

# **LONDONDERRY TO CANADA: THE 'CHEAPEST AND SHORTEST SEA PASSAGE' TO NORTH AMERICA**

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From the late 1600s, in the age of the sailing ships, to the onset of the Second World War in 1939, when the last transatlantic steamer sailed from the port, Derry was one of the principal emigration ports in Ireland.

## **Geography**

Derry port possessed an ideal situation. She stood at the head of a virtually land-locked Lough Foyle, 24 miles long and only 2 miles wide at its head. The Lough was sheltered from the prevailing westerly winds by the Inishowen peninsula, thus making it, in the age of sail, a harbour of refuge, accessible and safe in all weathers. Owing to her westerly situation Derry was seen as being halfway between London and the American colonies; a Derry ship "is no sooner out of the river, but she is immediately in the open sea and has but one course." Derry was, therefore, well placed to benefit from the emigration of Ulster people to North America.



Photo: 1790 – 'Londonderry' from an original sketch by John Nixon

## 18<sup>th</sup> Century Emigration and the Ulster-Scots

Between 1718 and the beginning of the War of American Independence in 1776, 250,000 Ulster-Scots – often referred to as Scotch-Irish or Scots-Irish in USA (i.e. descendants of 17<sup>th</sup> century Scottish Presbyterian settlers in the nine counties of the Province of Ulster: Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry and Tyrone in Northern Ireland and Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan in the Republic of Ireland) – emigrated from Ireland through the ports of Belfast, Londonderry, Newry, Larne and Portrush for the British Colonies in North America. Researchers wishing to explore this topic further should read R J Dickson's *Ulster Emigration to Colonial America 1718-1775* (Ulster Historical Foundation, Belfast, 2016).

### Philadelphia

Derry established itself as one of the chief Irish ports for transatlantic trade in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Derry merchants and ship-owners testified to the importance of their American trade. A report of a committee of the Irish House of Commons in 1767 recorded that “67 ships containing near 11,000 tons belong to the merchants of Derry.” It is clear that strong trade links, reinforced by family connections in the mercantile community, developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century between the ports of Londonderry and Philadelphia. Flaxseed, the raw material of the linen industry, was shipped to Derry from Philadelphia in the early spring, and on the return voyage linen and emigrants were destined for Philadelphia.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century few inducements were able to overturn the Irish emigrants' preferred destination of Philadelphia. The 18<sup>th</sup> century Ulster emigrant tended to enter Colonial America through Philadelphia and then head for the frontier. Of 128 vessels advertised to sail from Derry between 1750 and 1775, 99 (77%) sailed for Philadelphia.

### Nova Scotia

In the 1760s, however, the activities of land promoters/businessmen, with Ulster connections, encouraged Irish emigrants to consider, if only briefly, two alternative destinations to Philadelphia: namely, Nova Scotia and the Carolinas. In the years 1750 to 1775, when 99 of 128 ships, departed Derry for Philadelphia, a further 10 ships were destined for Halifax (Nova Scotia) and another 10 for Charleston (South Carolina).

Through the activity of a Londonderry-born, land promoter Alexander McNutt very strenuous and enthusiastic attempts were made in the 1760s to persuade Irish emigrants to settle in Nova Scotia. The Acadians (i.e. descendants of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century French colonists who settled in Acadia, located in the Canadian Maritime provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island) were expelled from Nova Scotia in 1755. Vigorous attempts now followed to settle the peninsula with more loyal subjects to

protect the northern flank of the British possessions in America. A proclamation was issued inviting the settlement of the lands vacated by the Acadians. McNutt was granted land reservations totalling 817,000 acres in Nova Scotia, and in return he was expected to settle six hundred families on the lands within four years, each family receiving five hundred acres.

In 1761 McNutt proceeded to Derry and launched his campaign, with 11 of his 13 agents based in villages and towns in Counties Derry, Donegal or Tyrone, such as Ramelton, Letterkenny, Fahan, Raphoe, Convoy, Strabane, Omagh and Maghera. It is estimated that in 1761 and 1762 McNutt persuaded about 500 people from Northwest Ireland to emigrate to Nova Scotia.

### **19<sup>th</sup> Century Emigration in the Age of Sail**

With the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 many small farmers, agricultural labourers and rural tradesmen in Ireland saw emigration as the only solution to their declining economic prospects. Emigration thus acted as a “safety valve,” enabling young men and women with little economic prospects to escape Ireland.

