



n December 23, 1840, a large public meeting was held at Limerick. Among the speakers were John O'Connell, a Member of the British Par-

liament (representing Kilkenny) and son and lieutenant of Daniel O'Connell; Sir David Roche, Bart., another M.P. (representing the City of Limerick); Thomas Steele, a Repealer, devoted to Daniel O'Connell; and Councillor Moore, a leading member of the Dublin-based Hibernian Anti-Slavery Society. The meeting, in the city courthouse, was attended by citizens of Limerick and bordering counties and by representatives of three Limerick organisations: the Citizens' Club, the Association of Congregated Trades, and the Auxiliary of the Anti-Slavery Society. The size of the meeting was unusual, and so was the gathering together of such a medley of individuals and interest groups. The topic of discussion was also out of the ordinary: not the repeal of the Union with England, not ways and means of relieving Irish poverty, nor ways and means of promoting Irish industry restricted by hostile English legislation, but the presence at the Limerick quay of what over the previous two weeks had been identified and denounced in the Irish press as a "Jamaica slave-ship" — the **Robert Kerr**. Jamaican planters, through their Limerick agents, the speakers declared vehemently, were attempting by false, deceiving promises, to persuade the credulous, the poor, the long suffering peasantry of Ireland to take berths aboard a vessel whose destination was an island where harsh treatment of the Negro population, cynical disregard for human suffering, fever, and other evils, had become proverbial. At all costs the vessel was to leave the Shannon in ballast or with as few deluded "victims" as possible.<sup>1</sup> The same message, proclaimed in handbills and posters, in street-marches and street-corner oratory, continued through Christmas week.

The **Robert Kerr** was not the first vessel in the years after the abolition of slavery in 1834 to enter an Irish port for the purpose of embarking emigrants for Jamaica. The first vessel known to have done so is the **James Ray**, a brig belonging to a Mr. Hamilton Brown, an extensive property owner, planting-attorney, and Member of Assembly for the parish of St. Ann. In December 1835, the brig left Belfast with one hundred and twenty one Irishmen and their families from Ballymoney, County Antrim, and on arrival in Jamaica they were located on estates and pens in Hamilton Brown's parish. Some of these immigrants certainly absconded from their locations and enlisted in the

# LIMERICK 'SLAVES' FOR JAMAICA

*by Carl Senior*

police, and on one estate about forty of them chased Hamilton Brown and narrowly missed giving him a sound beating.<sup>2</sup> Undaunted, in late 1836 he despatched his brig to Ireland once again; it returned with at least one hundred and eighty five Irish for St. Ann. In January 1840 the **New Phoenix** transported one hundred and thirty six Irish to the Island from County Kildare, and these were located on the properties of the London company of W.R.&S. Mitchell;<sup>3</sup> Leicesterfields in Clarendon, Boroughbridge in St. Ann, and Rosetta. Many more Irish were undoubtedly among the 1,618 British immigrants who were located by planters in the period between 1834 and the arrival of the **New Phoenix**.<sup>4</sup>

During this period no notice was apparently taken by the "friends of humanity" (as the opponents of white emigration to Jamaica came to term themselves) of the departure of Irishmen and their families to the Island. But by 1840 it was suspected in Ireland that the Jamaican Legislature, under the authority of an Act to encourage immigration, intended to boost Irish immigration on a scale hitherto unknown. The Limerick Auxiliary Anti-Slavery Society speculated that as many as 50,000 and perhaps more, were sought by the planters, and that a "great system", promoted by discreet, "quietly established sub-agents" in Irish ports, would be set in train; and it believed that the **Robert Kerr** was the first of a series of Jamaican "man traps" which would sweep into sleepy, unsuspecting ports, taking off to destruction the "uninformed and suffering poor ... by the delusive offer of a

free passage, by the lure of high wages, by the hope of bettering their miserable condition". An example was to be set in Limerick which would compel Jamaican "slave-seekers" to abandon Ireland for their invidious purpose.<sup>5</sup>

Besides the British immigrants who were located in the Island prior to 1840 there were over 1,180 Germans and one hundred and ninety two Portuguese from Madiera, the Azores, and from Portugal itself. The mortality among these newcomers had been very high, particularly during 1835, the year of highest immigration. This gave the "friends of humanity" good cause for concern in 1840 as they envisaged thousands more emigrating; so did the harsh treatment which had been meted out by some planters to those who had gone before.<sup>6</sup> But besides solicitude for the welfare of future immigrants was a concern that floods of newcomers would lower the wages of the ex-slaves to unsatisfactory rates; and some "friends of humanity" were just as concerned that the newcomers would spread "immorality and all the iniquities" of their homelands among the newly-freed Negroes.<sup>7</sup>

While some of the Scots and English brought to the Island (and a few of the Germans) were employed in skilled departments of sugar estates, most — along with the Irish and Portuguese — were put to work as field labourers: planting and cutting sugar-cane, preparing coffee fields, and working on the barbeques. Over four hundred and fifty Scots and Germans were recruited by official Government agents and located in specially prepared Government Townships; the rest were

imported by planters or their agents under the inducement of a bounty offered by the Legislature on European "mechanics, artisans and field labourers imported for the purpose of cultivating the soil." Prior to March 31, 1836, £15 a head was paid; after that date, £12 and £8 on Europeans above and below sixteen years of age respectively; and after March 1838, £10 a head on all Europeans located for twelve months.<sup>8</sup>

At the basis of the Legislature's European immigration scheme lay racial fear and insecurity. During the "apprenticeship" — the six year period which preceded full emancipation in 1838 (originally planned for 1840) and during which the ex-slaves were obliged to give a portion of their labour to their masters — many white Jamaicans feared that the complete loosening of the bonds of slavery would be followed by slaughter, incendiary fires, and the destruction of property; others did not fear violence, but, because of lack of regular labour, the abandonment of the production of the Island's principal exports — sugar and coffee — and, consequently, the collapse of existing society.

