

# Stephen de Vere's Voyage to Canada, 1847

by P.J. Meghen

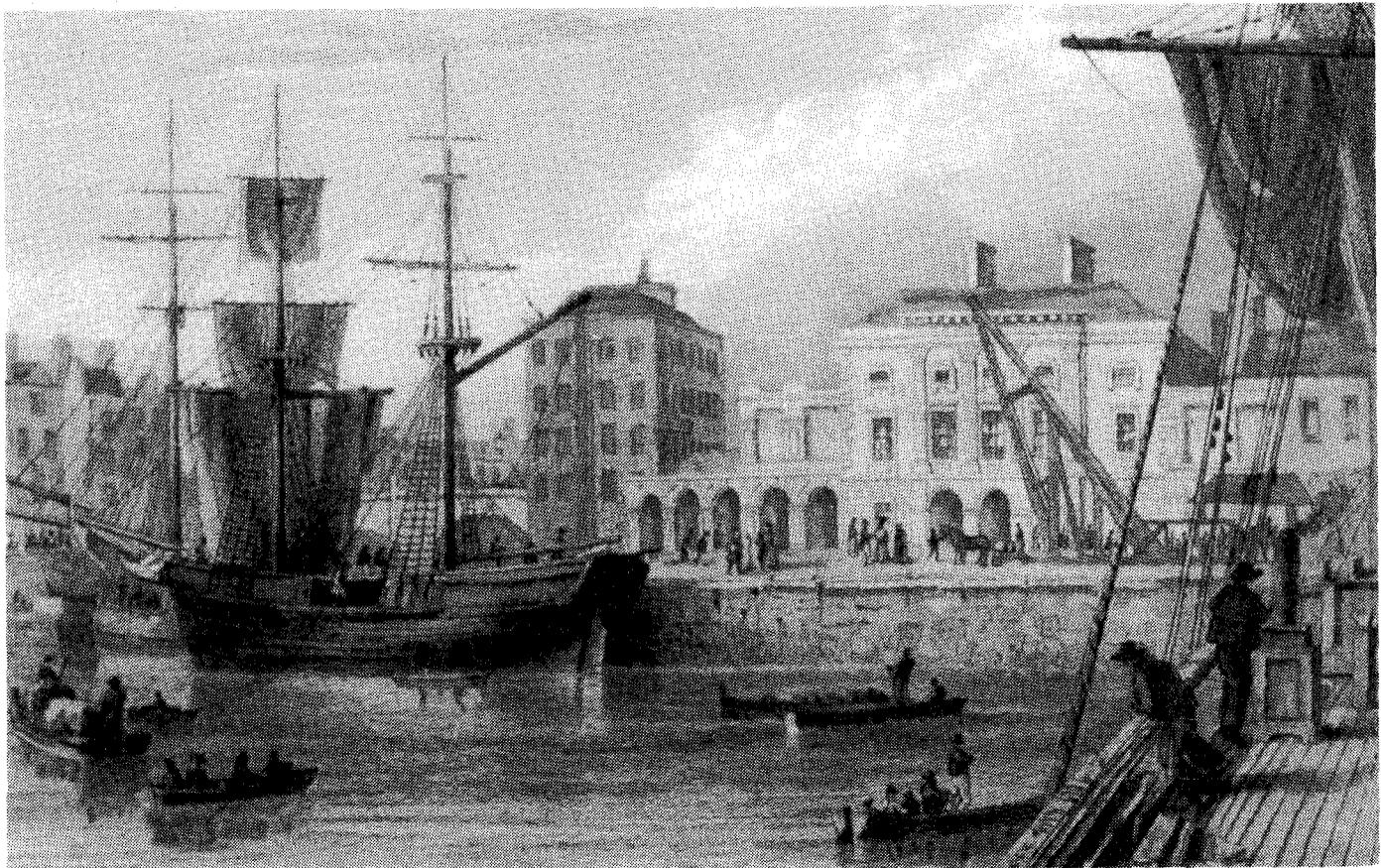
**A**lthough the story of the Great Famine in Ireland is a dark one, it must not be forgotten that many landowners worked hard to relieve hunger and distress. One of those whose efforts had a long-term effect was the Limerick landowner, Stephen de Vere. He travelled with a party of Limerick people who emigrated to Canada and by giving a full account of the hardships of the voyage, he was instrumental in bringing about some much-needed improvement in conditions for emigrants.