From 1815 to 1845 it is estimated that 1 million Irishmen and women crossed the Atlantic for North America. In this period Canada, not the USA, was the initial destination of these emigrants. It is estimated that 80% of passengers who sailed to North America from Irish ports landed in Canada, though perhaps half that total may have gone on to the United States. Prior to the Famine the cheapest way to get to the US was by way of Canada through St John's, Newfoundland, Saint John, New Brunswick or Quebec.

Thomas Mellon (1813-1908), entrepreneur and banker of Pittsburgh, USA recalls in his autobiography the family's journey, in 1818, from Derry, via Canada, to USA. The family embarked on a ship belonging to a Mr Buchanan who 'was the uncle of the late President of the United States', destined for Saint John, New Brunswick. The voyage to Saint John took 'a trifle over twelve weeks' and then a further 2 weeks was spent on a coasting ship which took them to Baltimore, and from there to their final destination, in a journey lasting three weeks, by Conestoga wagon to a still largely unpopulated Westmoreland County, 21 miles east of Pittsburgh.

In contrast to the United States, the greatest numbers of Irish came to Canada in the pre-Famine period. By 1871, the Irish-born and their descendants made up 24.3% of Canada's population. In the same year, the provinces of Ontario and New Brunswick, with 35% of their population of Irish origin, were the two most Irish jurisdictions outside of Ireland. In this pre-Famine migration to both the United States and Canada, Protestant Irish migrants continued to significantly outnumber Catholic Irish immigrants. As a consequence, in 1871, 60% of the Irish in Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick were



Protestant. The Irish in Canada were, furthermore, rural settlers. By contrast, in USA, the Irish immigrant's principal role was to service industrial expansion.

### **Saint John, New Brunswick**

Derry's importance as an emigration port continued to grow in the 19th century; it was a profitable trade. Merchants in Derry soon became ship-owners as opposed to agents for American and British companies. An outward cargo of emigrants, a homeward cargo of timber or grain, together with two voyages per year, one in spring and one in the autumn, ensured a sizeable profit. By 1833 seven merchants in the city – Daniel Baird, James Corscaden, John Kelso, William McCorkell, James McCrea, John Munn and Joseph Young – owned fifteen vessels, all engaged in the North American emigrant trade.

Saint John (New Brunswick) and Quebec in Canada, and New York and Philadelphia in the United States were the destination ports of emigrants departing from Derry in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Of 38 emigrant ships advertised to sail from Derry in 1836: 12 were destined for Saint John (New Brunswick), 12 for Philadelphia, 7 for Quebec and 6 for New York.

From its earliest days Irish migration has been a family affair. The Irish either moved with kin or moved to join kin. Although the decision to emigrate was influenced by economic and social conditions at home, the locations of family members who had gone before was the major determinant of emigrant destination.

Based on the 1851 census for New Brunswick, Professor Peter Toner has produced settlement distribution maps for Irish immigrants according to source region in Ireland (*The Green Fields of Canada, Irish Immigration and New Brunswick Settlement 1815-1850*, leaflet produced by the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick, 1991). It clearly demonstrates that Irish immigrants settled near others from the same areas in Ireland. The Irish from eastern Ulster settled in large numbers in Charlotte County while those from Counties Derry, Donegal, Fermanagh and Tyrone (who made up 43% of Irish immigrants to New Brunswick in the period 1815-1850) settled in the entire lower valley of the Saint John River. Immigrants from the south-eastern corner of Ireland settled in the Miramichi while those from Cork (who provided 19% of Irish immigrants in the period) predominated in the town of Saint John itself.

Professor Peter Toner in his *Index to Irish Immigrants in the New Brunswick Census of 1851* (published 1991) stated that, on the basis of the evidence of the 1851 census, 'the vast majority of those in New Brunswick with Irish blood owe that blood to ancestors who arrived in the province before the Famine, and that the overwhelming majority of the Famine immigrants to this province disappeared very quickly by further migration. Most of the Famine people who stayed in the province did do because they came to join relatives

who had arrived earlier'. Anyone with Irish connections to New Brunswick, Canada should check out the fantastic range of databases to search, free of charge, on Provincial Archives of New Brunswick Irish portal at [www.archives.gnb.ca/Irish/databases\\_en.html](http://www.archives.gnb.ca/Irish/databases_en.html).