In Jamaica the best sugar land was on the lowlands, in alluvial valleys, river basins and deltas; coffee estates were located in the highlands. Only a small portion of these estates were actually put into cultivation, the rest being left in wood, fallow and ruin: and it was to the idle but cultivable parts of estates that many white Jamaicans feared the ex-slaves would resort in 1840 as independent cultivators — through squatting, rent or purchase — and thereby abandon regular estate work. Intensifying the fear was the existence of abandoned coffee estates for the ex-slaves' taking and an (erroneous) notion that there were vast acreages of Crown Lands.

For the planters, who dominated the local Assembly, the ill-omens for the future were quite apparent, and left three alternatives: high enough wages would have to be offered to tempt the ex-slaves away from independent cultivation, immigrants would have to be imported to fill the gaps left by the ex-slaves on the estates, or immigrants would have to be located in the highlands — leaving the ex-slaves no alternative but to remain where the planters held they properly belonged: on the lowlands, planting and cutting cane. While the other great immigrant-seeking colonies of Trinidad and British Guiana adopted the former two alternatives in the years after Abolition, with no great regard for the complexion of their immigrants, the planters of Jamaica opted for the latter alternative and insisted that the immigrants should be Europeans, preferably from the north of Europe.

The highlands, considered more

healthy than low-lying land and certainly much cooler, were to be "stocked" with Europeans who would work as independent small farmers, as labourers and artisans on coffee estates and cattle pens, and in Government townships specially prepared for their arrival. But such a policy was expected to take time to put into effect, and in the meantime planters wanted immediate, additional labour on their estates so as to maintain pre-abolition levels of production. Thus, accompanying efforts to establish Government townships in the highlands and the offering of bounties to highland planters, bounties were also offered to lowland sugar planters. This, however, was regarded as a short term, temporary expedient which might be abolished as highland colonization got under way.<sup>11</sup>

Even during the year when liberal bounties were given, and which provided importers with substantial profits, never enough Europeans were imported to meet the wishes of the Legislature. The inadequacy became even more apparent when, in August 1838, the apprenticeship period was abridged by two years, leaving planters without the modicum of labour they had expected from the ex-slaves. Disputes between planters and ex-slaves, neither accustomed to wage bargaining, became general, and much of the 1838 crop was lost as a consequence. More and more attention was accordingly given to other sources of immigrants: an exclusive European immigration policy was no longer regarded as being tenable since Europeans could not be imported in large enough numbers to save lowland cultivation, and besides, it had come to be recognized that there was no great advantage in importing Europeans for the lowlands where so many died from fever. For the lowlands, Maltese (considered to be more hardy than north Europeans), Asians, the free Negroes of the United States, and particularly Africans became by 1840 what the Governor of Jamaica described as "objects of speculation". But for the Island's long-term peace, security and prosperity, the colonization of the highlands was still regarded as being of the utmost importance.

In 1840 the Legislature passed its first full-fledged Immigration Act to regulate and promote immigration. Under this Act the Governor was authorized to appoint an Agent-General of Immigrants, a corps of sub-agents, and an Immigration Commissioner. The principal duties of the former officials were to ensure that proper preparations had been made by employers for their immigrants and that contracts were properly and fairly drawn up; the Commissioner was to be responsible for setting in train a system of immigration from the United States, Great Britain

and "elsewhere". Provided the Agent-General was satisfied with the preparations made and the terms of contract, persons who received immigrants through their own or the Government immigration agents abroad were to receive a moiety of the cost of importation. (This was modified to full costs under an Act of December 1840, 4 Vict., c.23). Provision was also made for the preparation of European villages (two to each parish during the duration of the Act) in the highlands; these were to supplement the Townships already in existence. Except for certain categories of indoor work and work less arduous than field labour, Europeans were not to be located on the lowlands; infringement of this principle made the person convicted liable to a heavy fine with full costs.

Alexander Barclay, a Scotsman with property in the east of the Island, and a leading Member of Assembly, was chosen as Commissioner. By late June 1840 he was in the United States on the first leg of his mission. Recruiting prospects proved disappointing, and after five weeks he left for London — leaving agents in Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York in the hope that the situation would improve in time. In London he immediately proceeded to give his attention to obtaining the sanction of the Colonial Secretary to proceed to Africa: specifically to Sierra Leone, a British colony greatly overburdened by large numbers of Africans liberated by the Royal Navy in its drive against the foreign slave-trade. Quasi-approval for his venture, which he considered adequate to enable him to proceed, was obtained after strong, persistent lobbying.<sup>13</sup>

Barclay decided against visiting the Continent and Malta. The adequate numbers likely to be recruited in Great Britain made a visit to the Continent unnecessary and as far as Malta was concerned, there had been too many discouraging accounts of the Maltese who had recently emigrated to Demerara and Grenada.<sup>14</sup> His personal recruiting efforts were confined to eastern Scotland, and by October he was at Montrose. The instructions covering this Commission did not specify the number of British emigrants he was to recruit, but Barclay decided to limit the number to a thousand; he believed that if these were successfully located thousands more would follow later.<sup>15</sup> The recruiting of most of the one thousand emigrants was left to the agents he appointed: James Barclay, his brother who lived in Aberdeenshire; Thomas McNeel, Custos and Chief Magistrate of Westmoreland in Jamaica, who was in Galloway, western Scotland, recruiting privately; the London-based West Indian Immigration Society; and William White, President of the Limerick Chamber of Commerce.

McNeel and James Barclay were both experienced in the emigration business. Only shortly before their appointment as agents, Barclay had despatched one hundred and twenty nine Aberdeenshire emigrants to estates belonging to and under the management of McNeel in Westmoreland, and between 1837 and 1839 had despatched a large number of Scots to two of Jamaica's highland townships; McNeel imported ten Scots between 1837 and 1838,<sup>16</sup> and was an active Township Commissioner. William White had had less experience in this regard, but he did have two qualities which Alexander Barclay could use: influence and a sound business knowledge. Limerick was also a useful base for recruiting purposes, being on the crossroads of three counties: County Limerick, County Clare, and County Tipperary.

