



# COFFIN SHIP

*The Wreck  
of the  
Brig St. John*

William Henry

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In memory of

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all who lost their lives at sea during  
the Great Famine of 1845–1850  
Their whitening bones in Atlantic deep  
Have formed a living chain  
Connecting their beloved land  
With the land they sought in vain.

*In God's house they dwell free from hunger  
and destitution.*

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# Acknowledgements

This book would not have been possible without the persistence and research of John Bhaba Jaick Ó Congaola from Lettermullen, Connemara, who provided much of the research material so that the story of the brig St. John and the people who sailed on her will not be forgotten. One of the first people to highlight the plight of the St. John was the late Paddy Mulkerrin of Lettermullen, whose research is also included in this book. Sincere thanks also to Kathleen Berry for making me aware of this story. The poem 'To Their Memory' is from John Bhaba Jaick Ó Congaola's collection. Sincere thanks also to Noel McGuire, Gerry Joyce and St Anthony's and Claddagh Credit Union for their generous support.

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The verse of the poem which appears on the dedication page is from a booklet entitled Centenary

Commemoration (21-8-1949) which was published for the centenary of the disaster.

*Note: Every effort has been made to acknowledge the sources of all the material used. Should a source not have been acknowledged, please contact Mercier Press and we will make the necessary corrections at the first opportunity.*

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# PREFACE

Many books and stories have been written about the Great Famine, but few have illustrated the horror as well as this, William Henry's latest book, *Coffin Ship: The Wreck of the Brig St. John*. In the lead-up to the central story of the tragic voyage, William Henry paints a picture of the conditions that prevailed in Ireland at the time, particularly at the emigrant port of Galway. He records the despair and desperation of the landless peasants, their often horrific journeys on foot to the famine ships and the callousness and dishonesty they suffered at the hands of the ship captains. He refers to the awful conditions which the emigrants endured in places such as Liverpool, where they were packed in small areas. William Henry does not write merely in general terms, but gives authenticity to the story by referring to individuals and their place of origin.

This excellent build-up gives way to the main story of one particular famine ship, the brig *St. John*. William Henry describes the characters of the captain and crew and outlines the difficulties of life on such a ship. He is at his best when outlining the mounting tension on board as desperate efforts are made to save the ship from the furious and unexpected storm.

In the aftermath of the tragedy, the William Henry maintains the reader's interest by relating the personal stories of both the passengers who survived the tragedy and those onshore who helped get them to safety. This is an outstandingly organised and unforgettable story.

*James Casserly*  
*President of the Old Galway Society, 2000*

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# INTRODUCTION

The loss of the brig *St. John* off the coast of Massachusetts in October 1849 was one of the most tragic events to occur during the Great Famine of 1845–50. This book traces the last voyage of the brig *St. John*, and briefly recounts the story of some of those who sailed on her in an attempt to survive. It acquaints the reader with the human beings behind the statistics. It begins with a look at the background of the famine and includes eyewitness accounts from areas such as Skibbereen and Connemara. These accounts describe the horrific living conditions which left so many with little choice but to undertake the frightening and dangerous voyage overseas. It was the nightmarish and appalling conditions throughout the country that forced so many to take the path to a famine ship. The third chapter explores the conditions on board these coffin ships, focusing on several particularly shocking examples to highlight the sufferings of these people. The fourth chapter accompanies the people on their gruelling walk to the port, while the remaining chapters are devoted to the story of the *St. John*, its tragic end and aftermath. The book also includes a list of both the survivors and victims amongst the passengers and crew of the *St. John*.

The voyage to the New World was long and perilous. About one-fifth of those who sailed from Irish shores during the famine perished en route. Sources indicate that in 1847 alone, some 100,000 people set sail for British North America, with an estimated 20,000 of them either perishing aboard the ‘coffin ships’ or dying afterwards as a result of conditions on board. The remains of those who died from disease and hunger during the voyages were consigned to a sea grave. There was nothing to mark their final resting place.

The Irish peasants had worked long, hard hours in an exploitative landlord system. If they were unable to pay the extortionate rents demanded of them, they faced eviction. Bolstered by the policies of the landlords’ agents evicted many from their homes. The peasants’ situation was exacerbated by a government that showed little interest in their plight. In the years before the famine the indifference and contempt of some members of the British government, expressed in their policies towards Ireland, had in a sense sealed the fate of the Irish people. Yet as famine ravaged the country, Ireland was being governed by the British Empire, a world superpower at the height of its glory.

