

'They all were no more': The story of the **Bristol** and the **Mexico**

by Tom Plante

Pick up any newspaper and you'll probably find at least one story about severe weather, the problems facing immigrants, or a recent plane crash or ship wreck. But combine these elements and you have a story of greater proportions. Such an event occurred locally a decade before the famine and more than half a century before my grandparents left County Longford for the streets of New York.

The year was 1836. Two American ships, the *Bristol* and the bark *Mexico*, were preparing to set sail from Liverpool. This would be the *Bristol's* second trans-Atlantic voyage. The passengers on both ships were chiefly Irish immigrants.

The *Bristol* weighed anchor on Oct. 16, 1836 with a crew of sixteen and one hundred passengers. The trip to New York was relatively quick and uneventful by nineteenth century standards. Captain McKown and his crew sighted Sandy Hook, New Jersey, after thirty-five days at sea.

The *Mexico* left Liverpool on Oct. 23. Captain Charles Winslow, his crew and one hundred twelve passengers, had a rougher passage. The *Mexico* reached Sandy Hook after a voyage of sixty-nine days.

On the night of Nov. 20 Captain McKown signalled for a harbor pilot to guide the *Bristol* through the Narrows to Upper New York Bay. Gale-force winds were blowing and no pilot would come to his aid.

The *Bristol* headed back to sea to ride out the storm, but ran aground several hours later off the coast of Long Beach, Long Island.

"Though within a half mile of shore," wrote S.A. Howland in 1840, "owing to the heavy sea, no relief could be afforded to the distressed passengers and crew, who were clinging to the shrouds and other parts of the rigging; during the day many lost their hold and were drowned."

A crowd soon gathered on shore as news of the grounding spread. They watched helplessly as twenty and thirty-foot waves battered the vessel.

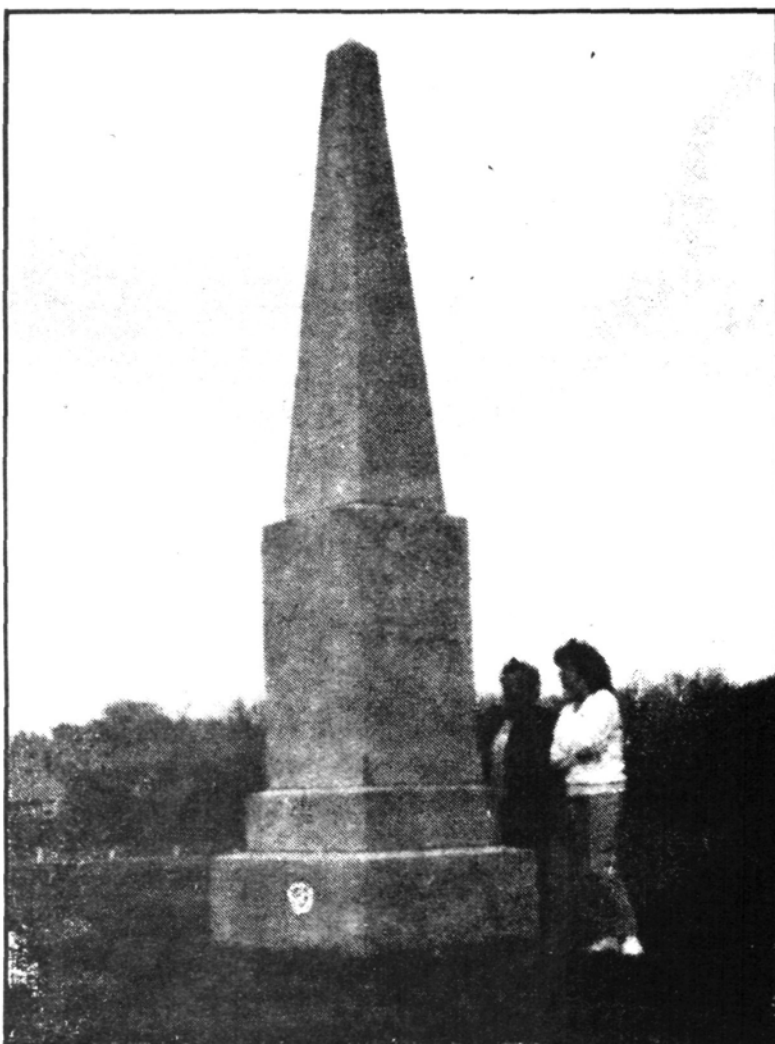
Some small boats eventually came to the aid of the *Bristol*. Captain McKown, a few of his crewmen, and some of the passengers were rescued on the night of Nov. 21, before the *Bristol* broke apart.

