

The Ocean Plague: The Diary of a Cabin Passenger
The Emigration Journal of Robert Whyte

(adapted from Peter Gray, *The Irish Famine*, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995)

Robert Whyte's journal tells the story of his trip from Ireland to Quebec, Canada on a "coffin ship" in 1847. It was published in 1848 under the title *The Ocean Plague: The Diary of a Cabin Passenger*. We do not know whether Robert Whyte was the author's actual name or a pseudonym. Nothing is known of his later life other than that he settled in the United States.

June 15, 1847: The reports this morning were very afflicting, and I felt much that I was unable to render any assistance to my poor fellow passengers. The captain desired the Mistress to give them everything out of his own stores that she considered to be of service to any of them. He felt much alarmed; nor was it to be wondered at that contagious fever -- which under the most advantageous circumstances and under the watchful eyes of the most skillful physicians requires the greatest ability -- should terrify one having the charge of so many human beings, likely to fall prey to the unchecked progress of the dreadful disease. For once having shown itself in the unventilated hold of a small brig, containing 110 living creatures, how could it possibly be stayed without suitable medicines, medical skill and pure water to slake the patients' burning thirst. The prospect before us was indeed an awful one, and there was no hope for us but in the mercy of God.

June 16: The past night was very rough, and I enjoyed little rest. No additional cases of sickness were reported, but there were signs of insubordination amongst the healthy men who complained of starvation and want of water for their sick wives and children. A deputation came aft to acquaint the captain with their grievances, but he ordered them away, and would not listen to a word from them. When he went below the ring leaders threatened that they would break into the provision store. In order to make a deeper impression on their minds, he brought out the old blunderbuss from which he fired a shot, the report of which was equal to the report of a small cannon. The deputation slunk away muttering complaints. If they were resolute they could easily have seized upon the provisions. In fact, I was surprised how famished men could so easily bear with their own and their starved children's sufferings. The captain would willingly have listened if it were in his power to relieve their distress.

June 24: Being the festival of St. John, and a Catholic holiday, some young men and women got up a dance in the evening, regardless of the moans and crys of those tortured by the fiery fever. When the mate spoke to them of the impropriety of such conduct they desisted and retired to the bow where they sat down and spent the remainder of the evening singing. The monotonous howling they kept up was quite in union with the scene of desolation within, and the dreary expanse of ocean without.

June 25: It was awful how suddenly some were stricken. A little child, playing with his companions, suddenly fell down, and for some time sunk in deadly torpor, from which when he awoke he commenced to scream violently and wreath in convulsive agony. A poor woman who was warming a drink at the fire for her husband also dropped down quite senseless and was borne to her berth. I found it very difficult to acquire precise information respecting the progressive symptoms of the disease. I inferred that the first symptom was generally a reeling in the head followed by a swelling pain, as if the head were going to burst. Next came excruciating pains in the bones, and then a swelling of the limbs, commencing with the feet, and in some cases ascending the body, and again descending before it reached the head, stopping at the throat. The period of this stage varied in different patients, some of them were covered in yellow watery pimples, and others with red and purple spots that turned into putrid sores.

July 28, Grosse Isle: By 6 AM we were settled in our new position before the quarantine station. The poor passengers, expecting that they would be all reviewed, were dressed in their best clothes and were clean, though haggard and weak. They were greatly disappointed in their expectations as they were under the impression that the sick would be immediately admitted to the hospital and the healthy landed upon the island, there to remain until taken to Quebec by a steamer. I could not believe it possible that here, within reach of help, we should be left as neglected as when upon the ocean. That after a voyage of two months' duration we were to be left still enveloped by reeking pestilence, the sick without medicine, medical skill, nourishment or so much as a drop of pure water. The river, although not saline here, was polluted by the most disgusting objects thrown overboard from the several vessels.

August 1: The steamer came alongside of us to take our passengers. It did not take very long to tranship them as few of them had any luggage. Many of them were sadly disappointed when they learned that they were to be carried on to Montreal, as those who had left their relatives upon Grosse Isle hoped that, as Quebec was not far distant, they would be enabled by some means to hear of them by staying there.

Questions

- 1- Why was it so difficult to combat disease on the emigration ships?
- 2- Do you think the Captain was right or wrong when he threatened to shoot people demanding the ship's food? Explain your answer.
- 3- In your opinion, why were the emigration ships from Ireland to North America called "coffin ships"?