

MAILS FROM BOTANY BAY

FIRST REPORTS FROM THE NEW PENAL COLONY, AS PUBLISHED IN THE ENNIS CHRONICLE APRIL- MAY 1789.

by Kieran Sheedy

In the first week of April 1789, local news reports in the Ennis Chronicle included the fact that a pig weighing 596lbs. was recently killed by local distiller Denis O'Brien, which had been reared in his still-house; an apprentice to the printing and bookbinding business was required also by the Printer, while the death had taken place at Summerhill of William Massy, the eighteen year old son of Sir Hugh Dillon Massy, a future county member of Parliament.

The four-page Ennis Chronicle, founded by Foster Parsons, six years before, was published thrice-weekly – Monday, Thursday and Saturday – at a cost of one penny. In common with newspapers of the period it relied, principally, for its content on material gleaned from newspapers arriving in the British mails. Indeed, the recent arrival of such mails was often highlighted at the top of pages, as an incentive to prospective buyers; a guarantee of fresh news.

The first page of a typical edition was devoted to a mixture of "Continental Intelligence and Politics", including political developments in countries such as France, Austria, Spain, and as far away as Egypt; and also "Domestic Intelligence" from Dublin. The second page dealt with reports from the British House of Commons (when in session); the third page was usually a continuation of the previous two, with one column featuring local advertisements for lands to be let in various baronies, and these were continued on the last page, in addition to "Country News" from provincial centres, such as Galway, Limerick and Cork. Local news from the county itself was surprisingly scarce, comprising the odd paragraph concerning recent crimes; and reports from recent Ennis markets concerning the price of barley, malt, beef, mutton, wheat, oats, potatoes, fresh butter, and the price of the 1d, 2d, 3d and 6d loaves. And a small section of the last page was given over to marriages, births and weddings – on a national rather than a local basis – and a list of the fairs in the coming month for Counties

Clare, Galway and Limerick. There were occasional features also for the ladies, such as "New French Dresses", and a list of costumes worn at a fancy dress ball in Waterford.

As for additional local news in 1789, Mr A C Stritch, Surveyor of Excise, Ennis, assisted by gaugers, and a party of the 59th regiment, was busy destroying private distilleries, spilling large quantities of pot ale and singlings, and carrying off stills, caps and worms, in areas such as Tulla; the Farmers Club in the county was quite active, with Richard Creagh (President), C J O'Brien (Vice-President); officers were changed from meeting to meeting; and in November they met at the house of Martin O'Loughlin, Corofin. At the end of October, the Subscribers of the Ennis Coffee House were requested to meet at 1 o'clock in order to elect a Committee for the ensuing year; in November also, Mr McMahon, Vice-Provost of Ennis, visited the various shops in the town to inspect their weights, and found many to be deficient, while in the same issue it was reported that old linen was urgently required for the inmates of the local Infirmary, and it was hoped "*that the humane Ladies of the neighbourhood will contribute their donations for the better relief of human wretchedness*". And in early December Francis Drew arrived at his seat in Drewsborough from Dublin and, as a compliment to his friend Col. McNamara, who had lately established his right to his estate in Co. Galway, assembled his "*numerous tenantry whom he hospitably entertained and ordered the Town of Scariff to be illuminated, which took place in the most general and brilliant manner, and the night concluded with every demonstration of joy.*"

In April and May of that year a series of reports was also published, concerning the setting up of a new penal colony at the far side of the world – at a place called Botany Bay. Faced with an unwillingness to build expensive penal establishments in Great Britain, to house an increasing number of offenders – as laid down by a restrictive penal code, the Transportation

Act of 1727 had been enacted to ship convicts to the American colonies where they would be far removed from their home environment and, hopefully, re-establish themselves, in addition to providing a cheap labour force for the colonists. But in the wake of the America War of Independence in 1775, and the rejection of locations such as Tristan Da Cunha, and the coast of Guinea in Africa, the new penal colony of New South Wales was set up, at the suggestion of Sir Joseph Banks, the President of the Royal Society, who had sailed as a naturalist with Captain Cook in the *Endeavour*, on his first voyage of discovery in 1770. In the course of that expedition they had landed at a harbour in the south coast of New Holland (New South Wales), and named their landing place Botany Bay on account of the abundance of hitherto unknown species of plants they discovered there.