Bodies soon washed ashore. *The Long Island Democrat* of Dec. 7, 1836, reported that five men were arrested for plundering the bodies. Eventually seventy-seven corpses were recovered.

Six weeks after the destruction of the *Bristol*, while money was being collected to bury the victims, the *Mexico* sighted Sandy Hook. The long voyage had depleted the ship's provisions and the passengers were on short rations. No pilot would brave the snow and high winds to guide the *Mexico* through the Narrows.

The bark was blown out to sea and three days later ran aground

Tom Plante's account of the tragic ships *Bristol* and *Mexico* first appeared in the *Irish Echo* (19 December 1987). It is reprinted here by kind permission of Tom Plante © 1987.



Mariners' lot

Marie (McManus) Plante and Patricia Plante read inscriptions on the monument to immigrants lost at sea in the winter of 1836-37. The marble pillar stands on a burial mound in the center of Lynbrook's Rockville Cemetery.

off Point Lookout, south of Freeport. The *Mexico* had filled with water and the passengers and crew, half-starved, huddled together on deck. Though within sight and sound of the people on the beach, the immigrants slowly froze to death as the pounding surf prevented their rescue. More than half of the victims were women and children.

On the morning of Jan. 3, 1837, the famed salvage master Captain Raynor Smith, his three sons and three other men, crossed the frozen bay and marshland from Freeport, dragging a life boat. Despite the storm, they managed to rescue Captain Winslow and seven others.

The following day sixty of the frozen bodies were gathered from the beach and taken on sleds to a barn for identification.

A visitor from New York described the scene: "We came to Lott's Tavern some four or five miles from the beach where the ship lay. I went out to the barn . . . Sixty bodies of all ages were lying before me on the floor, all frozen, and as solid as marble . . . almost everyone with an arm crooked as it would be in clinging to the rigging."

"There were scattered about among the number five or six beautiful little girls, their cheeks and lips red as roses, with their calm blue eyes open as though they were about to speak."

Shortly thereafter, the unidentified were buried in the "Mariners' Lot" near the old Sand Hole Church. In a common grave, most

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Loss of the Bristol

The American of last evening has the following additional particulars respecting the wreck of the ship *Bristol*. The robbery of the unfortunate passengers adds to the horror of the catastrophe. It behoves the officers of justice to see that the felons be pursued, apprehended and punished.

"Among the passengers lost was Mr. Donnelly, the son-in-law of the late Michael Hogan, of this city—and he died a victim of his own philanthropy. Mrs. Hogan and two daughters, Mrs. Donnelly, her nurse and children were saved, and with other women and children, landed by the first boat. Twice the boats returned to the wreck, and twice Mr. Donnelly yielded his place to others. In the third attempt to go off, the boats were swamped, and the crew became discouraged, and would not go back. Meantime the storm increased, and Mr. Donnelly, with the two Mr. Charltons, took to the foremast, where the crew and many steerage passengers had sought temporary safety. Unhappily, this mast soon went by the board, and of about 20 persons on it, one only, Mr. Briscoe, a cabin passenger, was saved, and he by catching at the bowsprit rigging, whence he was taken by the boats. The captain and other cabin and steerage passengers, were on the mizen-mast, and when that fell, he and others lashed themselves to the taffrail, where for four hours the sea broke over them.

Some twenty of the steerage passengers, principally women and children, perished almost immediately after the ship struck. Even before they could leave their berths the ship bilged, filled, and all below were drowned. Not a groan was heard to denote the catastrophe—so awfully sudden was it.

And to those whom the waves and the mercy of God had spared, what was the conduct of their brother man? Their persons, their trunks, were searched and robbed by the fiends that gathered around the wreck. One hapless being, thrown senseless, but yet alive, on the shore, and having about him his all—ten sovereigns—was plundered of them!