To understand the value of Stephen de Vere's effort, one must first get a picture of the emigrant traffic in those years. The research necessary has been carried out by Dr. Oliver MacDonagh, who gives the facts in his valuable book *A Pattern of Government Growth - The Passenger Acts and Their Enforcement*, published by Macgibbon & Kee of London in 1961. The years he describes date from 1800 to 1860. During the years 1800 to 1850 the ships that crossed the Atlantic from most of the English and Irish ports were sailing ships, very few of which were more than 400 tons and the average probably only about 300 tons. Most of these ships were cargo

vessels and only took the emigrants when they had no cargo for America. The owners and captains of the ships accepted emigrants merely as a necessary evil. Merchants in the seaports would pay a fixed charter price for the vacant space between decks and then tried to make as big a profit as possible by cramming in as many passengers as they could. Dr. MacDonagh mentions that "amongst the arrivals at Quebec in 1831 were three Irish ships with tonnages of 229, 334 and 378, which carried respectively 300, 505 and 447 passengers".

The scandals of these conditions were brought to light in 1834 when cholera attacked many passengers. Also many ships foundered at sea. The British Government appointed emigration officers at the principal ports. A new Passenger Bill was introduced in 1835. It is interesting to note in Dr. MacDonagh's book that on the debate in parliament on the Bill, William Smith O'Brien, "one who had for some years striven to improve the Limerick passenger trade, testified that this trade was still disgraceful. Five

hundred, or 20 per cent, of the passengers who had embarked at Limerick during the preceding season had died at sea". The Passenger Act 1835 made some improvements: "The numbers ratio was reduced from three passengers for every four tons burden to three passengers for every five, and the quantity of breadstuffs increased from 50 to 70 lbs. Customs Officers were entrusted with the duty of inspecting food, water and berths, and deciding sea-worthiness. Detention money of one shilling per day was to be paid to passengers if vessels were delayed in starting". This Act was not very effective and more complaints came, particularly from Canada. In 1837, the British Government appointed T.F. Elliot as agent-general for emigration to supervise the officers at the ports. Finally, in 1840, a commission entitled the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission was established with wide authority over both state-assisted and voluntary emigration, and over passenger legislation and the executive corps. Emigration officers were now ordered to personally inspect the supplies and count the passengers. The U.K. officers were instructed to send by post a duplicate list of passengers to the



The Custom House by W.H. Bartlett (1809-1854).

immigration agent of the colony to which the ship was bound. It was hoped in this way to check the overcrowding and to prevent passengers being smuggled on board after the inspection had taken place. In many places like Limerick where a slow journey down river at the start of the voyage was necessary, it had been the practice to take on extra passengers put aboard from rowing boats. The reader may wonder how the captain would permit this if he had only sufficient supplies for the journey but it must be remembered that in those years before 1842, the passengers had to bring their own food. Even in 1841, the chief immigration physician of Canada described the emigrant trade as follows:

*The common practice was for groups of speculating brokers to charter the space on out-going timber vessels for a small sum, in return for which the owners provided berths and water. Sub-agents were then sent through the country to ferret-out passengers. Paid by commission to drum up trade, the sub-agents naturally told prospective emigrants that the voyage was short, that they would need little food at sea, that the master would take care of everything and so on. Thus, hundreds of Irish labourers are induced to embark for this country with but a scanty supply of oatmeal and potatoes for the voyage; often with no clothes but what they have on, and a bundle of straw for a bed.*

The only relieving feature of this picture was that fares were low. Dr. MacDonagh points out that about 1840, the fare from the western Irish ports was forty-five shillings and the emigrant would require to spend another thirty shillings on food for the journey. These amounts seem ridiculously low now but money was difficult to obtain in Ireland then. Very often it took a local collection to get enough money to help a family to emigrate and some landowners tried to help their tenants to get the fare. This may seem a device of the landlords to clear their lands but actually the growth of population was so great in those years, that it was the most liberal and enlightened members of the landlord class who tried to give some of their people a chance in another land.