The government in London agreed to the location in 1786; hired nine transports, consisting of six convict and three store ships and, accompanied by two Naval ships, a total of 756 convicts (564 male and 192 female), together with 550 officers, ships crews and their families, set off from Portsmouth in May 1787, on a voyage which took them to Tenerife, Rio de Janeiro, and past the Cape of Good Hope, before reaching Botany Bay on 26 January 1788 to begin what is known as the European settlement – the idea being that, on arrival, the convicts would be put to work on government projects such as building roads and houses; acting as servants to the military personnel, and as agricultural labourers to future free settlers; and, providing they had not transgressed, be given the opportunity of free pardons to re-establish their lives in the new colony. The native nomadic, aboriginal population (circa. 300,000) had inhabited the continent for ten thousand years but prior to this time had very little contact with outsiders, and was quite unprepared for the invasion of their ancestral lands.

News of the First Fleet's voyage outwards was carried in the pages of Dublin's Freeman's Journal in May and June 1788, while the reports in the Ennis Chronicle (copied from the London newspapers of March 25-27) began in the issue of Thursday 2 April 1789, with the headline EXPEDITION TO BOTANY BAY. It confirmed that the ships of war Sibius [Syrius]

and Supply, and the transport ships, had arrived safely, under the command of Captain Arthur Phillip. On arrival they discovered there was not sufficient water at Botany Bay to supply the new settlement: "*A council was in consequence held and the ships weighing anchor stood away for Jackson's Bay [Sydney Harbour], where Nature's gifts appeared equal to all their wishes – the verdure strong and rich, and the springs of the best water; the face of the country too, possessing great variety, and well clothed with wood.*" No subsequent groups of convicts were landed at Botany Bay, but its romantic-sounding name caught the public imagination and it continued to become synonymous with transportation.

The report highlighted the fact that the cattle who had survived the voyage had strayed into the woods and disappeared. In fact, a greatly increased number of these cattle were discovered some years later which became the foundation of the colony's herd. A pessimistic forecast concerning the ability to breed sheep was also made – again very wide of the mark, but the poultry were doing well and the horses, while the pigs had also thrived, and indeed, within a decade, there were complaints about the number of pigs roaming freely through the streets of the Sydney settlement. And when the Prince of Wales transport left Jackson's Bay on its return voyage in July 1788, "*a very fine crop of grain was presented to the eye*" which occupied twelve acres; as to the convicts, when three of their number decided to flee the settlement "*and try their fortunes among the natives, where they hoped to have a favourable reception; two of these were killed and eaten* [a further report contradicted this, stating that they were killed with arrows], *and the third, after subsisting on roots for some time, returned, almost perished through hunger. This operated to deter other adventures of a like nature.*"

Just four days later (Monday 6 April), readers of the Ennis Chronicle were treated to a further, comprehensive report from Botany Bay, taking up more than a page in that issue. It was described as an authentic letter from a "*very intelligent Gentleman at that quarter, and though this account differs from most others, we can confidently deliver it to our readers as a representation of authenticity.*" The anonymous writer had arrived with the First Fleet, and described again settling at Port Jackson rather

than Botany Bay. But in these very early days of the settlement he reported, somewhat pessimistically, that *"the country about us has been explored for upwards of forty miles round us, and hardly one acre of ground could be found in any one place, free from woods or rocks, no fresh water river, or even a spring has as yet been discovered."* And he also described the native population they had encountered; *"The men have bushy beards, and the hair on their heads is furzy, and stuck full of fish teeth and bits of shells which is fastened with gum...another more preposterous, namely a bone fastened in the cartilage of the nose, but this is worn only by a few of the distinguished. Some also had a belt of coloured clay smeared on them; and women were observed with two joints cut off the middle finger....Their huts are formed of boughs, and covered with bushes; their canoes are made of bark; their weapons consist of a long spear made of hard wood, which they jerk with such skill, as sometimes kill a bird; they have a shield made of a bark of a tree, which can hardly be penetrated. They have a lance also, with which they strike fish, and seldom fail to kill it. Their tackle consists of a hook made of shell, and a line formed of bark beat[en] into thread; and their wants being few, these are all the implements they have occasion for, except an adze made of stone, with which they cut wood. Fish is their principal food, and this, as well as flesh, they eat, scarce warm through, although they sit around a fire at all times at meals."* And for the first time also readers of the Ennis Chronicle were treated to a description of the new animals which had been found, such as the kangaroo: *"A quadruped as large as a sheep; the forelegs measure only eight inches, and the hind legs twenty one – the progress is by successive leaps or hops of a considerable length, in an erect posture."* There was also mention of opossums – larger than a cat, native dogs [dingoes] – described as being of the fox kind – polecats, birds of showy feathers – parakeets, loriquets; various species of the parrot kind; different kinds of small birds, totally unknown in Europe which sang *"pretty wild notes"*, and are in general of the wood pecker or fly catcher species. *One ostrich and one black swan have been killed, and several more seen. The bays frequented by the natives produce wild spinach, celery, parsley, and wild beans; some wild grapes have been found, and a shrub that pro-*

duces small berries, which are tart as gooseberries, as make good pies. The country produces various sorts of flowers unknown in England; two very different kinds of trees produce a sort of astringent gum, which is used in medicine; a large shrub produces a yellow gum of the Tolu kind, with which the natives fasten together their weapons, tackle for fishing etc.; of these I will collect what I can at my leisure; hitherto I have had hardly time to look around me."

