight, twice Mayor of Limerick who took over the shipping company in 1861.

In 1844 Francis himself purchased a significant estate of 3,000 acres, as well as a 'mansion-house and offices' to the east of Lough Derg, near Killaloe in County Tipperary. Landowners at that time faced a problem: over the generations, their lands had been sub-divided repeatedly, until they were occupied by dozens of families, who were increasingly unable to pay their rent, or even feed their children.

Derry Castle was, at that point, home to over 1,200 people. Emigration offered a solution for landowners such as Francis – he could clear the small-holdings, consolidate the land, and put the estate to better commercial use. Tenants were offered free passage and provisions - at a cost of £3.50 a head - as an inducement to leave; so many people applied for the scheme that Francis had to charter additional ships.

An advertisement in the Limerick Chronicle, dated Wednesday, March 30, 1842, announced: "Important notice to Emigrants, Francis Spaight has purchased this season a splendid new oak ship called the Jane Black. The largest vessel ever in the port of Limerick, passengers will therefore have on board this large vessel all they can desire for their comfort and accommodation."

As the Great Famine took hold, Irish men and women began fleeing in earnest. Between 1845 and 1852 over two million people left on ships bound for the United Kingdom, Canada or the United States. Many travelled from Limerick port, which was at that time as busy as Belfast and Cobh.

One of the family members who departed from the shores of the River Shannon was Thomas Fitzgerald, who carried his beloved family bible throughout the voyage. His descendent, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, would later swear his presidential oath with his hand upon that same bible.

Francis Spaight, as a leading magistrate and businessman, gave evidence in the House of Lords in July 1847, to a committee examining the ongoing famine in Ireland. His testimony was tailored for its particular audience and the language is of the time: he detailed how the failed potato crop had been: "of the greatest possible value" in bringing about emigration. This solved the problem of crowding on his Derry estate, "the most over-populated property in Great Britain". In a now infamous section of his speech, he announced that the desperate emigrants represented "clear profit" as otherwise his ships would have to sail with ballast instead.

However, beneath the bombast, a thread of altruism ran through his actions. Dr Patrick O'Connor analysed the testimony and historical context, emphasising that Mr Spaight, when offering free passage, accepted only whole families, thereby keeping parents and children together. "Landlords assisting migration invariably granted a larger food allowance," he noted, pointing out that aside from free passage, provisions, and a little starting capital, "no other pressure was used." Indeed, it wasn't necessary; most were desperate to escape the grinding poverty, constant sickness and gnawing hunger.

Francis Spaight recounted to the House of Lords that "there was a great rage for emigration" and this is borne true in the figures, which show that the demand for his scheme far outstripped available berths.

As families settled in the cities of Boston, or New York, they wrote home, urging relatives and friends to join them. Dr O'Connor illustrates this point with letters from the time: "every day is like a Christmas Day," one Tipperary man gushed, with "a prospect for plenty of work."

No doubt these words bely an aching loneliness and homesickness, but they are indicative of the sense of promise and good fortune the new world represented. Certainly, emigration helped to increase the value of the Spaight estate, but it also served to improve, and perhaps even save, the lives of hundreds of people who would otherwise have starved during the Great Famine.