However, not everyone turned a blind eye to the suffering of the Irish peasants. The Choctaw nation of North America, being no stranger to suffering and indifference itself, was moved to compassion by the plight of the Irish during the famine. In the winter of 1831, tens of thousands of Choctaws had been removed from their ancestral homelands in Mississippi and sent to a reservation in Oklahoma. The reason was that settlers and many other white Americans saw the Choctaw as standing in the way of progress and in their eagerness to secure land to raise cotton, they pressurised the federal



government into forcibly acquiring the Choctaws' territory. During the forced march to the reservation, which became known as the 'Trail of Tears', almost half of the Choctaw people perished. The Choctaws raised \$710 for the starving Irish, which would be equivalent to more than €100,000 today's money.

Other groups also tried to help, among them the Society of Friends, or the Quakers as they are more commonly known. The Quakers donated consignments of flour, rice, biscuits and meal to the Irish people. Eventually soup kitchens replaced public works projects in Ireland and by 1847 this support was reaching some three million people on a daily basis.

Many older people still remember their parents being extremely conscientious regarding the wastage of food. I believe that this was a legacy from the famine passed down through successive generations. In a similar vein, for most Irish people it is an absolute priority that they have ownership of the house in which they live; it is embedded in the Irish mindset. This is another possible legacy from a period when evictions were the order of the day for those who could not afford to pay the rent. I have been asked time and time again why I switched, midstream, from writing a series of children's books to writing about a tragedy such as the loss of the brig *St. John*. The original impetus for the book came from a dream. One night, while asleep in my bed, I found myself transported onto a nineteenth-century sailing ship. It was a beautiful sun-drenched day. I looked up at the sails as they fluttered gently in the warm breeze. I could feel the slow and gentle side-to-side motion of the ship as it floated on the waves. Moments later I became aware of movements ahead of me at the entrance to the hold of the ship. It was open and a sailor was slowly emerging from it, dragging a large object concealed by a white sheet along behind him. A second sailor stood to the rear of the first, and he was holding on to the other end of the sheet. The two sailors proceeded towards the gunwale of the ship where they emptied the contents of the sheet onto the deck.

I was shocked by what I saw – it was the lifeless, emaciated body of a man. It suddenly dawned on me that I was aboard a coffin ship. I had no idea how I had arrived there but for some reason I did not question the strangeness of my surroundings. The sailors returned to the hold and repeated this same exercise several times over until a small heap of bodies lay on the deck. The sailors seemed oblivious to my presence as they lifted one of the bodies. One sailor grabbed the legs, while the other took the arms, and between them they raised the corpse onto the gunwale. They then dropped the body into the sea as though they were discarding nothing more than an old and worn pair of boots.

As they grabbed the next body, my emotions got the better of me and I shouted at them to have some respect, to say a prayer at least for these poor, wretched human beings. They didn't seem to hear me as they lifted a second body and consigned it to the sea. Advancing towards them I shouted, 'At least bless yourselves', but once again my cries fell on deaf ears. I looked down at one of the corpses still lying on the deck. Suddenly his head rolled around to face me. His eyes flew open and he looked directly at me in shock. I knew that he was aware of my presence. The sailors then grabbed him and

threw his body over the side of the ship.

I ran and grabbed the gunwale and stared down at the sea. I was stunned. His body was floating about six inches below the surface of the water and his gaze was still fixed on me. It was then that I noticed he was not alone. As my eyes scanned the ocean I saw that there were literally thousands of other bodies floating alongside him. I was overcome by a mixture of sadness and fear. I heard him whisper the words 'Remember us, remember us', as he and all the other bodies slowly sank to the bottom of the ocean. On the second utterance of those haunting words I was sure I heard a chorus of other voices join in.

Suddenly I awoke and realised that it had all been a dream. I was drenched in sweat, but delighted to be safely back in my bed. My mind was a flurry of activity so, knowing there was little chance of returning to sleep, I began to process the dream. Such was the effect it had on me that the following morning I contacted a very gifted friend and spiritual Canadian woman called Naomi Jane Zettl to seek help in clarifying its meaning. Naomi is a woman of great wisdom and a short time later she informed me that one of the main messages of my dream was that something needed to be done to commemorate these people.