In attempting to dig the soil to grow crops it was found that the clay was eminently suitable for making bricks, with the result that the building of houses began, in addition to timber huts – made principally from the wood of the cabbage tree. And they also discovered dry marl or chalk from which lime was produced. But the writer ended his letter on a pessimistic note: *"Having given you now a sketch of this country and its production, I leave you to inform your own opinion of it. I shall only venture to say that it will never answer the intentions of government, and I make [have] no doubt but we shall be recalled, which I sincerely wish."*

The third report on the new penal settlement was carried just three days later (Thursday 9 April) and was headed **MAILS FROM BOTANY BAY!** The inclusion of the exclamation mark was very necessary because it consisted of three disparaging letters, written in a comic vein, supposedly sent from Botany Bay; the first from one Irish convict (presumably sentenced in England) to a relative:

*To Mr Phelim O Flanagan, Chairman.
Cousin PHELIM,*

This place is worse than no place at all. We are still crawling about; but as for living, by J-----s! there has been no such thing. If I had taken poor PAT'S advice, and taken a swing [hanging] with him only for five little minutes at Newgate [Jail, London] I would not have been so bothered by half.

All day I have nothing to do but hard work. I get a little sweet nap at dinner, picking the tough tail of a kangaroo – Cousin Dermot has had a misfortune. He went to the woods after POURSTW, a poor gentlewoman of great fortune in this country. But they were caught in a pretty snug thicket, for want of no shelter at all, and eaten and roasted, both together one after another, for a whet before dinner on a moon-light night.

I have sent a letter to Sheelagh Shaughnessy; Father O Dogherty will read it to her, if she be alive; if he don't he may go to the devil

His

LUKE X O LEARY

Mark.

The second letter was written in the same vein (but using more classical language) by a Peter Penman to a Jacob Jolter, author. He had seemingly arrived, expecting "*Calypso's island, Circe lulling shades*", but had found instead "*deserts worse than the wilds of Loghaber, and females too filthy for a Scotch Presbyterian probationer. I heartily wish I had refused by conditional pardon, and petitioned for a fair hanging.*"

The third letter was to Thomas Trundle, poet, from Dick Distich, a fiddler who also expressed his disappointment, but was pleased by the reaction to his music: "*Here I reign the Orpheus of the woods. Hundreds of footy, flimsy devils dance around me, while I trickle the stump of an old fiddle. I have got up some interludes of my own, which are admirably acted. No danger of rejection here.*"

The letters were published without any comment or explanation, and taken from London newspapers. Pen names were surely used in all three, but who was the author(s), and were they written in London or Botany Bay?

A fortnight later, in the 23 April issue, an extract from a letter, sent by an officer with the First Fleet, gave further details of their arrival, including the holding of the first religious service by Rev Mr Johnson who preached a sermon to as many of the convicts as could be collected: "*Their behaviour was tolerably decent during the service, in the open air, and a mizzling rain.....Warraw! Repeated seems to be the cry of alarm among the natives, who seem more pleased with our hats than anything else worn by the Europeans.....The district of Port Jackson was named Cumberland County on the 4th of June [1788] when the birthday of His Majesty was kept with the highest conviviality; His Majesty's ships Syrius and Supply fired three royal salutes, to the great terror of the natives. Each soldier had a pint of porter; every convict under displeasure was pardoned, a distribution of half a pint of rum to every male, and to the females a gill. Wood being plenty, bonfires appeared in every direction within the lines.*"

Readers of the Ennis Chronicle were treated on 30 April also to an extract (of almost one page) from the Journal of Captain Watkin Tench, called *Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay* that had just been published in London. The extract covered in greater detail the arrival of the First Fleet in January 1788, first contacts with the native population (whom he called Indians), and the establishment of the penal settlement, but ended on a more optimistic note: "*The climate is undoubtedly very desirable to live in. In summer the heats are usually moderated by the sea breeze; and in winter the degree of cold is so slight as to occasion no inconvenience. Once or twice we had hoar frosts and hail, but no appearance of snow; nor is the temperature of the air less healthy than pleasant. We are strangers to epidemic diseases; and on the whole (thunder storms in the hot months excepted) I know not of any climate equal to this.*"