Dr. MacDonagh shows that in 1842 a new Passenger Act was passed to deal with some of the major complaints. This Act required that the vessels should supply each passenger weekly with 7 lbs. of bread, biscuit, flour, oatmeal or rice, or the equivalent in potatoes. The Act set out a prescribed form of agreement for passages in which a fixed date for sailing was mentioned and provided that subsistence should be paid from that date and the act also required all passenger brokers and agents to be licensed. Dr. MacDonagh sets out other matters dealt with in the following paragraph:

*The other main features of the 1842 Act were as follows. The passenger-tonnage*

*ratio remained 3:5 and the surface space allowance between decks was still ten square feet; a fine of £5 per capita for excess passengers replaced the former inadequate maximum of £20, and all children under fourteen years were henceforth to count as half-passengers. These new requirements were unquestionably more useful in preventing overcrowding than any mere reduction in numbers ratio would have been. They were supported by a new clause prescribing a set form of passenger list to be completed by the master and countersigned at the last customs post to be cleared, and a secondary list on which the master had to enter the names of any passengers taken aboard after that stage. Together with the practice of sending passenger lists ahead by steamer, this clause made it possible at last to establish the facts of culpable excess and of the master's responsibility. As to the actual sea-passage, there were three new clauses of some importance. The first regulated the size and structure of the berths, the second required water to be stored in 'sweetened' containers of specified dimensions, and the third laid down the number of lifeboats to be carried, scaled according to the vessel's size. Moreover, the drinking or sale of spirits was forbidden altogether under the very heavy fine of £100; the regulation height between decks was increased to six feet; and there were various additional requirements as to the thickness and security of the decks.*

It was natural that these restrictions would not be relished by the shipowners. Dr. MacDonagh noted: "Most of the Irish ships were Clyde or Cumberland built, and lacked the requisite six feet in height. A Limerick shipowner, Spaight, complained that he had several vessels made for him in the previous three years in conformity with the requirements of the 1835 Act and that none of them could now be used for passengers ... Again, many protested against the new children's clause (Spaight prophesied that Irish families would abandon all those below the age of seven in the workhouses)." But in a footnote Dr. MacDonagh adds: "Spaight's complaint need not be taken too seriously. He remained the leader of the Limerick passenger trade for many seasons after 1842".

While this Act did effect a great improvement, it must be remembered that conditions were still appalling on the voyage by present day standards. Dr. MacDonagh sets out some of these as follows:

*Even after the reforming legislation of 1842 there was little more than two square feet of clear space for each passenger in the quarters in which he would have to dwell for forty days or more. Only a child could stand upright in the usual low-ceilinged steerage. There was little or perhaps no ventilation except through the open hatchways:*

*there was none at all when the between decks was battened in bad weather. There was no sanitary system whatever on most vessels before 1850 and never one which worked: and there was no privacy. Men and women had to clothe and unclothe (if they did), and 'relieve nature', as it was delicately put, in sight of one another. Some did not even bring 'utensils' aboard, and more or less filth (and with it dangerous bacteria) accumulated on the floors and especially between the bottom row of berths. The wooden berths, in layers little more than two feet high, and only six square feet in area, bedded at least four people - often more. On nine vessels out of ten no attempt was made to separate the sexes before it was made obligatory in 1849, and as late as 1860 the separation was not effectively enforced.*

These problems were serious enough before 1845 but in those years, though emigration was steady from Ireland, the numbers were not too great. Limerick accounted usually for about 3,000 each year, Cork and Dublin about 5,000 each year and many smaller Irish ports accounted for smaller numbers. But now the situation was to get much worse. Perhaps we are all inclined to think of the Great Irish Famine as a tragedy of the one year 1847. Dr. MacDonagh, however, gives the full picture in a chapter headed "Catastrophe". Here are his words:

*The great Irish Famine affected passenger legislation and its execution profoundly. It is important to realise that the famine was not the outcome of one year's blight or its terrible effects concentrated into one season. It was rather a succession of great blows, two of them particularly devastating, delivered over seven years. In every year between 1845 and 1851 the Irish potato crop - the mainstay of the entire economy - failed in a greater or lesser degree. In 1846 and 1848, the failure was virtually complete. So far as emigration was concerned it was these two hammer-strokes which really told. But the disintegration of Irish society would have been so quick or general had these catastrophes not belonged to a seemingly endless series, and been accompanied by mounting and interacting burdens and disheartening influences of every kind: ruinous rates and vanishing capital, the collapse of commerce, the continued scarcity and high cost of food, the common spectacle of death, and political humiliation. The terrified mass-flight of 1847 was followed by an almost mechanical exodus of despair in 1849, 1850 and 1851. By then, the great famine and its concomitants had broken the stubborn back of Irish agriculture. In massive waves, Irish emigration swept through the old psychological and material restraints. From 54,000 in 1844, it rose to 75,000 in 1845, to 106,000 in 1846, and the first crescendo, 215,000 in 1847. The partial*

success of the 1847 harvest, combined with the ghastly fate of the 1847 emigrants, produced a sharp decline in the first half of 1848. But the potato failure of 1848 released so enormous an autumn and winter outflow that the total for that year was nearly 180,000 in the end. In 1849 the terrible level of 1847 was equalled and in 1850, with an emigration of 209,000 nearly reached. Then came two seasons of almost unbelievable magnitude during which nearly one half a million persons emigrated. In 1853, the total fell to 193,000, in 1854 to 150,000. The climax had been passed. The number of Irish emigrants in those years (1847-1854) is estimated by the emigration commissioners to have exceeded 1,700,000 - an estimate which they consider as far below the truth. Those figures, well weighed and meditated, will reveal a tragedy which no mere words could disclose.

These extracts give some idea of the situation that arose from 1845 onwards. Dr. MacDonagh gives many details of the difficulties encountered by the emigrant in those years. Owing to the shortage of transport in those pre-railway years, he concludes that "the overwhelming majority of the emigrants walked to the ports, with children and baggage riding in their little carts. There are many pitiful descriptions of the country roads choked with the long slow trains of people winding their way towards the sea, having first undergone the piercing experience of parting". The shortage of food at the ports created another difficulty, as the emigrants were accustomed to bringing potatoes and oatmeal with them and these foods were not available. Indian meal proved to be useless as a food on the sea-journey as it deteriorated rapidly. Towards the end of 1846, many emigrants went down with typhus. In the beginning of 1847 many ships were forced to return owing to the spread of disease on board. Dr. MacDonagh writes: "Vessels returning in distress to the Irish ports in March and April had been ravaged by the disease. In the same months the emigration commissioners learned of desperate shortage of shipping in Liverpool, Cork, Limerick and Sligo, of great sufferings and mortality amongst those awaiting passages in the fever-ridden slums, and of the overwhelming exodus which was proceeding none the less".

It was at this dreadful time that Stephen de Vere decided to travel to America with a party of emigrants from his part of County Limerick. There is little doubt that he had to provide finance for many of them and to be of more assistance to them, he decided to travel steerage with them. Knowing the position at the ports, he brought them to London first where there was more chance of getting passages. There were many Limerick-owned ships which travelled to London in the coastal trade and no doubt, de Vere was able to get his people to London

without suffering too much hardship. While in London he called to the office of the emigration commissioners and T.F. Elliot asked him to let him have any information which he might obtain on his journey. One must remember that Stephen de Vere was a nephew of Lord Monteagle, who had been Chancellor of the Exchequer between 1835 and 1839. His brother, Aubrey de Vere, states in his *Recollections*: "My brother was resolved that at least an accurate knowledge of the facts, a knowledge derived from personal experience, should be supplied to the public and to Parliament". Actually, as we shall see, Stephen's letter to Elliot in November 1847 was read aloud in the House of Lords by Earl Grey, then Secretary for the Colonies. In this way, it became enshrined in the official records. I am indebted to Mr. Dan Doyle, Limerick County Librarian, for a photostat copy of it, which he obtained through the kindness of Mr. P. Henchy, Keeper of Printed Books, National Library of Ireland. Here are the main portions of the letter describing the voyage:

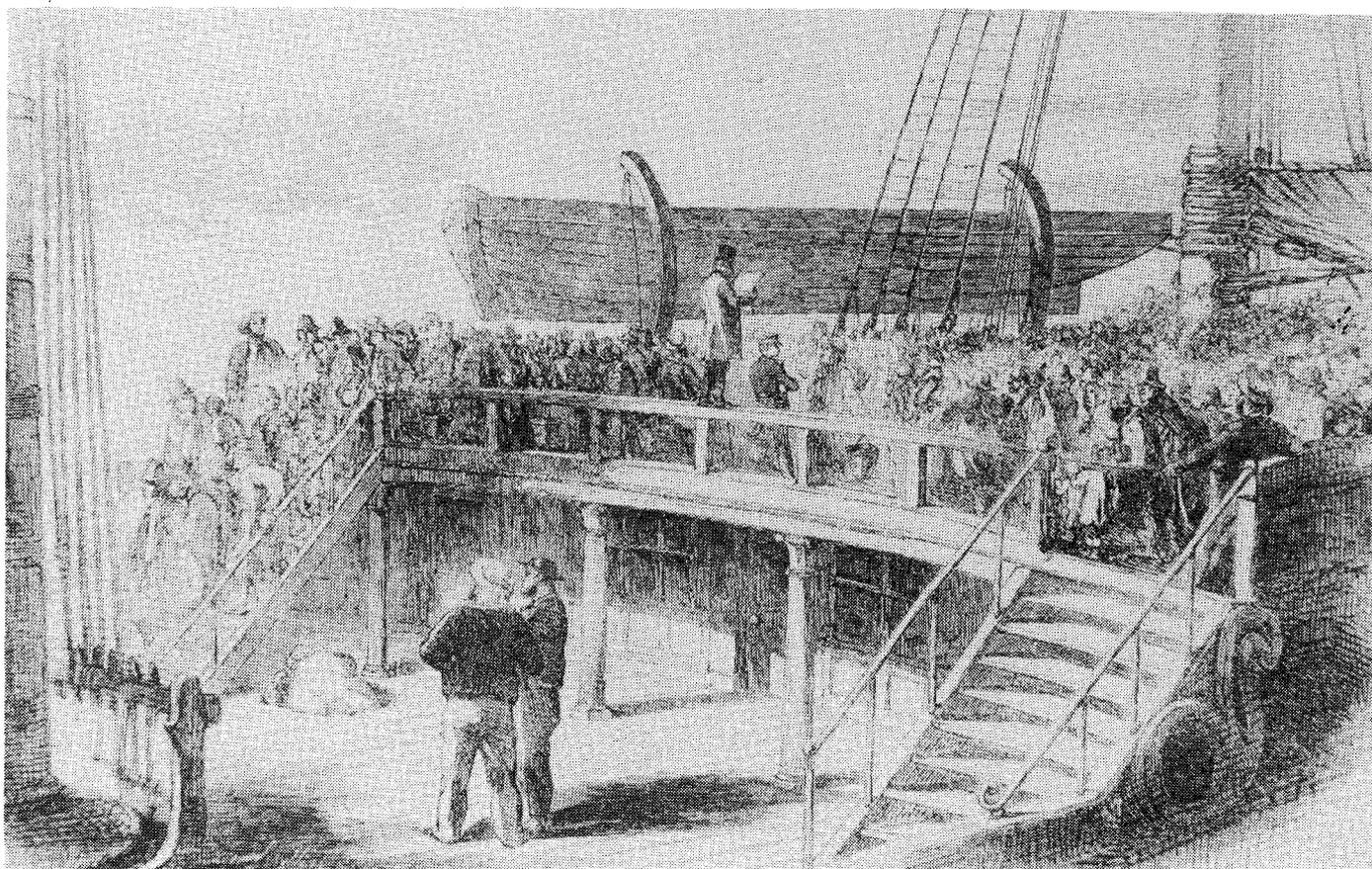
*The fearful state of disease and debility in which the Irish emigrants have reached Canada, must undoubtedly be attributed in a great degree to the destitution and consequent sickness prevailing in Ireland; but has been much aggravated by the neglect of cleanliness, ventilation, and a generally good state of social economy during the passage, and has afterwards been increased and disseminated throughout the whole country by the mal-arrangements of the Government system of emigrant relief. Having myself submitted to the privation of a steerage passage in an emigrant ship for nearly two months, in order to make myself acquainted with the condition of the emigrant from the beginning, I can state from experience that the present regulations for ensuring health and comparative comfort to passengers are wholly insufficient, and that they are not, and cannot be enforced, notwithstanding the great zeal and high abilities of the Government agents.*