As always in Ireland, hunger or actual starvation occurred whenever the potato, the staple food of the Irish, could not be fully reaped because of disease. 1840 was not a bad year for the potato, but there was still hunger in parts of the island, particularly in the west and including County Limerick. Only a few months before White was appointed as an agent by Barclay, an oat-laden vessel on the river Shannon and barns and houses in County Limerick had been attacked by famine-driven peasants.<sup>17</sup> Not surprisingly then that as soon as White began advertising, by distributing handbills and by using the press, the response was such that there were three or four times the number of applications for berths than he could accommodate. The inducements, first published in the *Limerick Reporter* of November 17, 1840, included the following:

1. A free passage, with food "and every other necessary attention"
2. A comfortable cottage with provision lands
3. Medicine and medical attention
4. A sow pig and the milk of a cow for each family
5. Six hundred-weight of oatmeal and half a barrel of herrings for first-class labourers during the first year, and proportionally less for other labourers
6. Good wages: 1s. 6d. sterling a nine-hour day for labourers and 2s. for mechanics
7. There are Roman Catholic clergymen and chapels on the island.

For those who decided to emigrate there would be passage aboard the 700 ton "fast-sailing, first class, coppered Ship" the *Robert Kerr* bound for Kingston or Savanna-la-Mar. The vessel had been chartered by White from a William Pirrie, a wealthy Belfast merchant who had also provided Thomas McNeel with a vessel.

Attractive as the inducements were, they were highly delusive. There was no guarantee that such benefits would be received in Jamaica; and the immigration Act gave the agents no authority to offer specific inducements to prospective emigrants: this was a matter to be settled between individual immigrants and their employers in Jamaica. What White had done was to simply copy the inducements which Thomas McNeel had held out to the Aberdeenshire emigrants previously sent to Jamaica. White received a sharp rebuke from Alexander Barclay, then in London, and he might have escaped with nothing more than this had not his advertisement also been spotted, ironically, by Thomas Shannon, ex-editor of the *Jamaica Despatch*, who was visiting Limerick. On December 1, 1840, Shannon brought it to the attention of the readers of the *Limerick Reporter*, and by the time Barclay's rebuke had arrived White had become embroiled in a controversy which threatened not only to prevent his efforts to fill the *Robert Kerr* but all future efforts to recruit Irish emigrants for Jamaica.

On November 27, 1840, ten days after the first appearance of the advertisement, Shannon met White — probably at the latter's office on the quay. Shannon expressed great concern at one of the inducements being held out to emigrants: that which implied that there were adequate Roman Catholic clergymen and chapels in Jamaica to serve the needs of Irish Catholic emigrants. As an Irishman and a Catholic himself, and well aware of the destitute condition of the Catholic Mission in every parish but Kingston, he expressed a wish that all recruits be warned that they would be "totally unprovided with religious aid or instruction of every kind." White was unwilling to cooperate; Shannon became indignant, and wrote a public letter to White demanding that recruits be told the truth and wrote a covering letter to the *Reporter* describing the state of the Catholic Mission. In Jamaica Shannon disclaimed any intention of impeding Irish emigration to the Island (the Kingston *Morning Journal*, February 11, 1841, called him a liar), but his letters could hardly have helped White in his recruiting and they set in motion a slanderous, exceedingly bitter campaign against Irish emigration to Jamaica.

In a scathing anti-Jamaica editorial covering the Shannon letters the *Limerick Reporter* declared that it was "melancholy indeed" that "virtuous Irish emigrants" would have to associate with native Jamaicans, "vicious and immoral, and none of them Catholics." On December 4, 1840, a Dublin newspaper, the *Freeman's Journal*, took up the Shannon letters, but emphasised not religious deprivation but its opinion that emigrants

would be going into actual physical slavery and a "pestilential" climate.

"Now that negro slavery is abolished ... and that the liberated black labourers are found a little stubborn in the hands of their old task masters, it appears that an ingenious contrivance has been resorted to. ... They (the planters) supposed that the Irish peasantry were, as of old, without the pale of humanity, and probably not much thought of in the English Parliament. What is the fact? Why a large ship is at this very moment lying at the quay of Limerick, and is being freighted with a cargo of our wretched, deluded countrymen, who are induced to go out ... to the pestilential shores of Jamaica, there to be indentured in the manner of the negro apprentices to the old slave-owners for a term of years, and all for the generous consideration of a *free passage and their diet on the voyage!*"

Astounding as this statement may appear — horrifying as it may be to humanity, it is nevertheless the fact".

"We protest against the horrid and inhuman traffic which it is attempted to carry on amongst us", the newspaper continued, "and we warn the peasantry of Ireland against the suicidal act into which it is attempted to inveigle them".

The anti-emigration banner was taken up by other Dublin newspapers: the *Monitor* and the *Weekly Register*; in Ennis, the capital of County Clare, it was taken up by the *Clare Journal*; in County Sligo by the *Sligo Champion*; in Nenagh, County Tipperary, by the *Nenagh Journal*; and in Limerick the *Standard* followed the lead of the *Reporter*. Other newspapers, more cautious than these, such as the *Kerry Examiner*, followed suit late in December and early January of the following year. Each newspaper strained to outdo its rivals in the vehemence of its denunciations. "Emigration to the West Indies — Kidnapping Irish Labourers" was the heading to the *Limerick Reporter's* editorial of December 11, 1840; "Emigration to Jamaica, 'Is Ireland to be made a Slave Market'?", and "Emigration to Jamaica — Ireland a 'Jamaica Apprentice' Market", were headings to the *Freeman's Journal* editorials of December 9 and 15 respectively.

On December 9, 1840, the *Nenagh Guardian* made its first comment on the emigration scheme, and with a vehemence typical of the Irish press. "We do not lose a moment in cautioning our countrymen", it said, against being inveigled "under insidious promises" into any agreement to go to Jamaica, and

"... we tell our peasantry if they go there, it will be a land of disease and death. Every experiment that has

been tried has proved that the burning sun of Jamaica will not suit white labourers, and we could tell appalling instances of the way in which former emigrants have been swept off. But, independently of all this, the scheme put forth is, we hesitate not to say, most unfavourable to the emigrant — may be likely to reduce him to the condition of being little better than a slave. By whom is it hatched? By the Jamaica House of Assembly — a body who have gained unenviable notoriety by their determined support of slavery, and, now that the black man has been wrenched from their grasp, would gladly set the iron heel of oppression even on the *poor Irish*. We tell our countrymen that if they listen to these proposals that they *will bitterly rue their steps* — that we have seen the handbills put forth which though plausible, are utterly unintelligible, and that they impose certain restrictions on the emigrant, which if he violates, he is liable to be thrown into prison for debt, to be mulct, and left a wanderer and houseless on a strange land; added to this, disease and death will be his almost certain inheritance. Privations at home are better than death and misery in a foreign land."