At the time I was not sure what to do but Naomi assured me that I would receive guidance and eventually her words made perfect sense. A few months later a woman, Kathleen Berry contacted me to write a book on the brig *St. John*, but at the time I was too busy. Later a man by the name of John Bhaba Jaick Ó Congaola, from Lettermullen, contacted me and also asked me to write a book on the brig *St. John*, as he believed I would be interested in the material. At the time I was still too busy to take on the project. Besides, I knew nothing about the *St. John*, let alone that it was a famine ship.

Over the following two years John Bhaba Jaick Ó Congaola contacted me a number of times to write this book, but each time I declined. Then in July of 2008, being very persistent, he made a final attempt. He had other historical material that he believed would be of interest to me and he offered to give it to me along with the *St. John* material. Realising this book was not going to go away, I finally agreed to examine the material. I was taken aback by the content: one document stated that if a timber headstone had been placed on the ocean for every man, woman and child consigned to a watery grave during the famine, the tombstones would have extended from Cobh in Cork to Boston Harbour. I was stunned; a shiver ran up along my spine and the hair stood up on the back of my neck. The dream from two years earlier came hurtling back to me.

Some might say that my dream and this material being delivered to me are nothing more than coincidence, and who could blame them. But all I can say is that you would have to have been there and felt what I felt and saw what I saw to realise that this was more than just a coincidence. I can honestly say that I did not intentionally set out to write this book. It sought me out on five occasions, and thank God that this book, in a sense, chose me.

# I – THE GREAT FAMINE

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It may prove difficult for those who have not studied nineteenth-century Irish history to understand why so many thousands of people, in fleeing their country, risked dying from starvation or disease on board a coffin ship. This hazardous journey across the Atlantic Ocean was often undertaken on overcrowded and unsafe ships. The Great Famine, which devastated Ireland between the years 1845 and 1850, was one of the most tragic events in Irish history. It left an estimated one million people dead, although the true figure will never be known. At least another one million people fled to other countries in the hope of a better life.

Outbreaks of famine were not uncommon in Ireland at the time. During the previous century potato crops had failed on a number of occasions. On the last day of the year 1739, Ireland awoke to find itself in the grip of what could be termed a mini Ice Age. This severe winter was followed by a summer of famine and disease during which a large number of peasants perished. Many parts of Ireland suffered. One report stated that ‘the dead have been eaten in the fields by dogs for want of people to bury them’. Food shortages were reported again in 1816 and 1817. In 1822 Galway was already suffering from the effects of poverty and high unemployment, and the failure of the potato crop that year caused a minor famine. Hordes of people flocked to the city in search of food, but the town was already struggling to feed its own population. During the summer, fever was widespread and grants were made available by the local authorities to combat the epidemic. By November, the scourge seems to have passed. Other food shortages occurred in 1831 and 1842; the latter resulting in food riots in Galway city where potato stores were attacked. However, the catastrophe of the Great Famine that swept across Ireland in 1845 was incomparable to anything the country had ever witnessed before.[\[1\]](#)



*A potato riot in Galway in 1842. (The Illustrated London News)*

The devastation of the famine has its origins in the introduction of the Penal Laws of 1695. The unjust laws deprived the Catholic majority of many civil rights in areas such as education, religious freedom and ownership of land, and paved the way for the rise of the Protestant ascendancy class. These landed gentry families exerted an almost limitless power over their tenants. Many were absentee landlords living in England who had little interest in their property except to make as much profit from their tenants as possible. Rents were high and if the tenants could not raise the necessary finance, they faced eviction. The saving grace for the Irish peasant was the potato, as it was cheap produce, easy to cultivate and yielded large crops. The potato was also a good source of vitamins.

At the time the population of Ireland was about eight million. Tenant housing consisted mainly of small thatched buildings or small one-roomed huts constructed of stone or sometimes turf. While both buildings were very basic, the huts were dreadful places to live. They had no windows or chimney, just a hole in the roof to allow the smoke from the fire to escape. Infant mortality was high because of such impoverished living conditions. Given the rigid land division and landlord policies, the vast majority of the Catholic population were forced to live on the brink of starvation and destitution on an ongoing basis.



