

The Loss of the Schooner, *Undine*

by Tom Donoban

On the night of Sunday January 6th 1839, a violent storm blew from north-north-west and swept across Ireland, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. That night has become known as the "Night of the Big Wind," indicating a certain level of understatement. There have been many big winds hitting Ireland in the past, but no storm has left its mark on the Irish landscape or memory more so than the one on the feast day of Little Christmas that year.

The destruction on land was enormous and has been previously documented.¹ Whatever protection from the hurricane was afforded on land, there was little or none at sea. The Shannon Estuary provided a virtual funnel for the wind and accelerated its speed. Vessels sheltering in harbours were torn from their moorings and left to the mercy of the elements. In Limerick, 25 ships were driven towards Wellesley Bridge² with the effect of displacing the large cut stones and leaving one of the arches of the bridge in a dangerous state. The balustrade on the west side was dismantled, with the cut stone pillars removed and some of them broken in pieces.³

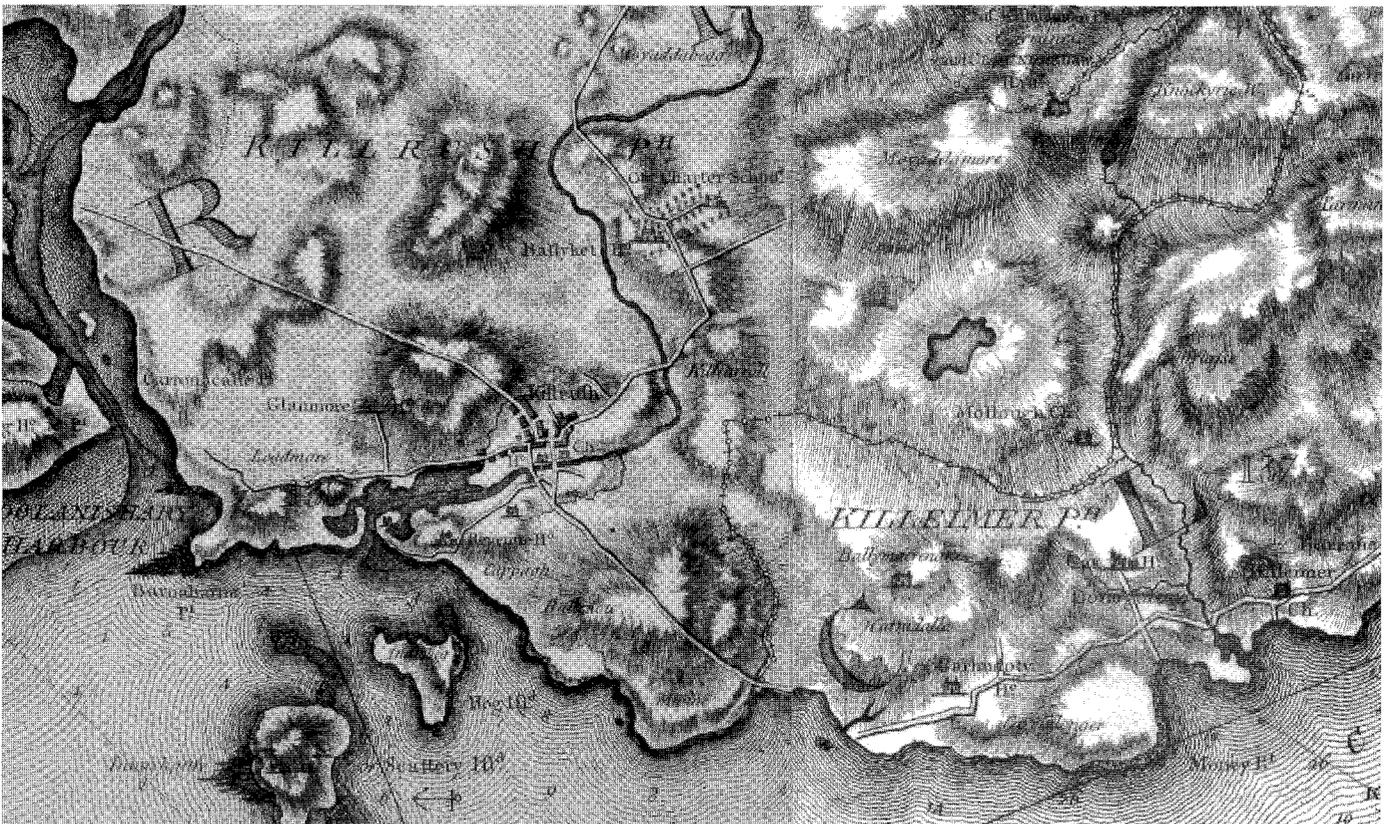
Further down the Estuary, several boats were driven ashore on both sides and some of those boats blown into the middle of the Estuary took shelter at Scattery Island. Most of these boats were damaged, but one schooner had a more unfortunate fate. The *Undine* of Limerick, which was caught in the violent gales, was wrecked when it was driven from Scattery onto the Clare coast and had her sails blown to shreds. Four of her crew also perished on that awful night.