The theme was always the same: the pestilential climate of the Island, the reduction of poor emigrants to slaves, the severity and cruelty of the planters and planter-dominated Assembly clinging to every vestige of oppression and, of course, the absence of priests and chapels. The *Limerick Standard* of December 31, 1840, described the emigration scheme as "without doubt, the most atrocious of the public swindlings, of which the present day is so prolific".

In Dublin the denunciation of the scheme by the Press was actively encouraged by the Hibernian Anti-Slavery Society; and in Limerick by the Auxiliary of the Society and by the Society of Friends. Failure to support the cause — or failure to support it with vigour — was regarded as a dereliction of moral duty, and it was communicated to a strong supporter of the cause, such as the *Freeman's Journal* so as to be made public. Copies of newspaper clippings about the scheme were passed to and fro between the Anti-Slavery Society and the Auxiliary,<sup>18</sup> and in early December 1840 placards and handbills condemning the scheme were despatched to Limerick by Richard Allen, Chairman of the Society. These were soon "circulating fast" in Limerick and the surrounding countryside. Five hundred copies of the December 4 editorial of the *Freeman's Journal* were also printed and despatched to the Auxiliary. Samuel Grey, Chairman of the Auxiliary, not only organized the distribution of post-

ers and handbills but succeeded in obtaining the active support of the Government Emigration Agent in Limerick, Lieutenant Lynch, R.N. (who, Grey wrote on December 12, was "doing his part well, but quietly") and several local Protestant and Roman Catholic clergymen.<sup>19</sup> The clergymen denounced the emigration scheme from their pulpits.<sup>20</sup>

On December 12, 1840, Richard Allen persuaded the *Dublin Register* to publish a notice, warning the peasantry of Ireland about the emigration scheme, at the top of its front page. He kept in contact with J.H. Tredgold, Secretary of the London-based British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, forwarding articles on the scheme which had appeared in the Irish press and pressing him to bring the subject of emigration to Jamaica before the Committee of the Society.<sup>21</sup> Tredgold saw to it that the scheme was brought to the attention of the Society's *Anti-Slavery Report*.<sup>22</sup> Late in December Allen wrote (without success) to Lords Russell (Colonial Secretary) and Morpeth (Chief Secretary for Ireland) and to the Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners in London complaining of what he described as the intolerable iniquities of white emigration to Jamaica.<sup>23</sup>

As soon as the presence of a Jamaica "slave-ship" became known in Limerick the information was relayed to Mr. James Haughton, a well known Repealer and philanthropist, and on December 8, 1840, he brought the subject to the attention of the Loyal National Repeal Association in Dublin. Speeches by Haughton and John O'Connell decried the "nefarious project", but no resolution was agreed on except a vague determination that the peasantry of Ireland should be warned. On December 17 O'Connell was in Limerick and had been joined by Sir David Roche, Thomas Steele, and Councillor Moore — the latter sent from Dublin as a delegate of the Hibernian Anti-Slavery Society. In a speech (fully reported in the Limerick press) to the Association of Congregated Trades O'Connell once again decried Jamaica and its "slavery scheme". By this time a plan of campaign had been agreed on, including a grand public meeting and marches through the streets of Limerick.

At the public meeting in December 23, 1840, besides the speakers previously mentioned, were two gentlemen who had some knowledge and experience of the deleterious effects of tropical climates: a Captain Kane and a Mr. Shannon (not Thomas Shannon of Jamaica). William White was also on the speakers' platform: he had agreed to attend the meeting only after assurances from Sir David Roche that he would get a fair, uninterrupted hearing. While the meeting began in a proper,

orderly manner, however, it soon degenerated as shouts, hooting and groaning came from the gallery whenever White attempted to speak. Angered by this, and the aspersions cast on his character and honour by Councillor Moore, he was forced to retire, leaving the other speakers free to denounce the emigration scheme to their hearts' content — and the denunciations reached a high pitch. Afterwards Samuel Grey in a letter to Richard Allen in Dublin described the



meeting as "Splendid"; Allen in a letter to J.H. Tredgold described it as "most triumphant."<sup>24</sup>

The enthusiasm of the "friends of humanity" had now been fully aroused, and on Christmas day they visited the chapels and thoroughfares of Limerick and its neighbourhood addressing crowds of people. On the following day, Saturday, they were joined by Thomas Steele who, accompanied by an enormous crowd, made his way to where the *Robert Kerr* was moored. He instructed his followers to "pass by the fatal ship in dead silence, without uttering a single word, or giving vent to a single groan": instructions, according to the *Limerick Reporter* (December 29, 1840), "attended to the letter." Meanwhile Councillor

Moore "roused the country for an extent of several miles" and held three roadside meetings — each attended by about a thousand people. On the 27th Councillor Moore and other "friends of humanity" gathered at the ship's side: Thomas Steele, after speaking in the streets leading to the quay, led "thousands" to William White's office where he again denounced the emigration scheme. A silent march along the ship's side was repeated. On the 29th Steele and Councillor Moore were

really full and that a man in the establishment of the Agent of said ship, has stated, that if they had **four more ships** they could fill them all!!!!" The anti-Jamaica posters and handbills, the press campaign and the denunciations from pulpits certainly caused all but the most intrepid or desperate souls some doubt about the wisdom of following their original determination of emigrating, and large numbers of persons did call on White requesting the return of their tickets. (Councillor Moore gave

propriety of such a step".