"Is there not some secret curse,
Some hidden thunder in the stores of Heaven,
Red with uncommon wrath,"

To blast such iniquity?

Will not the Marshall of the District feel it his duty to repair to the scene of this disaster, and seek to ferret out the evil-doers.

Among other things, Mrs. Donnelly was robbed of a valuable case of jewels; some of which were publicly paraded, as we are told, by an individual who can be traced.

Shall there not be a public meeting to speak decisively as to the Pilot system? Will the insurance offices slumber on?"

The New York Evening Post, 24 November 1836, p. 2. col. 3.

of the victims of the two worst ship wrecks in Long Island history finally came to rest.

Currier and Ives issued a depiction of the destruction of the *Mexico*. This is believed to be the first shipwreck print published by Currier and Ives.

The inhabitants of the area, all of which was in Queens County at the time, began raising funds for a monument. Some money came from donations; the rest was recovered from the bodies of those who perished.

In 1840, a monument was purchased in Ossining, New York and transported by sloop to East Rockaway. Peter T. Hewlett bought the plot and the monument was erected on Oct. 26, 1840.

A gentleman from Hempstead offered to make a substantial contribution toward the cost of the monument, if a verse he composed would be inscribed on the column. His proposal was accepted and his stanza can still be read today:

*"In this grave from the wide
ocean dost sleep
The bodies of those that had
crossed the deep
And instead of being landed
safe on the shore*

*On a cold frosty night they all
were no more."*

No sooner was the monument dedicated than the inscription became the center of controversy. Local newspapers published letters critical of the verse. A *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* editorial commented that "As the epitaph was perhaps the only literary attempt of the author, he doubtless thought it was a masterpiece and the committee were too delicate to refuse it. . . But may some friendly hand remove that epitaph and save his memory from heavy damages!"

In his history of Long Island, published in 1845, Nathaniel S. Prime wrote: "Our graveyards abound with similar examples of bad grammar and contemptible trash."

While the destruction of the *Bristol* and the *Mexico* cost the lives of nearly two hundred Irish and English immigrants, the publicity about the tragedies is believed responsible for the formation of a life-saving service in 1848. Today that organization is the United States Coast Guard.

The memorial to the lost immigrants still stands in Rockville Cemetery, on Merrick Road, near the border between Lynbrook and Rockville Centre, a white marble reminder of the hazardous journeys undertaken by generations of Irish men, women and children.

Loss of the Barque Mexico

By seven o'clock the ship bilged and filled with water. The passengers then came on deck, after cutting away the foremast, and remained there until four o'clock that afternoon, when a boat from the shore fortunately reached the wreck, and took off the captain and seven men, and returned safely to the shore. This boat had been hauled ten miles for the purpose, by seven persons on the beach, there being no boats or means of affording the ship any relief. This attempt could not be repeated on account of the extreme peril of the first trip, and the remaining souls on board were left to their fate. The wretched situation of these can by no means be imagined. When they saw that all further attempts at succour were unavailing, there is no describing their piercing shrieks and lamentations. In this way were they until Wednesday morning, when one by one perished in unutterable pain and anguish, and their bodies floated ashore lashed to various parts of the wreck.

It is stated that two-thirds of the passengers were women and children, and mostly in good circumstances. A guard has been placed on the beach to protect such articles as come ashore.

The New York Evening Post, 5 January 1837, p. 2., col. 2.

MORE BOOKS

ACROSS THE WATER: IRISH WOMEN'S LIVES IN BRITAIN. By Mary Lennon, Marie McAdam, and Joanne O'Brien. (Virago Press, 1988). Through oral testimonies and haunting photographs, this book explores the lives of Irish women who emigrated to England in this century. It "effectively overturns stereotypical notions of the Irish, and voices the unrecognised experiences of Irish women in Britain." A good example of a "history of the inarticulate", or those ordinary people who are usually passed by in major histories. Since the book presents the stories of fifteen women in their own words, it is far from inarticulate.