The *Limerick Standard* newspaper of Friday, January 11th, gives the most detailed account of how the schooner was wrecked.

It appears the *Undine* rode out the gale safely at Scattery until between 11 and 12 o'clock, when a large brig, named the *John of Leith*, came, dragging her anchors and giving cable, and appeared likely to run her down. Captain Patterson, the master of the *Undine*, on perceiving the danger which threatened him, called out to the master of the *John* to "hold on". The latter, not being able to hear him, continued to give chain, which left Captain Patterson no

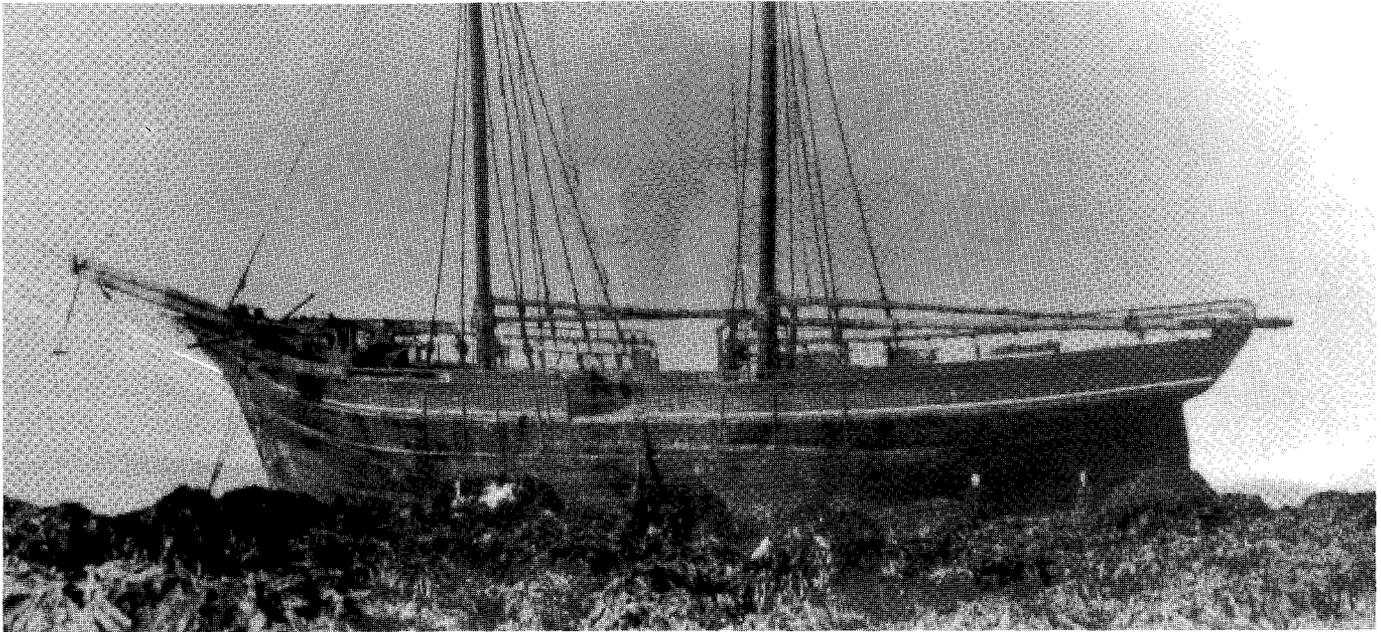
alternative but to slip his cables. After doing this, he went to the helm to steer, and found that the wheel had been carried away.

The vessel then drifted ashore and became almost a total wreck. The *John of Leith* was a brig belonging to Kirkwall and when she threatened to sink the *Undine*, Captain Patterson's initial intention was to run her up to Tarbert and get her up on the mud.⁴ This proved impossible without the wheel. Despite this, Captain Patterson continued to try and save his boat while in his shirt and trousers. The surviving witnesses claimed that his death was occasioned by a blow from a block, which was swinging about on board. The seaman's body was brought into town after dusk to the house of his brother-in-law, Doctor Elliott, where, on the previous day, he had parted from his wife, who he only married within the last year. An inquest was held the same day. When the boat finally hit land, the surviving crew slid down a spar of the boat and made their way to safety near Carandota.⁵ They intended to take shelter in the woods when they saw a light in the distance. They made their way towards it and reached a cottage where they found relief.⁶



The Clare coast from Scattery Island to Moneypoint, 1787, from a set of maps of Co. Clare by Henry Pelham

(Limerick Museum)



Welsh schooner *Sabrina* aground on Cock Rock, Shannon Estuary, November 1890

(Limerick Museum)

The *Limerick Chronicle* newspaper for Wednesday, January 9th, printed extracts from two letters sent from Kilrush reporting on the loss of the *Undine* schooner.

