

SOME LIMERICK LINKS WITH AUSTRALIA

DOONSKERDEEN

Irish places can sound picturesque, even quaint. The reality of living there could be very different. Doonskerdeen is a town-land (small division of land) of 125 acres in the old parish of Robertstown on the road between Askeaton and Foynes on the Shannon Estuary. Few people live there today. In 1846, it contained 42 families, 236 men, women and children living in 35 cottages. Some of these would undoubtedly have been what the Irish census of 1841 called 'class four houses' – one-roomed cabins with mud floors and mud or stone walls.

English visitors, Mr. and Mrs. S.C. Hall, described the class four house in 1842. 'There is not only no window, but no chimney ... the thatched roof is rarely kept in repair, and it is not uncommon for the rain to drip through it ... the members of the family commonly rest upon straw or heather laid on the floor ... the dung heap is invariably found close to the door ... (but) without manure the food could not be grown'.

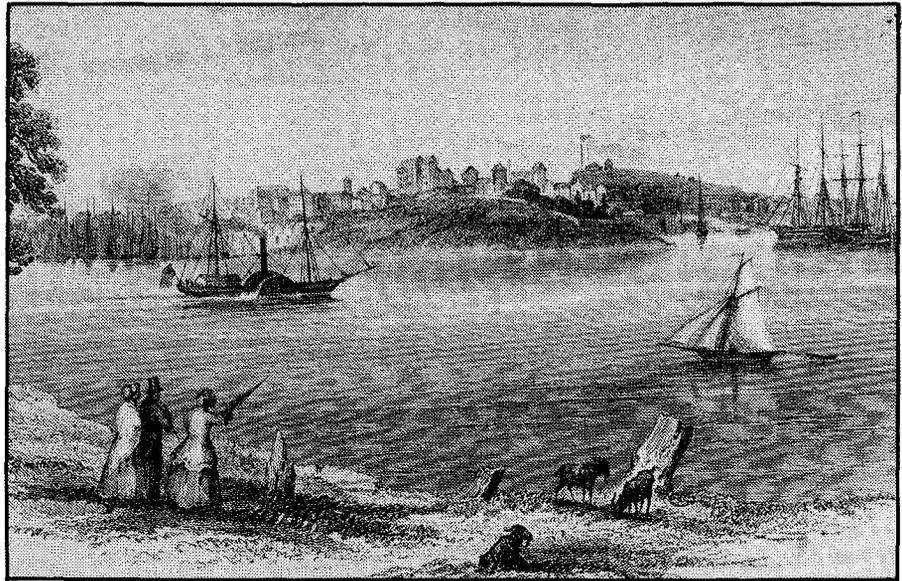
For food, people in such houses depended on the potato and between 1845 and 1849 the potato crop failed in Ireland. One landowner described the results:

'The only reply to my question of 'What do you want?' is 'I want something to eat', so simple, so universal, that it tells its own tale, and neither rags nor sickness nor worn-out faces nor emaciated limbs can make their situation more truly pitiable than these few words'.

Doonskerdeen was part of the estate of Lord Monteagle. Observing the Famine at first hand, he wrote of the people of Doonskerdeen, 'What is to be done with this wretched multitude?' His answer was simple – emigrate.

One possibility was for those on his estates to take a government assisted passage to one of the Australian colonies, but many of Monteagle's tenants were too poor to buy the compulsory chest of sea-clothes or to pay the regulation one pound emigrant contribution. Monteagle advanced some of them the necessary money and many took ship for Melbourne.

Arriving there on the *Lady Peel*, in 1848, Patrick Danaher wrote back to His Lordship with news of the relative success of those he had helped. All the girls had found employment in 'respect-



An early nineteenth century view of Sydney Harbour.

BY RICHARD REID

able places' at twenty-six pounds a year. Thomas Sheahan was attending bricklayers for four shillings and sixpence per day. All this at a time when it was next to impossible for such people to find any work in Ireland. Monteagle had this letter printed for general circulation to convince the Irish that there were places, in 1848, where men and women could earn a decent living.

Overlooking the village of Foynes, a 25 feet high Celtic cross was erected by the tenants of Stephen Edmund Spring Rice in his memory. He was Monteagle's younger brother.

Monteagle's family home, Mount Trenchard House, is one mile from Foynes on the Foynes/Glin Road. It is not open to the public. Doonskerdeen is off the Foynes/Shanagolden Road.

The Fountain of Mercy – Sir Richard Bourke

When in England, history conscious Australians often visit the church of St. Nicholas at Bathampton, where lie the remains of Admiral of the Blue, Arthur Phillip, first Governor of New South Wales. Few make their way to the little church of Ireland at Castleconnell, County Limerick, to visit the grave of the colony's first and greatest Irish Governor, Sir Richard Bourke. When he left New South Wales in 1837, 3,500 pounds was collected to erect a statue to a man who according to its inscription, ... 'raised the

colony to unexampled prosperity and retired amid the reverent and affectionate regret of the people'. It stands today outside the Mitchell Library in Sydney.

To the Irish Roman Catholics of New South Wales in 1833, Bourke was their champion. Despite his own Irish Protestant background, he ensured that all churches received government support in proportion to their adherents. He tried unsuccessfully to introduce a national system of education for all, irrespective of religion or ability to pay.

When a large landholder suggested the governor refuse to receive petitions from convicts, Bourke wrote: 'I should indeed be an unworthy representative of His Majesty if I refused to receive a petition from a man in Bonds. To whom has he to apply if not to the fountain of mercy?' In 1837, Bourke visited the small New South Wales settlement at Port Phillip on Westernport Bay. From there he wrote to his son: 'Have had the pleasure of affixing names in the bush. Melbourne is a beautiful site for a town and there will soon be a very pretty one erected'. He was to live to see it grow into the capital of the gold colony of Victoria.

Bourke's home was at Thornfield House, near Castleconnell, and he retired there in 1838. It can be no coincidence that Castleconnell people figured prominently as emigrants to New South Wales and Victoria. In the Church of Ireland at Castleconnell is a plaque to Bourke's memory: 'He was born on 4th May, 1778. He was suddenly called, in this house of prayer, And fell asleep in the Lord. On the 12th day of August, 1855'.