*Boy and girl foraging for potatoes on the road to Cahera, County Cork.  
(The Illustrated London News, 20-2-1847)*

Once the potato crop was planted, the tenants were then free to ‘work off’ their rent on the landlord’s estate. The situation was such that in 1843 the Devon Commission, having examined the Irish economic system, reported that the landlords and their policies were the main cause of the widespread poverty amongst the people. One member stated that the Irish people were the ‘worst fed, worst clothed, but were the most patient people in Europe’.[\[2\]](#)

In June 1845, frightening reports began arriving from Europe that a new blight called *Phytophthora infestans* had been detected in Belgium. It was not known where the blight had originated but it was suspected to have come from South America two years earlier, perhaps carried to Europe in fertiliser



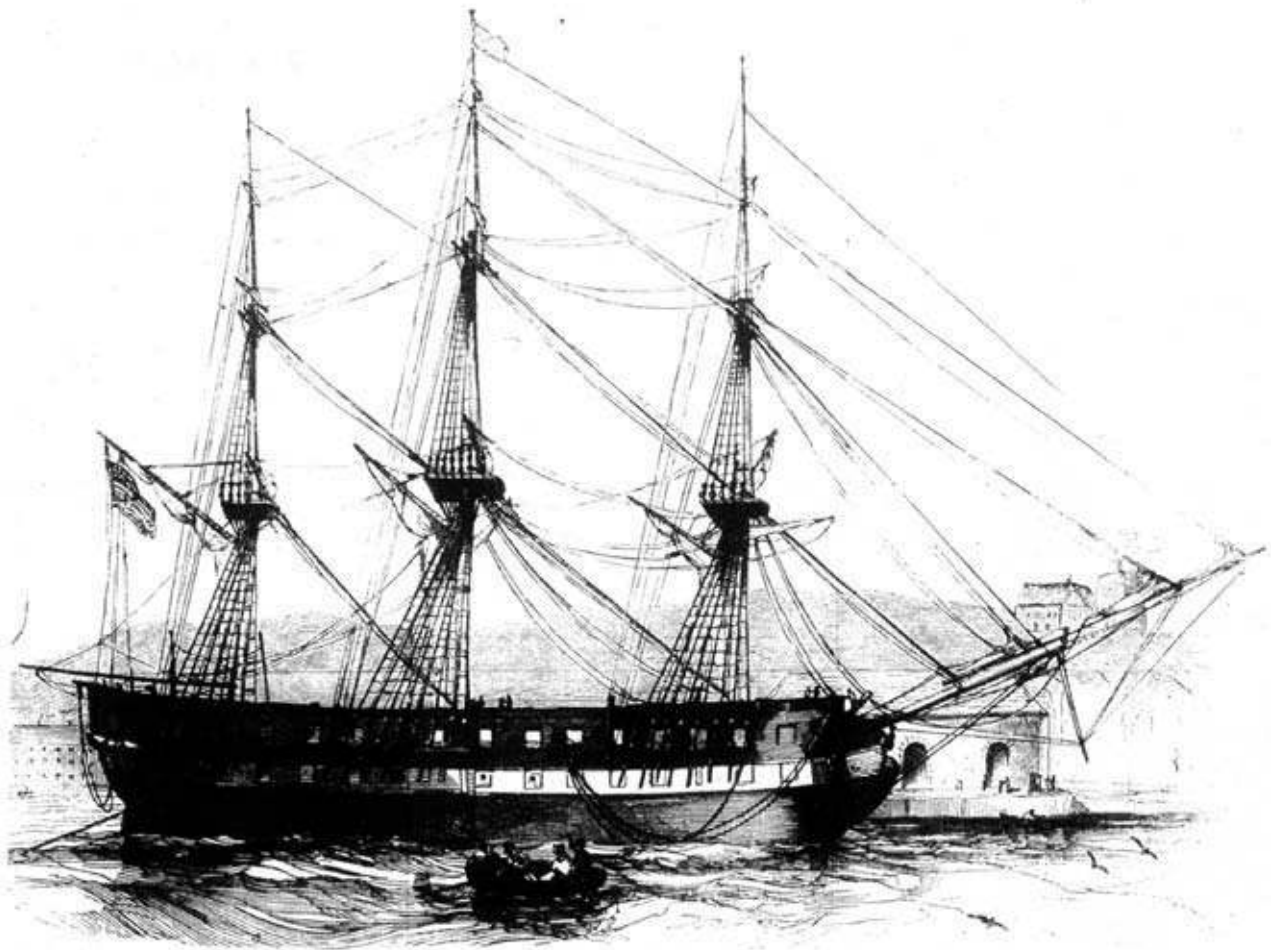
On 9 September 1845, the *Dublin Evening Post* reported that the curator of the Botanic Gardens Glasnevin, David Moore, had stated that specimens of potatoes sent to him from Wexford and Waterford showed ‘convincing proofs of the rapid progress this alarming disease is making. Some of the stems looked fertile, but when dug up the roots were rotten.’