*Before the emigrant has been at sea a week, he is an altered man. How can it be otherwise? Hundreds of poor people, men, women and children, of all ages from the drivelling idiot of 90 to the babe just born, huddled together, without light, without air, wallowing in filth and breathing a fetid atmosphere, sick in body, dispirited in heart; the fevered patients lying between the sound, in sleeping places so narrow as almost to deny them the power of indulging, by a change of position, the natural restlessness of the disease; by their agonized ravings disturbing those around and predisposing them, through the effects of the imagination, to imbibe the contagion; living without food or medicine except as administered by the hand of casual charity; dying without the voice of spiritual consolation and buried in the*

*deep without the rites of the Church. The food is generally ill-selected and seldom sufficiently cooked, in consequence of the insufficiency and bad construction of the cooking places. The supply of water, hardly enough for cooking and drinking, does not allow washing. In many ships the filthy beds, teeming with all abominations, are never required to be brought on deck and aired: the narrow space between the sleeping berths and the piles of boxes is never washed or scraped, but breathes up a damp and fetid stench, until the day before arrival at quarantine, when all hands are required to "scrub up" and put on a fair face for the doctor and Government inspector. No moral restraint is attempted; the voice of prayer is never heard; drunkenness, with its consequent train of ruffianly debasement, is not discouraged, because it is profitable to the captain who traffics in the grog.*

*In the ship which brought me out from London last April, the passengers were found in provisions by the owners according to a contract, and a furnished scale of dietary. The meat was of the worst quality. The supply of water shipped on board was abundant, but the quantity served out to the passengers was so scanty that they were frequently obliged to throw overboard their salt provisions and rice (a most important article of their food), because they had not water enough both for the necessary cooking and the satisfying of their raging thirst afterwards. They could only afford water for washing by withdrawing it from the cooking of their food. I have known persons to remain for days together in their dark close berths, because they thus suffered less from hunger, though compelled at the same time, by want of water to heave overboard their salt provisions and rice. No cleanliness was enforced; the beds never aired; the master during the whole voyage never entered the steerage, and would listen to no complaints; the dietary contracted for was, with some exceptions, nominally supplied, though at irregular periods; but false measures were used (in which the water and several articles of dry food were served), the gallon measure containing but three quarts, which fact I proved in Quebec, and had the captain fined for; once or twice a week, ardent spirits were sold indiscriminately to the passengers, producing scenes of unchecked black-guardism beyond description; and lights were prohibited, because the ship, with her open fire-grates upon deck, with lucifer matches and lighted pipes used secretly in the sleeping berths, was freighted with Government powder for the garrison of Quebec.*

*The case of this ship was not one of peculiar misconduct, on the contrary, I have the strongest reason to know from information which I have received from very many emigrants well-known to me who came over this year in different vessels, that this ship was better*



"Merchants ... tried to make as big a profit as possible by cramming in as many passengers as they could".

regulated and more comfortable than many that reached Canada.

Some of these evils might be prevented by a more careful inspection of the ship and her stores, before leaving port; but the provisions of the Passenger Act are insufficient to procure cleanliness and ventilation, and the machinery of the emigration agencies at the landing ports is insufficient to enforce those provisions and to detect frauds. It is true that a clerk sometimes comes on board at the ship's arrival in port: questions the captain or mate, and ends by asking whether any passenger means to make a complaint; but this is a mere farce, for the captain takes care to 'keep away the crowd from the gentleman'. Even were all to hear the question, few would venture to commence a prosecution; ignorant, friendless, penniless, disheartened, and anxious to proceed to the place of their ultimate destination ...