White had something else in his favour. At the public meeting of December 23 Councillor Moore had announced that, contrary to what White had been telling would-be emigrants, no Roman Catholic clergyman would accompany the **Robert Kerr**; and that this was simply a ruse to give the impression that the emigration scheme had the approbation of the Church. On December 28, however, White was able to announce officially (in the **Limerick Reporter**) that a clergyman would indeed accompany the vessel, and with the full approbation of his Bishop. This was a serious blow to White's opponents, and an appeal was made in the **Limerick Standard** of December 31 for the clergyman to make his name and address public; and he was warned that his presence in the "Transport Ship" would be sufficient to modify "if not counterbalance the evils that the friends of humanity have been pointing out to those intending to emigrate". The clergyman, the Rev. Oliver Frost, a young man of zeal, determined to embark on a foreign mission, could not be persuaded to remain at home. Thomas Steele met him on the quayside and in a public letter to the Catholics of Ireland (**Limerick Standard**, December 31, 1840) made it plain that he was going to Jamaica as a martyr for the Faith, and certainly with no intention of promoting the emigration scheme.

On January 1, 1841, the **Robert Kerr**, with many empty berths, slipped her moorings and sailed eighteen miles down the Shannon to the Pool. Here, as the vessel awaited the inspection of the Government Emigration Agent prior to departure (in accordance with the Imperial Passengers Act), it was reported in the Press that in an attempt to increase the number of passengers "the parties engaged in her have, in their despair, turned to our lanes and alleys, the abodes of vice and immorality of every sort, and have succeeded in enticing numbers of the most degraded characters of both sexes on board."<sup>26</sup> "The lanes and alleys, the by-streets and resorts of vice," the **Nenagh Guardian** reported (January 9, 1841), "were swept of their votaries." Whether or not this did happen, and there must be some doubt, it was clear that by the time the vessel was ready to leave the Pool the one hundred and twenty seven passengers aboard were not the "very best class of people" that Barclay had insisted White should obtain. They were desperate, hungry, ill-clad people, prepared to embark on any desperate venture that offered the smallest opportunity of betterment. The **Nenagh Guardian** (January 23, 1841) called them "the very refuse of the community, such as our island is well rid of." Among them were forty-one single persons, their average age twenty-two.



Taking the emigrant ship.

joined in the streets by a number of Quakers, including Samuel Evans, Secretary of the Auxiliary Anti-Slavery Society. Throughout the agitation the Limerick authorities, anticipating violence, provided the "slave-ship" with a police guard.

The number of names on White's passenger list fluctuated wildly during December 1840. Barclay intended that the **Robert Kerr** should transport about two hundred, but there were certainly applications for berths far in excess of this number early in the month. The **Freeman's Journal** reported on December 31 that three hundred had actually secured berths before the agitation; and on December 12 Grey wrote to Richard Allen dismally: "I regret to inform thee that the 'Robert Kerr' is

fifteen such people the means of returning home to distant Roscrea; others were perhaps aided by a subscription which the Limerick Citizens' Club planned to raise. But many persons who had decided not to emigrate changed their minds again and re-enrolled. This was largely due to the wise policy of William White who, instead of insisting on his right to retain the deposits and securities of those who withdrew, returned them willingly. This, wrote the **Limerick Chronicle** on December 30, was in itself sufficient to convince persons that no fraud or delusion was intended to be practiced, and that although a vast expense had been incurred in fitting up a ship ... it was not sought to compel any man to embark unless he was satisfied of the

While in the Pool William Pirrie, the owner of the vessel, and Lieutenant Lynch, the Government Agent, paid a visit. All passengers were summoned on deck and a check made that the provisions of the Passengers Act had been complied with. Pirrie informed the passengers:

"that it was not his wish to retain any persons on board unless they were quite decided as to the propriety of proceeding on the voyage to Jamaica. He then called on any person that pleased to come forward and, although they had been supported at his expense since Monday, he would not compel them to proceed. There was then a general cry on deck of "ALL FOR JAMAICA," and three cheers for Mr. Pirrie, which was heartily responded to."

On board were fifty barrels of beef and pork "of the best quality", eighty-eight hogsheads of fresh water, twelve tons of potatoes, four tons of bread, as well as tea, coffee, sugar, flour, wine, and "a large supply of culinary utensils", tinware and fuel; printed calico "purchased at Todd's" was distributed among the females, and each man received a cap, coat and trousers.<sup>27</sup>

Although the vessel passed inspection all was still not well. A storm drove her onto the bank of the Pool, and the two Limerick Steam Companies — at the request of Thomas Steele — refused to tow her down the long, dangerous channel of the Shannon.

On January 9, 1841, at a court of petty sessions, Councillor Moore asserted that two emigrants — Patrick and Mary Purtill — were being detained aboard the vessel against their will, and this resulted in a visit by the police. The Purtils, however, were found to be "willing and anxious" to remain aboard.<sup>28</sup> It was not until the 11th, ten days after leaving the quay, that the *Robert Kerr* hit the open sea bound for Kingston.

The "slave-ship" had been allowed to escape with perhaps half its cargo, and now the "friends of humanity" turned their attention to other ports which might be used by Jamaica agents. In February 1841 the Limerick Auxiliary Anti-Slavery Society issued an "Appeal to the Public" for distribution among interested and sympathetic parties in the United Kingdom. Another appeal, prepared by the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, was also distributed and published in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (January 27, 1841). In Dublin a Watchdog Committee under the Chairmanship of Daniel O'Connell was created: its purpose being to collect information about the presence of "slave-ships" in the various ports of Ireland and to issue immediate warnings to the peasantry.<sup>29</sup>

Despite these measures British emigrants continued to depart for

Jamaica during 1841. On December 12, 1841, Samuel Grey discovered that a vessel owned by William Pirrie was at Stranraer, western Scotland, "about to be freighted" with emigrants for Jamaica,<sup>30</sup> but on that very day the vessel referred to (the *William Pirrie* chartered by Thomas McNeel) sailed for Bluefields, western Jamaica, with three hundred and twenty two Irish and Scottish emigrants. James Barclay despatched the 270-ton *Rob Roy* to Kingston with ninety-two Aberdeenshire emigrants on April 1, 1841, but it was a week after its departure before the "friends of humanity" made the discovery. Five vessels left from London between mid-December 1840 and October 1841 with over eight hundred and sixty emigrants, chiefly Irish,<sup>31</sup> but none were apparently detected until they had left port.