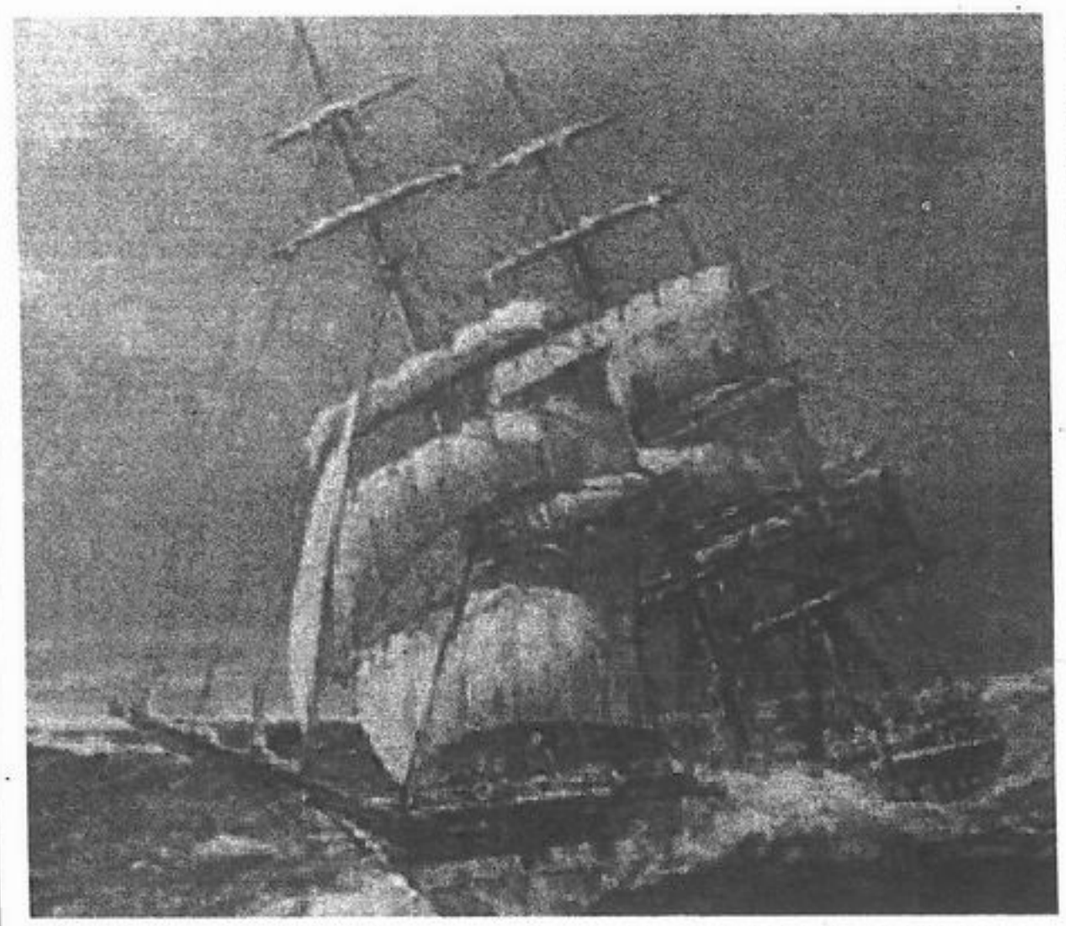
While Francis Spaight is remembered as a blunt, straight-shooting man, his second son James, was considered a much more measured speaker, with more refined sensibilities. Born in 1819, he took over the shipping company after his father's death in 1861. His older brother, Captain William Spaight, inherited the Derry Castle estate.

In 1850 James married Elizabeth Alason Eckhord, a Scotswoman from Edinburgh, and together they lived at 77 George's Street, now O'Connell Street. It was a modern home – one of the first to have electricity in Limerick – and from there they entertained a number of leading society members, including the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in 1873.

His background in international shipping brought him far-reaching connections, resulting in the title of Vice Consul for the German Empire and Russian Empire for Limerick. Demonstrating a canny eye for diversification, he also became the chairman of the Waterford and Limerick Railway.

He was twice Mayor of Limerick, and a city magistrate, like his father. He sat as head of the Chamber of Commerce for over twenty years and served as a Deputy Lieutenant of Tipperary. He also represented Limerick as an MP in the House of Commons in 1857 and 1858. However, his conservative platform later proved unpopular with local voters during the turbulent political climate of the time, in which Home Rule was a contentious issue.

He was a devout member of the Church of Ireland, but worked closely



The Ill-fated Francis Spaight, whose crew were involved in cannibalism following the ship's partial collapse on a return journey from Canada

with Catholic charities. He had little interest in which faith the needy subscribed to, saying: "Let it not be said that charity be divided by religion".

Artist Phyl Guerin has carefully studied the life of James Spaight and his maritime passions, particularly with regard to the Limerick Sailors' Home. Her research culminated in a recent exhibition in Spaight's original home at 77 O Connell Street, entitled 'A Drowned World: The Limerick Sailors' Home'. She found, during her investigations, that James Spaight had a hugely positive influence on Limerick: he tried to advance and enrich the maritime culture of the city, seeking to open a naval school, enhance international trade relations and improve the port to allow for additional, bigger ships to enter.

He, along with other civic-minded businessmen and merchants, raised the funds to construct the ornate building on O'Curry Street, which was designed to provide refuge and safe lodgings for sailors.

A plaque on the wall inside attests to his 'zeal, energy and success,' in raising subscriptions for it. It's a fitting tribute, Ms Guerin believes, for a man who "tried to advance the city" through his work and legacy.

James Spaight died in 1892, of influenza. His will – which Mr Pat Kearney very kindly shared with Limerick Life - shows that he left the bulk of his estate - valued at £941 - to his wife Elizabeth. They had no children.

The glory days of Limerick shipping were coming to a close, as the packing station moved to Cobh and the railway became an increasingly easier and cheaper method of transportation. Spaight and Son was sold in 1893 and James' widow, Elizabeth, left their home in George's Street soon after. However, their legacy lives on, as every day, ships pass by Spaight's Quay – now Mount Kennett – following a tradition of maritime trade the family championed 200 years earlier.

Like many modern men of influence, the Spaights lived complicated, sometimes contradictory lives. They were industrious and hard-working, while also enjoying social distinction. They filled ships full of emigrants, but made sure they travelled with medical care, food and money. They were conservatives opposed to Home Rule, and yet wrote letters of support for Fenian prisoners. They were tough task-masters, as well as active philanthropists. They were proud of their British establishment roots, but made Limerick their home.