In the issue of 21 May, in the section headed Country News, it was reported that the Golden Grove supply ship under Captain Sharp (part of the First Fleet) had arrived in Cork harbour in the previous week, on her return from Jackson Bay – she had stopped also at the Falkland Islands – and their reports brought some new (and visible) evidence as to how the settlement was faring: "*The crew brought over some good corn grown there, and other kinds of vegetables, particularly potatoes which thrive well. The natives are very shy of the new settlers, and it is feared will remain so. The convicts continue in their old habits of thieving; their females are very happy and provided with good houses, and notwithstanding the loss sustained in the lice flock of cows, the Governor hoped soon would be replenished from the Cape, which was only ten weeks sailing from port Jackson. The ship is brought over several of the Kangaroos, an Oppossum, and many other curiosities of beasts, birds and fishes.*"

There was further news from the Golden Grove crew in the following week (28 May), mainly concerning the fate of some convicts; a man called Barrett was executed in February (1788) for stealing, while three others were reprieved; and another convict who had sworn to have discovered a gold mine, and to have sold a quantity of gold to a gentleman belonging to the Golden Grove, was put in irons when his deceit was discovered, and received three

hundred lashes before he confessed. It would be a hundred and fifty years later before gold was found.

One of the final issues of the year (21 December) included the report of a trial in London which, indirectly, had a bearing on the future fortunes of the penal colony. D'Arcy Wentworth, a twenty seven years old from Portadown, was put on trial on a charge of being a highway man, having been accused of robbing barrister Pemberton Heywood, near the eight-mile stone, on Finchley Common, London, in July of the previous year. A member of a well-known family, and a relative of Lord Fitzwilliam, he had served as an ensign in the First Armagh Company of the Irish Volunteers, and served his apprenticeship to the medical profession before going to London to complete his training. But finding himself in financial difficulty he, allegedly, turned to highway robbery, and with an accomplice held up Pemberton. As luck would have it, the wind blew the drape from his face and he was recognised by Pemberton who had met him in Yorkshire a few years before. D'Arcy Wentworth had been already tried twice and found not guilty on the charge (a guilty verdict would have meant hanging), and on this occasion, when Pemberton could not positively identify him, Baron Perryn told the jury there was too much doubt to warrant a capital conviction and he was found not guilty again. *"Mr Heywood applied to the Court that Mr Wentworth might be immediately discharged, he having procured the appointment of an Assistant-Surgeon at Botany Bay and as there was no other charge against him, it was ordered accordingly."*

D'Arcy Wentworth arrived in New South Wales in the following July. He acted as Superintendent of Convicts (the irony of holding that post must have struck him!) at Norfolk Island, before returning to work at Sydney and Paramatta, and was appointed as principal surgeon of the Civil Medical Department in 1809. He held varied posts of increased importance in New South Wales, including a number of commercial ventures which made him very wealthy. But he was also a humanitarian who showed great sympathy to the plight of the convict population. His son William Charles Wentworth became an even more influential person in the development of the colony and published in London in 1819 *"A Statistical,*

Historical, and Political Description of the Colony of New South Wales."

The effect on the readership of Ennis Chronicle's coverage of 1789 of the setting up of the new colony in Botany Bay cannot be gauged. For the majority it probably was regarded at best as a curiosity, with its description of new flora and fauna. The fate of the convicts would not have moved many consciences, but for the prison population in the country it had ominous undertones. The issue of 14 May included a report from Cork that a number of felons, under a rule of transportation, from the city and county jails, were transmitted to Dublin, on their way to Port Jackson, or Botany Bay. The first ship carrying Irish convicts, *The Queen*, arrived at Port Jackson in late September 1791, and was followed by a steady stream of similar human cargoes, including an additional ten in the decade following the 1798 Rebellion, and a large number of Clare-born men and women whose convictions ranged from petty crime to involvement in agrarian disturbances. The majority never returned, but their legacy, along with thousands of others *"has come in the shape of thousands of their descendants who have helped to create an individual nation and to impress on it the need for eternal vigilance regarding the fundamental right of human freedom."*

SOURCES:

- The 1789 edition of the Ennis Chronicle can be consulted on microfilm in the Local Studies Centre, Ennis.
- The Freeman's Journal (1788).
- The Tellicherry Five by Kieran Sheedy (The Woodfield Press).
- Australian Dictionary of Biography (ed. Douglas Pike).
- Historical records of Australia.
- Historical Records of New South Wales.
- Botany Bay by Con Costello.
- The Convict Ships by Charles Bateson (1787-1868).
- Irish Convicts by Robert Reese (ed.).