The *Robert Kerr* took seven weeks to reach Jamaica. Sea-sickness became general among the passengers, and according to the Rev. Frost their conduct was "anything but good." But there was plenty of steerage space, a good surgeon, and no complaints about the rations. The passengers in fact were far better off than many fellow-emigrants who braved the Atlantic crossing in the 'forties. The Rev. Frost described the passage as "delightful", and one of the emigrants, Thomas Daly, whose wife gave birth to a girl during the passage, described it as healthy and pleasant.<sup>32</sup> They at least seem to have escaped the sea-sickness.

On arrival the newcomers, decked out with new clothes and some displaying Temperance Medals, made a favourable impression on the Kingston press.<sup>33</sup> They were met by the Kingston sub-agent, James Paul M.D., and conveyed to the specially prepared immigration depot at Admiral's Pen (now the Eventide Home). The Rev. Frost was duly impressed by the new land. He wrote to William Pirrie:

"We are now only two or three days landed, and yet two-thirds of the emigrants are engaged in excellent situations. In fact, had I known, in Limerick, as I now know, that there is nothing like poverty in Jamaica, I would have been the means of inducing hundreds to come out here. I have met the Agent-General and Sub-Agent for Immigration, and two more honourable or high-minded men, I have never spoken to."

Frost's letter, published in the Belfast *Northern Whig* of April 3, 1842, caused the "friends of humanity" in Dublin considerable discomfort, but it was concluded that he had been premature in writing: he had arrived in the healthy spring-time and had been deluded by crafty immigration officials who, aware of his influence, had given him a smile

at every turn.<sup>34</sup>

Thirty of the immigrants were engaged by Dr. Hinton Spalding for field work on his Hermitage coffee estate high in the parish of St. George (straddling the present parishes of St. Mary and Portland); the others were engaged as follows: Spanish Town Police (12); the Agent-General (4); Mr. Chavane of St. Andrew (2); Stephen Hanaford of St. Dorothy (part of present St. Catherine and Clarendon) (2); J.H. Smith of Kingston (2); R.J. Hitchins, Kingston merchant (2); Walter Pollock of St. Mary (2); John Jones of Portland (11); Mr. Bonitto, Kingston Tailor (2); Robert Smith of Manchester (2); J. Harrison of St. Catherine, pen-keeper (4)]. The rest were individually engaged to other parties.<sup>35</sup>

Prospects were bright, and on March 21, 1841 (in a letter subsequently published in the *Limerick Chronicle*, May 5, 1841) Thomas Daly wrote to his father in Ireland:

"Within a week after our landing we were all employed at very high wages. I and my wife remain for the present with Fathers Frost and Gleeson, the latter from County Clare. In the course of a few days I am to enter the Police at a salary of £60 sterling per annum. Norry is to stop where she is, and is to get six shillings a week, her diet, and lodging, for her services as cook and housekeeper. I will be permitted to live with her. ... I beg you will answer this letter by return of post, and let me know how you are situated, as also the friends. I expect to be able to send you a trifle of money as soon as I receive your answer. I am very anxious that my sister would come out to me by the next vessel that leaves Ireland for this country with emigrants. Though it should not start from Limerick, her expenses will be paid from and to any port in the kingdom. Let her apply to Mr. White, who will give her all necessary information on the subject. ... My health is excellent, thank God as is also Norry's. We can live in this country as well as at home, if we take care of ourselves. Don't believe what you hear at home of the dangers of the climate; it is warm to be sure, but not half so much as I expected. I would advise James Hickey and family to come out here. He could have his sons bound to most respectable tradesmen, and his girls get excellent situations."

Here was an expression of enthusiasm probably shared by all the newcomers, but as spring faded into summer grievous disappointment, as the "friends of humanity" had predicted, began to set in. The downfall of many of them began to manifest itself in an inordinate penchant for easily available cheap new rum. As early as March

1841, while still at the Admiral's Pen depot, some were seen in a drunken state by a visiting missionary;<sup>36</sup> and in May the Rev. Frost, who kept track of his flock, wrote to William White that:

"A thousand times have I and others cautioned them against intemperance, in vain they were told that fresh rum and exposure to sun were most destructive to new comers. ... Most truly was it said in the placard you posted up in Limerick, that Jamaica was no place for a drunkard."<sup>37</sup>

For the first time in several years a yellow fever epidemic broke out during the summer months of 1841; the disease, as always, was particularly severe on newcomers. At the time of the Rev. Frost's letter to White nine of his flock had died from "fever, the result of drunkenness"; in late August when the epidemic was at its height at least eighteen had died (twelve in Kingston and six in the country) and eight were in the Kingston Public Hospital. During September, it was reported, deaths at the Hospital were exclusively confined to immigrants. The suffering of the *Robert Kerr* immigrants was shared by those who came to the Island in other vessels, and the sick and dying daily congregated at the Hospital — creating a "fearful expenditure." The suffering was also great at Admiral's Pen where, during May, immigrants from five vessels were accommodated. Here, with few offers of employment and consequent over-long detention and over-crowding, dysentery and typhus, as well as yellow fever prevailed. Among those who had come in the *Robert Kerr*, and who escaped the misery at the Pen, there had been twenty five deaths by the end of February 1842.