THE ST. PATRICK'S DAY PARADE IN NEW YORK. By John T. Ridge. (St. Patrick's Day Parade Committee, 1988). From the first recorded St. Patrick's Day "parade" in New York City in 1763 down to John Lawe's Grand Marshallship in 1987, John Ridge chronicles the growth of this most famous parade with an entry for every year from 1851. He is especially interested in how the parade mirrored the "events concerning the Irish at home and abroad, particularly in New York City [and the] many causes that have gripped Ireland from time to time." His sources include most of the New York daily and Irish-American weekly newspapers.

BEYOND THE GOLDEN DOOR. By William O'Dwyer. Edited by Paul O'Dwyer. (St. John's University, 1987). A portrait of the man from Bohola, Co. Mayo who became Mayor of New York City from 1946-1950. Bill O'Dwyer's story includes his youth in Ireland, education in Spain, emigration to America, careers as a New York policeman, Army General, and Mayor of "the world's most influential city", as well as his work with the Allied Commission and War Refugee Board.

THE FITZGERALDS AND THE KENNEDYS. By Doris Kearns Goodwin. (Simon and Schuster, 1987). The thrust of this book has been described as the "quintessential immigrant experience". It is a family history about the "rise of the Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys from the slums of Boston's North End to the White House". Goodwin ends her blend of "public and private history" with John F. Kennedy's inauguration; she comments that "perhaps no American family—with the possible exception of the Adams family—has had a more vivid and powerful impact on the life of their times."

THE PARISH AND THE HILL. By Mary Doyle Curran. (The Feminist Press, 1986). This novel was written in 1948 by Mary Doyle Curran (1917-1981), an English professor who was born in Holyoke, Massachusetts. It is the story of Irish Parish and Money Hole Hill, or the push-pull between an immigrant's old ethnic parish and the "Lace Curtain" world of the middle class. It is narrated by Mary O'Connor, the daughter of a Lace Curtain father who moved his family to cool and Yankee Money Hole Hill from Irish Parish where her grandfather John O'Sullivan lived in the warm embrace of his fellow Kerry men. It is Mary's mother, Mame, who dominates the novel as she delicately balances life in both worlds.

IRISH LETTERS IN THE NEW YORK CARMELITES' ARCHIVES. Edited by Alfred Isacson, O. Carm. (Vestigium Press, 1988). A riveting transcript of 122 letters from the archives of the Carmelites of the New York Province. The letters are correspondence between various Irish government officials and members of the Carmelite order based in New York. Eamon De Valera and Sean T. O'Kelly are the major correspondents and the letters provide a fascinating insight into their relationship with the New York Carmelites which dated from their American speaking tour and bond drive to promote Irish Freedom during 1919/1920. For example, De Valera recalled that in the years after 1916 "Liam Mellows, Harry Boland, Sean Nunan, Liam Pedler and I were constant visitors" to the Carmelite community on East 28th Street, New York "and were accepted almost as members of the Community." Often the letters deal with the friction which developed between the Friends of Irish Freedom and the old Clan-na-Gael; for example, Father Flanagan wrote to De Valera in 1963 that "Cohalan and Devoy were foremost among your opponents. As they could not control you, they determined to get you out of the country by any means possible. Week after week slanderous articles appeared in the *Gaelic-American*. They were written by John Devoy, and it was said that Cohalan approved of them." For further information on this little goldmine of letters, write to the Vestigium Press, 4944 Rabbit Hollow Drive, Boca Raton, FL 33487.

A Partial Bibliography of Published Works on the New York Irish

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- O'CONNOR, RICHARD. *HELL'S KITCHEN: The Roaring Days of New York's Wild West Side*. (J.B. Lippincott Co., 1958). Contains chapter on the Orange Riot of 1871.
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- ROSENWAIKE, IRA. "American Chronicles: Democracy in Action", *THE NEW YORKER*, 21 March 1988, p. 85. An insightful look at how the New York Irish select the Grand Marshall of the St. Patrick's Day Parade.
- TRILLIN, CALVIN.

The Roundtable is in the process of collecting citations such as the above, which reflect only a small portion of the available sources, for a comprehensive bibliography to be published. Please send suggestions to P.O. Box 2087, Church Street Station, New York, New York 10007.