*Miss Kennedy distributing clothing in Kilrush, County Clare.  
(The Illustrated London News, 22-12-1849)*

Reports from Mayo said that an ‘intolerable stench’ filled the air during the digging of potato crops. That same year, thousands of people died from starvation in France, the Netherlands, Germany and Switzerland because of huge crop failures. However, people living in these areas were not dependent on the potato as the Irish and so the stage was set for disaster.

The rest of Europe was spared further fatalities when a year later a severe drought helped kill off the blight, thus avoiding the catastrophe that befell Ireland. The following statistics indicate the extent of the Irish famine: the blight destroyed one-third of the potato crop in 1845, three-quarters in the years 1846 and 1847, and one-third in 1849.[\[3\]](#)



*The Macedonian sails into Cork with provisions for Ireland.  
(The Illustrated London News, 7-8-1847)*

Charles Edward Trevelyan, who was the permanent secretary of the British Treasury during the famine, worked hard on introducing relief schemes that generated employment in the area of road construction and repair. However, Trevelyan was against the idea of dispensing free aid and his attitude to the Irish was appalling. He believed that the famine was God's way of punishing an idle, ungrateful and rebellious nation.



*Searching for potatoes in a stubble field in County Clare.  
(The Illustrated London News, 22-12-1849)*

By November 1846, with food prices on the increase, a labourer had to earn twenty-one shillings a week to sustain an average-sized family. Even if one was fortunate enough to secure work on a relief scheme, wages were still only between six and eight shillings a week. Families hadn't enough money to feed themselves and they were becoming increasingly malnourished all the time; this was a recipe for disaster. It was not as though the authorities were not informed of the imminent dangers. In a letter to Trevelyan dated August 1846, Fr Theobald Mathew wrote:

*A blast has passed over the land, and the food of a whole nation has perished. On the 27th of*



*last month I passed from Cork to Dublin, and this doomed plant bloomed in all luxuriance of an abundant harvest. Returning on the third instant, I beheld, with sorrow, one wide waste of putrefying vegetation. In many places the wretched people were seated on the fences of their decaying gardens, wringing their hands and wailing bitterly the destruction that had left them foodless.*[\[4\]](#)



*Bridget O'Donnell and her two children, County Clare.  
(The Illustrated London News, 22-12-1849)*

When one considers the ongoing exportation of food, the tenant evictions and the poor travelling conditions on offer to those fleeing the country, it is reasonable to say that a serious lack of concern

for the Irish people existed. While the government received ample warning of the seriousness of the situation in Ireland, they simply failed to take adequate action. In fact, even as the disaster was unfolding the British Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, stated, 'there is such a tendency to exaggeration and inaccuracy in Irish reports that delay in acting upon them is always desirable'.

The following letter, published in the *Galway Mercury* in July 1847, challenged the 'absolute rubbish' being 'peddled' by politicians in relation to the hidden treasures of the Irish peasantry:

*Of all the wonderful discoveries in this age of invention there cannot be found one so remarkable as that lately set before the public, by the Prime Minister of England, in relation to this unfortunate country. Two or three years ago Lord Stanley astonished the world by announcing, what he declared to be a well-ascertained fact, that the Irish peasantry were possessed of heaps of hidden treasure – that they had hoarded up wealth, and that money, in all shapes, could be found in their coffers. But what was this to the assertion of the noble member for London, lately made in the high court of parliament, namely, THAT THERE WERE VERY FEW DEATHS FROM STARVATION IN IRELAND?*