In Ireland a close watch was kept on the fate of the British immigrants, particularly the *Robert Kerr* immigrants; and the "friends of humanity" made sure that the press obtained all information relating to the subject, even that of doubtful authenticity. They also made persistent appeals (in concert with the Jamaican "friends of humanity", led by William Knibb and the *Baptist Herald*) for the British Government to appoint a commission of enquiry and to charter a vessel to transport the "miserable remnant" of the immigrants home again. Such appeals were unavailing, but the publicity given to the working of the immigration scheme did come to the attention of the Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners and, in the House of Lords, to Lord Brougham. The result was that instructions were conveyed by the Colonial Secretary to the Governor of Jamaica that an investigation into the circumstances of the *Robert Kerr* immigrants should take place.<sup>38</sup>

The investigation was conducted by

the sub-agent of Kingston, Dr. James Paul. Keeping track of the circumstances of the one hundred and twenty seven immigrants was no easy task, but by February 28, 1842, a report was drawn up. In reference to most of the immigrants the information was terse and to the point: repeatedly intoxicated, drank excessively, seen emerging from grog shops, very dissolute, very dissolute and abandoned, intemperate and abandoned, of very intemperate habits, drank hard. Only twenty four had remained with their original employers and in Dr. Paul's opinion only a handful of these were doing well for themselves; twenty five had died and ten emigrated. In the Agent-General's opinion the reason for so many having left their original locations was quite simple. They were not deceived in regard to wages and other advantages, he wrote in a covering letter to Dr. Paul's report:

"as I questioned and spoke to many of them soon after their arrival, and could not find any one who would honestly state that any deception was practiced. I believe many of them deceived themselves; for, although fairly told what their prospects were, they worked themselves up on board ship, where they were much better fed and cared for than they were accustomed to, to believe they were going to an "el dorado", and were much disappointed, on being brought to their sober senses, on finding that they must work fairly for their subsistence."

In his report Dr. Paul made a brief reference to the Rev. Frost. He had left the Island (along with the Daly family) "having been shut out of the society of his countrymen in Kingston, for giving a candid and fair statement of this Island, and the advantages of emigrating higher." The letter which Frost had written to William White and William Pirrie describing his favourable impression of the Island, both of which were published in Ireland, had evidently brought down the ire of the Kingston "friends of humanity" onto his head. Frost also failed to support these "friends of humanity" in their campaign of the summer months to expose Dr. Paul as a tyrant who mistreated immigrants at Admiral's Pen, and who allowed the Pen to become a "complete Golgotha." Frost, who had not visited the Pen after the departure of his flock in March, was unwilling to join the storm of criticism aimed at the man who, to him, had been nothing but courteous and kind. Where Frost went — back to Ireland or to America — is not recorded.

Another item of interest in Dr. Paul's report is his reference to the thirty immigrants located on Dr. Spalding's Heritage estate. Every one of them had

deserted him. They had received wages usual for the area, the report stated, as well as cottages, rent-free land, and free medicine and medical attention, but they "were induced to Kingston in the hope of getting their agreement annulled, and have lived for some months in a state of idleness, at the public expense."<sup>39</sup> Not stated in the report was that sixty-three other Irish immigrants employed by Spalding had also left his estate for Kingston.

Seven of Spalding's *Robert Kerr* immigrants claimed in a petition to the Assembly in December 1841 that they had been badly treated by their employer: cottages had not been provided, they had been forced to herd into the coffee store, they had not received adequate wages, two milch cows they had been promised had not been received, nor adequate rations.<sup>40</sup> In the House, as a Member for Manchester, Spalding countered the allegations. He asserted that the seeds of discontent among his immigrants had been sown by the Attorney-General and a number of Kingston magistrates, all avowed "friends of humanity", while they were at Admiral's Pen. Some of his *Robert Kerr* immigrants were in fact fugitives from justice. For refusing to work, after taking a weeks' rations, he had taken them to court in Annotto Bay; the magistrates had passed sentence against them (a fine or fourteen days in the house of correction) but, Spalding claimed, the Attorney-General had put pressure on the magistrates and they had allowed the immigrants to "escape". They headed for Kingston where, despite the fact that the Attorney-General knew they were fugitives, they were supported (in good health) at the Public Hospital. In fact, Spalding added, they had been sent to the Hospital on the Attorney-General's direct order.<sup>41</sup> An Assembly Committee which investigated Spalding's and the immigrants' allegations reported the evidence to be of a "conflicting nature" but that the immigrants had not been badly treated by Spalding's and the immigrants' allegations reported justice with official connivance.<sup>42</sup> Much to the annoyance of Spalding and his supporters in the House, however; no recommendation was made by the Committee and the subject was allowed to drop.

Many aspects of the Spalding case, which was much publicised at the time, remain obscure and of a "conflicting nature." Some of the immigrants were certainly happily enough located on the Hermitage. Twenty-one (of the non-*Robert Kerr*) immigrants whom Spalding located and who were later located on Fair Hill estate in St. Andrew praised their old employer for his kindness and were all able to show character references written by him.<sup>43</sup> The Rev. Frost, who visited the Hermitage, remarked in a letter dated April 16, 1841 (read by

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Spalding in the Assembly) that he was satisfied with the immigrants' diet, lodgings, and work, and was "much gratified" to find them so "comfortable and contented."<sup>44</sup> Something however had made the immigrants discontented. In the House Spalding blamed magisterial interference but did not mention what he later told the 1842 Select Committee of the House of Commons on the West India Colonies: their dislike of having to hoe the steep hills of the Hermitage.<sup>45</sup> What certainly did rankle with the immigrants — at least those who appeared before the magistrates — was Spalding's failure to supply milch cows and the insulting behaviour of one of his regular estate employees.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps there was something in what the Agent-General said in his covering letter to Dr. Paul's report: that they expected to be going to an El Dorado, where little work need be done. The Attorney-General's role in the affair remained at the time inconclusive. All that was known for certain was that he had visited Admiral's Pen, that he was aware that some of the immigrants were eluding justice, and that he had connived at or given direct orders that they be supported at the Public Hospital.

The **Robert Kerr** immigrants who left for Kingston were joined by scores of other Irish, and these ragged, angry people roaming the streets and frequenting the grog shops became something of a local hazard; few were prepared to employ them, and with a reputation for laziness and sudden violence they made it difficult for other Irish who came to the Island after them (such as the two hundred and seventeen in the **New Phoenix** in September 1841). Few could afford to return home or pay the smaller passage cost necessary to go to America. Some were fortunate in receiving public or private charity, and a few, at the Governor's personal expense, were transported off the Island to New York.<sup>47</sup>

The last word on the fate of the **Robert Kerr** immigrants appeared in the **Limerick Reporter** of August 19, 1842, and referred to Patrick Purtill (who, it will be recalled, had said he was willing and anxious to go to Jamaica) and Cornelius Donaghue. Purtill left Jamaica for Baltimore after February 1842 and wrote to his brothers in Limerick that he had been deceived in going to Jamaica and that he had been ill-used there; "scarcely three" of his shipmates, he said, had survived their Jamaican experience. Donaghue emigrated back to Limerick, via New Orleans, and called at the office of the **Reporter**: he told the proprietors that he had escaped from Jamaica and from what he suffered in the Island and at New Orleans nothing would dislodge him from his homeland.