I am aware that the Passengers Act has been amended during the last Session, but I have not been yet able to see the amendments. They are probably of a nature calculated to meet the cases I have detailed; but I would earnestly suggest the arrangement of every passenger ship into separate divisions for the married, for single men, and for single women; and the appointment from amongst themselves, of monitors for each ward; the appropriation of an hospital ward for the sick; the providing of commodious cooking stoves and utensils, and the erection of decent privies; and the appointment, to each ship carrying more than 50 passengers,

of a surgeon paid by Government, who should be invested during the voyage with the authority of a Government emigration agent, with power to investigate all complaints at sea on the spot and at the time of their occurrence to direct and enforce temporary redress, and to institute proceedings on arrival in port, in concert with the resident emigration agent. He ought for this purpose, to have authority to detain witnesses, and to support them during the prosecution at Government expense. I would also suggest the payment of the chaplain of the religion professed by the majority of the passengers.

Stephen de Vere had much more to relate of the difficulties of the emigrants in Canada but it is important to consider what effect his letter had on the Atlantic traffic. Dr. MacDonagh has no doubt that the commissioners took serious note of Stephen de Vere's letter and considers that it was an important source for new legislation. He writes: "This was the first occasion on which an educated observer had made the Atlantic voyage between-decks, and described exactly what he saw. The letter made a profound impression on the commissioners. It is scarcely too much to regard it as the basis of most of their future legislation for ship life. Attempts were soon made sooner or later to achieve every one of de Vere's projected reforms except for the provision of chaplains, and even this subject was to some extent explored".

Readers who are interested in this matter will find it fully dealt with in Dr.

MacDonagh's book. Here we will pass on to consider Stephen de Vere's work in Canada.

The Canadian authorities had established a quarantine station at Grosse Isle near Quebec but this was never designed to handle the numbers that poured into it in 1847. Early in June there were estimated to be 12,000 people on the island. De Vere wrote: "In the quarantine establishment at Grosse Isle, when I was there in June, the medical attendance and hospital accommodation were quite inadequate. The medical inspections on board were slight and hasty; hardly any questions were asked; but as the doctor walked down the file on deck, he selected those for hospital who did not look well, and, after a very slight examination ordered them on shore. The ill-effect of this haste was two-fold:- some were detained in danger who were not ill, and many were allowed to proceed who were actually in fever ... The sheds were very miserable: so slightly built as to exclude neither the heat or the cold. No sufficient care was taken to remove the sick from the sound, or to disinfect and clean the building after the removal of the sick to hospital. The very straw on which they had lain was often allowed to become the bed for their successors: and I have known many poor families prefer to burrow under heaps of loose stones which happened to be piled up near the shore, rather than accept the shelter of the infected sheds". De Vere agreed that it would have been difficult to deal with the enormous problem and he gave high praise to those who provided food for the

inmates of the sheds. As he said: "It was a harassing and dangerous duty, and one requiring much judgement on the part of the agent, and it was performed with zeal, humanity and good sense".

The authorities tried to get a number of the least infected immigrants off the island and up the St. Lawrence river. The Canadian government made a contract with one individual for the steam transmission of all emigrants forwarded by the State at a certain price per head, without any restrictive regulations. De Vere described the result:

*The consequences were frightful. I have seen small, incommensurable and ill-ventilated steamers arriving at the quay in Toronto, after a 48 hours passage from Montreal, freighted with fetid cargoes of 1100 and 1200 'Government emigrants' of all ages and sexes. The healthy who had just arrived from Europe, mixed with the half-recovered convalescents of the hospitals, unable during that time to lie down, almost to sit. In almost every boat were clearly marked cases of actual fever - in some were deaths - the dead and the living huddled together. Sometimes the crowds were stowed in open barges, and towed after the steamer, standing like pigs upon the deck of a Cork and Bristol packet. A poor woman died in hospital here in consequence of having been trodden down when weak and fainting in one of those barges. I have, myself, when accompanying the emigrant agent on his visit of duty to inspect the steamer on arrival, seen him stagger back, like one struck, when meeting the current of fetid infection, exhaled from between her decks. It is the unhesitating opinion of every man I have spoken to, including Government officers and medical men, that a large proportion of the fever throughout the country has been actually generated in the river steamers.*