*No doubt, in the estimation of the very great, though withal very insignificant Statesman, the deaths have been by no means on as extensive a scale as he could wish – no doubt his policy was intended to produce a far more wide-spread mortality. It is not his fault if no more than two millions of human beings shall not in the course of a single year, be sacrificed in Ireland, to the doctrines of political economy – but why mock our sufferings? – why torture us still further by the cruel assertion which he has just sent forth, as if to prevent the flow of public sympathy towards alleviating the miseries of our wretched people. When men read these things abroad – when Europeans and Americans shall peruse the proceedings in Parliament, they will naturally say to themselves that matters are not so bad in Ireland as was represented, that plenty is flowing in, and disease going forth from the land.*

*Well, truly, we are a misgoverned race, when a person entrusted with the conduct of public affairs could dare to make such an assertion. How forcibly does this prove to us the folly of submitting any longer to be ruled by men so utterly ignorant, or wilfully blind to the interests of this portion of the Empire?[5]*

Were these sentiments intended to ease the conscience of a government refusing to face up to its responsibilities? Some would say that more sinister motives were at play; that a natural disaster was allowed to develop, through starvation, destitution, disease, fever and mass emigration.

## Notes

[1] Henry, William, *Role of Honour: The Mayors of Galway City 1485–2001* (2001), pp. 102, 103.

Litton, Helen, *The Irish Famine: An Illustrated History* (1994), Introduction.

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Ó Cathaoir, Brendan, *Famine Diary* (1999), Introduction.

O’Dowd, Peadar, *The Great Famine and the West 1845-1850* (1995), pp. 2, 3.

*The Illustrated London News*: ‘The Galway Starvation Riots’ (25-6-1842).

[2] Henry, William, *Role of Honour: The Mayors of Galway City 1485–2001* (2001), p. 93.

Litton, Helen, *The Irish Famine: An Illustrated History* (1994), pp. 9, 10, 12, 13, 15.

O’Dowd, Peadar, *The Great Famine and the West 1845-1850* (1995), p. 3.

*The Galway Mercury*: ‘The Devon Commission’ (26-6-1847).

[3] *Boston Herald*: ‘Triumph out of Tragedy – Commemorating the 150 Anniversary of the Great Hunger’ (26-6-1998), p. 3.

Litton, Helen, *The Irish Famine: An Illustrated History* (1994), p. 17.

Ó Cathaoir, Brendan, *Famine Diary* (1999), pp. 3, 4.

O’Dowd, Peadar, *The Great Famine and the West 1845-1850* (1995), p. 3.

*The Dublin Evening Post* (9-9-1845).

[4] *Boston Herald*, ‘Triumph out of Tragedy – Commemorating the 150 Anniversary of the Great Hunger’ (26-6-1998), p. 3.

Litton, Helen, *The Irish Famine: An Illustrated History* (1994), pp. 30, 43.

Ó Cathaoir, Brendan, *Famine Diary* (1999), p. 5.

Woodham-Smith, Cecil, *The Great Hunger 1845-1849* (1989), p. 58.

[5] *The Galway Mercury*: ‘Irish Sufferings – Whig and Tory Sympathy’ (5-6-1847).

## II – A SHOCKING ACCOUNT

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The scepticism on the part of some politicians about the extent of the problem in Ireland proved extremely costly for the country, and the high price paid by the unfortunate people can neither be ignored nor forgotten.

In 1847, the *Illustrated London News* reported that accounts from the Irish provincial papers continued to detail the terrible sufferings of the starving peasantry in Ireland. The artist James Mahoney from Cork, who was working for the *Illustrated London News* at the time, recounted his experiences in the newspaper. His journey began in Cork city; his destination was Skibbereen. One of the worst hit areas in Ireland during the famine was Skibbereen in County Cork. ‘Remember Skibbereen’ became a byword for rebels in the years following the famine; in fact it is occasionally still uttered today. He encountered few problems during the journey until he reached Clonakilty where he stopped for breakfast. It was here that the horrors of poverty first became visible to him. Vast numbers of ‘famished poor’ flocked around the coach and began begging. Among them was a woman carrying the corpse of a small child in her arms. She was making the most distressing appeal to the passengers for aid to ‘enable her to purchase a coffin and bury her dear little baby’. Upon enquiring at the hotel, Mahoney was informed that each new day brought ‘dozens’ more destitute and starving people to the town.[\[1\]](#)