There is no evidence that the Irish

"friends of humanity" made any financial contributions towards securing the return of their surviving countrymen — apparently satisfied to prevent the departure of any more to Jamaica, at least direct from Irish ports. There were occasional emigration scares during 1842 when it was rumoured that Jamaican agents were being appointed and vessels searching the coast,<sup>48</sup> but no emigrant vessel entered an Irish port after the **Robert Kerr**: Irish emigrants were recruited in England or sent from Ireland to London in unobtrusive commercial vessels. By the end of 1841 Irish emigration to Jamaica had ceased. Disappointed with its lack of success with white immigrants over the previous eight years and the very great expense in importing them, the Legislature devoted its attention to other sources of labour: to Africa and to Asia. Bounties were still offered up to 1845, but under such strict regulations that between 1842 and 1845 only forty-two white immigrants (Scots and English) were imported.<sup>49</sup> In late 1842 legislation was passed to break up and sell the still uncompleted European villages, and with the villages was abandoned the last vestige of the scheme of highland colonization.

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5. **Limerick Chronicle**, February 17, 1841.
6. As above, N.4 (Ch. IV, pp.98-147; Ch. VI, pp.193-198).
7. **Limerick Reporter**, April 6, 1841 (from **Morning Register**); same newspaper, May 11, June 4, 1841, letters from R. Allen to editor of **Freeman's Journal** and **Limerick Reporter**; **Limerick Reporter**, April 13, 1841, R. Barrett to J. Sturge, March 21.
8. As above, n.4 (Appendix I).
9. See, for example, James Logan, **Notes of a Journey Through Canada, The United States of America, and the West Indies** (Edin. 1838), p.218; C.O. 137/196, letter of Lord Sandon (1834); C.O. 137/196, various correspondence of R. Parker; C.O. 318/119, Friend to Hay, September 16, 1934.
10. As a result of having no Island-wide survey, poor surveying practices, and a consequent overlapping of titles, the extent of the Island's acreage and the acreage of the Crown Lands was grossly exaggerated. The former was thought to be over four million acres (when in fact it is only 2,692,480) and the latter one and a half million.
11. As above, n.4 (Ch.I, p. 18).
12. C.O. 137/248, Metcalfe to Russell, No. 50, March 30, 1840.
13. **Votes of the Jamaican Assembly (Votes)**, 1841/1842, Appendix V, pp. 46-50, 57-67, 75-78.

14. *Ibid.*, p.59.
15. *Ibid.*, pp.66-68.
16. B.M. Add. MSS 51816, f. 132, McNeel to Holland, May 20, 1837; **Votes**, November 25, 1841, pp.201-202.
17. **Morning Journal** (Kingston, Jamaica), July 24, 1840. See also **Limerick Standard**, December 14, 1840; same newspaper, December 29, 1840.
18. British and Foreign Anti-Slavery papers (A.S.S. papers) MSS Brit. Emp. S 18 C 154/192-195, C 4/42-44, 47.
19. *Ibid.*, C. 154/193.
20. **Sligo Champion**, December 29, 1840; **Limerick Reporter**, January 8, 1841.
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25. *Ibid.*, C 154/193.
26. **Limerick Reporter**, January 8, 1841; **Freeman's Journal**, December 30, 1840.
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32. **Northern Whig**, April 3, 1841, Frost to W. Pirrie, March 4; **Limerick Chronicle**, May 5, 1841, Daly to his father, March 21.
33. (Jamaica) **Morning Journal**, March 9, 1841; **Limerick Chronicle**, April 7, 1841 (from a Jamaican newspaper) (probably the **Despatch**).
34. **Northern Whig**, April 6, 1841, J. Standfield, Sec. of Hibernian Anti-Slavery Society, to editor, April 5; **Limerick Reporter**, April 13, 1841, meeting of Hibernian Anti-Slavery Society, April 7, speech by R. Allen.
35. C.O. 137/262, Metcalfe to Stanley, No. 88, March 1, 1842 (enclosure).
36. **Anti-Slavery Reporter**, March 9, 1841, p.39, letter dated October 27. See also **Emigration to the British West Indies**, anon., (Liverpool, 1842), p.7.
37. **Royal Gazette and Jamaica Standard**, August 10, 1841.
38. As above, n.4 (Ch. XI, pp.398-399, 410-420).
39. As above, n.35.
40. **Votes**, December 1, 1841, pp.241-243.
41. **Votes**, November 4, 1841. pp.79-81; **Royal Gazette and Jamaica Standard**, December 4, 1841, January 18, 19, 1842.
42. **Votes**, January 12, 1842, pp.445-446.
43. **Votes**, 1841/1842, Appendix IV, p.42.
44. **Jamaica Standard and Royal Gazette**, January 19, 1842.
45. **British Parliamentary Papers**, 1842, Vol. XIII, Minutes of Evidence, 5879.
46. Provision of milch cows was not included in the immigrants' contract, but an oral promise had been given by Spalding. On the advice of his overseer, however, who feared damage to the estate's unfenced coffee fields, Spalding changed his mind.
47. **Baptist Herald**, December 1, 1841; **Falmouth Post**, January 19, March 9, 1842; **Royal Gazette and Jamaica Standard**, April 28, 1842.
48. **Freeman's Journal**, January 4, 8, 1842; **Nenagh Guardian**, March 23, 1842; **Clare Journal**, January 6, 1842.
49. As above, n.4 (Ch. XIII, pp.488-503). (Reprinted from the "Jamaica Journal", September 1978).