Dr. MacDonagh gives a graphic description of the effects of this movement:

*Clearing the island periodically of the least distressed immigrants had meant that the inland towns and cities from Quebec to Montreal and farther west, were successively visited by pestilence ... As news of the approach of the Irish reached the river towns, hundreds fled in terror to the countryside. Lazarettos were hastily set up, and local boards of health collected; but, as the archbishop of Quebec observed, the new relief systems were organised too late and too hurriedly to save the situation. Every St. Laurence city had its own Grosse Isle, but Montreal, where over 6,000 immigrants perished, was worst of all. An eye-witness described the endless rows of immigrants lying in the makeshift hospitals as if they were in their coffins, while the hospitals themselves were so under-staffed that the test of fever was to require the immigrants to crawl under a cord three feet high, declaring all who stumbled to*



*be infected and all who did not fall to be well. An entire community of nursing nuns died of typhus at Montreal; and only one of the local priests survived at Point St. Charles, where the bishop himself fell a victim. Although some 30,000 of the Irish had crossed the border to the United States before the year's end, Canada still groaned under appalling burdens in the winter of 1847. Relief depots were further extended, the emigrant hospitals at Quebec and Montreal enlarged to hold 14,000 persons, and every almshouse and refuge thronged with orphans. In all it was estimated that 20,000 of the 70,000 Irish who had taken ship for Canada in 1847 died during the year; and that at least 25,000 of the remainder either had been, or still were, patients in Canadian hospitals.*

Stephen de Vere, seeing the conditions in Quebec, rented a large house to provide shelter for those who had travelled with him. But, as his brother Aubrey recalled:

*Nearly all those whom he had taken with him were stricken down in succession during a period covering about eight months, and received from him personally all the ministrations which they could have had from a hospital nurse. After their recovery, they found work in Canada and settled later chiefly in the United States. A second detachment of emigrants, sent out wholly at the expense of my brother, followed during the next autumn those who had first gone, and were also received and provided for in his house, until the natural fear of infection had abated, and it became*

*possible to procure employment for an Irish emigrant restored to health.*

Stephen de Vere returned to Ireland in the autumn of 1848 bringing home with him a few for whom the American climate was unfit. But, as his brother wrote, "the aim for which he had toiled was accomplished". His letter had been sent by Earl Grey to the Earl of Elgin, the Governor-General of Canada, Dr. MacDonagh notes that in 1848

*Permanent cookhouses and convalescent sheds were built on Grosse Isle and Partridge Island: an army officer was placed in charge of the commissariat and domestic organisation of each of the stations: and internal transportation was cheapened. Once again, de Vere's observations formed the basis of the reforms. But on this occasion they came to a more successful issue. Immigrant protection in British North America was henceforth really effective, at any rate as far as immigrants who had sailed from ports in the United Kingdom were concerned.*

What sort of a man was Stephen de Vere? Wilfrid Ward, who wrote a *Memoir of Aubrey de Vere*, mentions him on page 183: "Aubrey's elder brother Stephen had joined the Roman Catholic Church not long after his father's death. The change was not due primarily to intellectual causes. He was dissatisfied with the Church of his birth. He was deeply impressed by the goodness of the Irish Catholic peasantry to whom he devoted his life". Ward also quotes a note by Aubrey on his brother as follows:

*From his early youth Stephen's life has been one of labour for Ireland. He has saved sons of hers from the gallows - laboured in their schools - abstained from wine for twenty years that he might encourage temperance among the poor, brought dying men into his house that they might have more comfort in death, pleaded their cause in public and private life, and during thirty years, he has reduced the rental of the property by about a fourth below what would have been considered the fair value. You know about his going to America as a steerage passenger that he might speak as a witness respecting the suffering of emigrants. He has always been a Liberal as he is now: and (unlike me) he approved of Gladstone's recent Land Act, having himself recommended nearly the same thing to the Government in 1870.*

One must surely conclude from these facts that Stephen de Vere was a brave and good man, and one whose memory should not be forgotten in County Limerick.

(Reprinted from *North Munster Studies: Essays in commemoration of Monsignor Michael Moloney*, edited by Etienne Rynne, the Thomond Archaeological Society, 1967)