Upon leaving Clonakilty, Mahoney encountered yet more evidence of misery. He recorded meeting a funeral party almost every hundred yards. This continued until he reached an area close to the Shepperton Lakes. Here, the distress became even more striking. When he reached Skibbereen, he stayed at the residence of Mr J. McCarthy-Dowling. It was while at this location that he met with Dr D. Donovan and his assistant, Mr Crowley. Dr Donovan had been recording the devastation caused by the famine in his diary. He was also publishing extracts from the diary in the *Cork Southern Reporter* yet people remained doubtful that such devastation in the countryside could be true. Accompanied by these two men, Mahoney visited areas around Skibbereen. He recorded that ‘neither pen nor pencil could ever portray the misery and horror, at this moment, to be witnessed in Skibbereen’. Dr Donovan then accompanied Mahoney to Bridgetown where, upon arrival, they witnessed even worse sights. On visiting one particular house Mahoney noted that the dying, the living and the dead were indiscriminately lying close to each other with nothing to protect themselves, save a few miserable rags that served as clothing. Some of the dead remained scattered amongst the living for up to six days at a time; such was the level of weakness and fear of disease that family members delayed so long in burying their loved ones. These scenes were commonplace; all the houses contained similar horrors. No family was spared. Of some five hundred houses, not one was



*Old Chapel Lane, Skibbereen, County Cork.  
(The Illustrated London News, 13-2-1847)*

Mahoney and Dr Donovan proceeded to High Street or Old Chapel Lane where they came upon a house with neither doors nor windows. It was filled with destitute people lying on the bare floor. Amongst them was the body of a 'fine, tall, stout country lad', who had sought shelter from the piercing cold. The witnesses felt sure that the other occupants of the house would soon join him in death. It was a heart-rending sight and Mahoney and the other members of their group instinctively wanted to help alleviate the dreadful situation. But Dr Donovan became alarmed that they would put themselves at risk of infection and he pleaded with them not to enter the house and to avoid physical contact with the people gathered in the doorway.<sup>[2]</sup> Their next stop was at the Chapel yard. The following extract, taken from the diary of Dr Donovan, describes what they encountered:

*On my return home, I remembered that I had yet a visit to pay; having in the morning received a ticket to see six members of one family, named Barrett, who had been turned out of the cabin in which they lodged, in the neighbourhood of Old Chapel yard; and who had struggled to this burying-ground, and literally entombed themselves in a small watch-house that was built for the shelter of those who were engaged in guarding against exhumation by the doctors, when more respect was paid to the dead than is at present the case. This shed is exactly seven feet long, by about six in breadth. By the side of the western wall is a long, newly made grave; by either gable are two of shorter dimensions, which have been recently tenanted; and near the hole that serves*



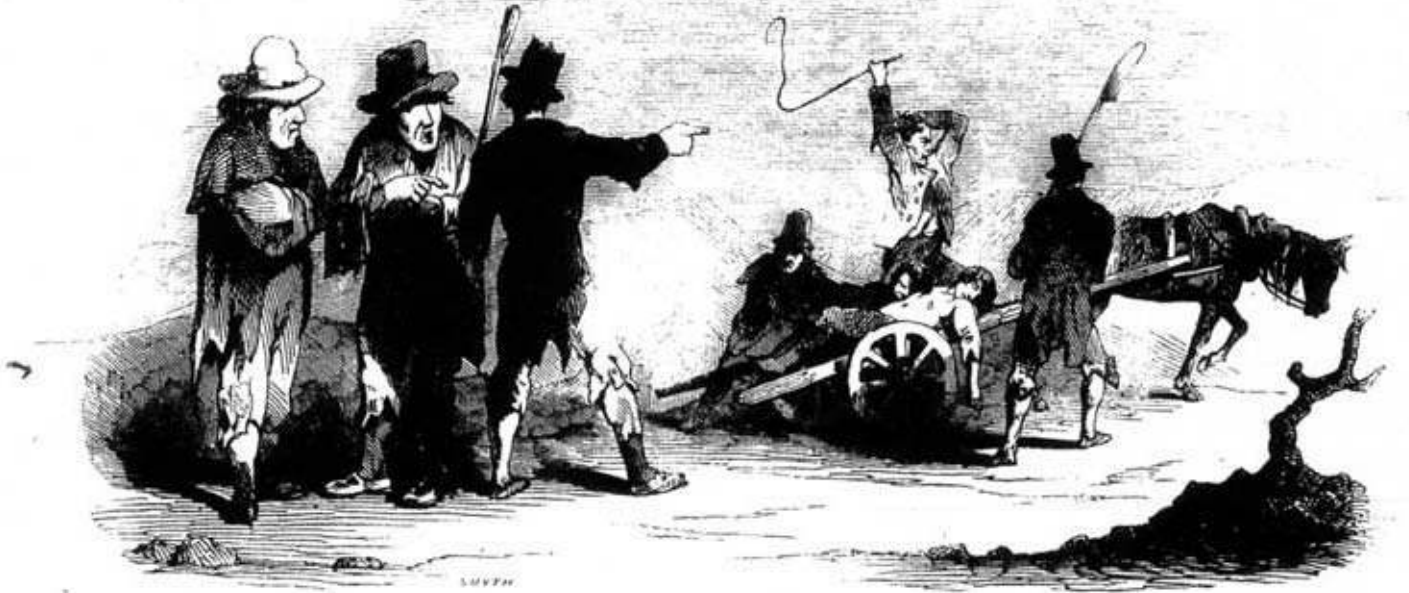
*as a doorway is the last resting-place of two or three children; in fact, this hut is surrounded by a rampart of human bones, which have accumulated to such a height that the threshold, which was originally on a level with the ground, is now two feet beneath it. In this horrible den, in the midst of a mass of human putrefaction, six individuals, males and females, labouring under most malignant fever, were huddled together, as closely as were the dead in the graves around.*