The first letter gave a brief account of the tragedy. The second letter, sent on January 8th, was sent by the Kilrush reporter in order to "elucidate the afflicting intelligence."

"For many years this coast has not been visited by so severe a storm as that of Sunday night, and the disastrous consequence attending it, in the death of Captain Robert Patterson, his companion, and crew, have occasioned a great sensation here, I cannot describe the regret that is felt by all the inhabitants at the melancholy catastrophe; most of the shops in the town were closed, and every possible mark of respect exhibited. The body of your townsman, Andrew Watson Mahony Esq. was brought into town (Kilrush) yesterday morning (Monday) and two of the seamen, named James Crockford and William Cooper. Crockford was a native of Bridport, about 28 years of age, and Cooper, a native of Lynne, and a fine interesting boy, of about 16. From the evidence of the inquest it appeared that the vessel, the *Undine* schooner of Limerick, broke from the moorings in Scatterry Roads about 10 o'clock on Sunday night, and was driven on shore at Carhudota (*sic*). Daniel McGrath, one of the seamen, saw Cooper attempting to gain the rigging, where the crew were, and was knocked down several times by the sea; he also saw Mr. Mahony sitting by the mainmast, quite exhausted; he complained much of cold, and McGrath rubbed his hands between his own several times to warm them."

Mr. Glanville Elliott stated that he was first mate to his brother-in-law Captain Patterson and when the *Undine* hit land within two miles of Kilrush, he jumped into the billows and was saved. He deposed that, while on board, to "having

gone out in the main chains for shelter, and when he returned he found Mr. Mahony lying dead on deck; and the sea breaking over the vessel at the time." The verdict was that the deceased, Andrew Watson Mahony, came by his death from cold, fatigue and exhaustion, and the other two men were drowned. Mr Mahony, who departed Limerick on the *Undine* for London with his friend Mr Patterson, had also recently accompanied his friend on the new schooner on a trip to America. The report continued that Mr Mahony's remains, which lay at a Kilrush hotel overnight, were returned to his parent's house in the Tontine, Limerick, for burial in the family vault at St. Munchin's Church on Thursday morning, the 10th of January. There was a large attendance at the funeral and upwards of 50 private carriages were in the cavalcade.⁷

The loss of the young O'Mahony to his afflicted parents was emphasised in all newspaper reports after his death. In fact his father, Denis, died on February 22nd the following year, aged 69.⁸

However, the young man was not allowed to rest in peace. A letter to the *Chronicle*⁹ dated January 11th, from a "Church of England Protestant," complained that "the reading of the service over the body in the church was not observed and some of the most beautiful parts of the burial service (including the 15 Chap, 1 Corinthians) were wholly omitted by the officiating minister." He went on to protest at the way "the mutilated service was run over in a manner little calculated to be of any beneficial effect." The editor of the *Chronicle* made a comment at the end of the letter defending the clergyman by stating that "he was not yet recovered from the effect of a long and severe illness, which may partly account for the omission complained of."

Despite the tragic loss of life, locals made attempts to plunder the boat on Sunday January 13th, exactly a week after it was wrecked. It was reported that

"between 10 and 11 o'clock, a large party of country people attacked the watchman on board the *Undine* schooner, but there having been a larger number of men than usual on the vessel at the time, the assailants were kept off until a messenger had been despatched to Kilrush, when Mr Channer, C.C. came promptly to the spot with the police under his command, and protected the property from plunder. Volleys of stones were thrown by the country people during the attack, and one man received a severe cut. A party have been applied for to remain at the wreck for the protection of the cargo, until discharged."¹⁰ Afterwards, reports stated that the schooner presented a melancholy appearance as she lay above the high water mark with her back broken. She was worth £3,500 and was the finest vessel belonging to the Limerick Shipping Company but was not worth repairing, so greatly was she damaged. She had a cargo of provisions on board, which was worth £13,000 and it was landed, despite being saturated with water."¹¹

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Curtin, Gerard: *The Night of the Big Wind in the Old Limerick Journal*, Number 36, 1999, p.27
- 2 Wellesley Bridge, now Sarsfield Bridge, was officially opened less than four years previously, in August 1835.
- 3 *Limerick Chronicle*, 9 January 1839
- 4 *Limerick Chronicle*, 16 January 1839
- 5 Carrandotta (spelt Carhudota earlier) is near Moneypoint, Co. Clare
- 6 *Limerick Chronicle*, 16 January 1839
- 7 *ibid.*
- 8 Talbot, Very Rev. M. J., Dean Emeritus: *The Monuments of St. Mary's Cathedral*
- 9 *Limerick Chronicle*, 16 January 1839
- 10 *ibid.*

My thanks to Mr. Thomas J Byrne, of Dublin and Kilkee, who, as always, graciously shared his research.