*At the time (eleven o'clock at night) that I went to visit these poor sufferers, it was blowing a perfect hurricane, and such groans of roaring wind and rain I never remember to have heard. I was accompanied by my assistant, Crowley, and we took with us some bread, tea and sugar; on reaching this vault, I thrust my head through the hole of [the] entrance, and had immediately to draw back, so intolerable was the effluvium; and, though rendered callous by a companionship for many years with disease and death, yet I was completely unnerved at the humble scene of suffering and misery that was presented to my view; six fellow creatures were almost buried alive in this filthy sepulchre. When they heard my voice, one called out, 'Is that the Priest?' another, 'Is that the Doctor?' The mother of the family begged in the most earnest manner that I would have them removed, or else that they would rot together; and they all implored that we would give them drink. Mr Crowley produced the tea and sugar, but they said it was of no use to them, as they had no fire or place to light it in, and that what they wanted was water; that they had put a jug under the droppings from the roof, but would not have drink enough for the night. The next day I got the consent of the Poor Law Guardians to have my patients removed from this abode of the dead to the fever hospital, and they are since improving.[\[3\]](#)*



*Tim Harrington's hut, County Cork.*  
*(The Illustrated London News, 13-2-1847)*

James Mahoney proceeded to enlist the help of a Mr Everett, who had a great knowledge of the countryside. During their journey they visited a hut where four people had lain dead for six days; this was the abode of a Tim Harrington. On hearing their voices, Mr Harrington made an effort to reach the door, and he asked for a drink of water and a fire to keep him warm. He collapsed in the doorway and in all probability died as they were unable to give him aid through fear of contracting disease. Mahoney and Everett continued on to Schull where they encountered a group of over three hundred women looking to purchase food. Some had queued from daybreak to buy Indian meal from government-appointed officers. The officers appeared to be issuing 'miserable quantities' at high 'famine prices'. Mahoney's harrowing reports were published in their entirety in the Irish newspaper as well as the *Illustrated London News*, and should rightly have inspired an urgent response from the government.[\[4\]](#)



*Funeral at Skibbereen, County Cork.  
(The Illustrated London News, 13-2-1847)*

Another two men to publish reports on the de-vastating effects of the famine were Mr Forster and his son from Leeds. They visited Connacht in January 1847 on behalf of their community, to view 'first-hand' the devastation caused by the famine. The following is an extract taken from their report on the village of Bunderagh in Connemara:

*One poor woman, whose cabin I had visited, said, 'There will be nothing for us but to lie down and die.' I tried to give her hope of English aid, but, alas, her prophecy has been too true. Out of a population of 240, I found 13 already dead from want. The survivors were like walking skeletons – the men gaunt and haggard, stamped with the livid mark of hunger – the children crying with pain – the women in some of the cabins too weak to stand.*



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