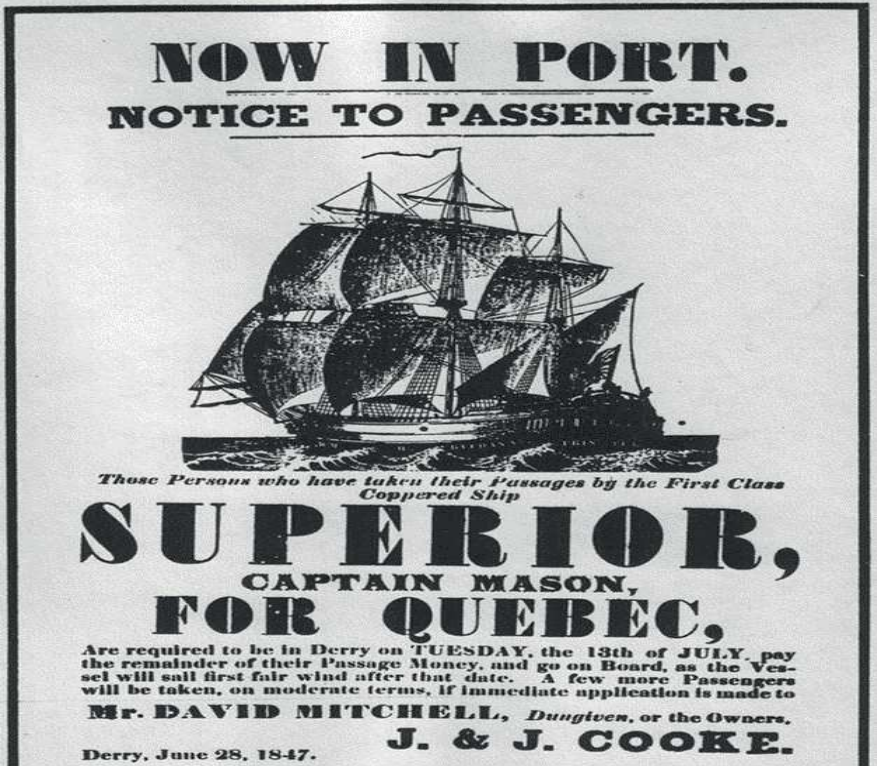
Sholto Cooke in *The Maiden City and The Western Ocean* (Morris and Company, Dublin) described Saint John, New Brunswick as 'the cradle of Derry trade with North America and destination of great numbers of emigrants for Canada or in transit to the United States. During the passenger season, one or more Derry ships usually lay at anchor in Saint John, either landing their passengers or loading deals for home. Saint John shipbuilders also had a good reputation in Derry and some of the finest and fastest ships owned in Derry were built in Saint John'.

The strong mercantile links between the maritime provinces of Canada and Derry are evident in the registers of the Custom House, Derry. These registers record that 54 ships, over 100 tons in size, were bought by Derry merchants between 1834 and 1850, and that 28 of these ships were built in Canada: 16 of them in New Brunswick and 7 in Nova Scotia. In the era of wooden ships, it was difficult for a shipbuilder in Britain and Ireland to compete with North American competitors with access to vast timber reserves.

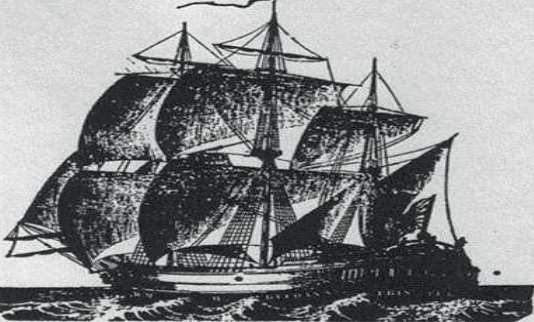
## J & J Cooke

By the 1850s, two local companies, J & J Cooke and William McCorkell & Co., dominated transatlantic trade and, in the process, built up sizeable shipping fleets.

By accepting John Cooke's offer of partnership, on serving six years as clerk and bookkeeper, "on condition that if anything better offers, I am free to accept it," Joseph



**NOW IN PORT.**  
**NOTICE TO PASSENGERS.**



*Those Persons who have taken their Passages by the First Class Coppered Ship*

**SUPERIOR,**  
CAPTAIN MASON,  
**FOR QUEBEC,**

Are required to be in Derry on TUESDAY, the 13th of JULY, pay the remainder of their Passage Money, and go on Board, as the Vessel will sail first fair wind after that date. A few more Passengers will be taken, on moderate terms, if immediate application is made to

Mr. DAVID MITCHELL, *Dungiven*, or the Owners.  
**J. & J. COOKE.**

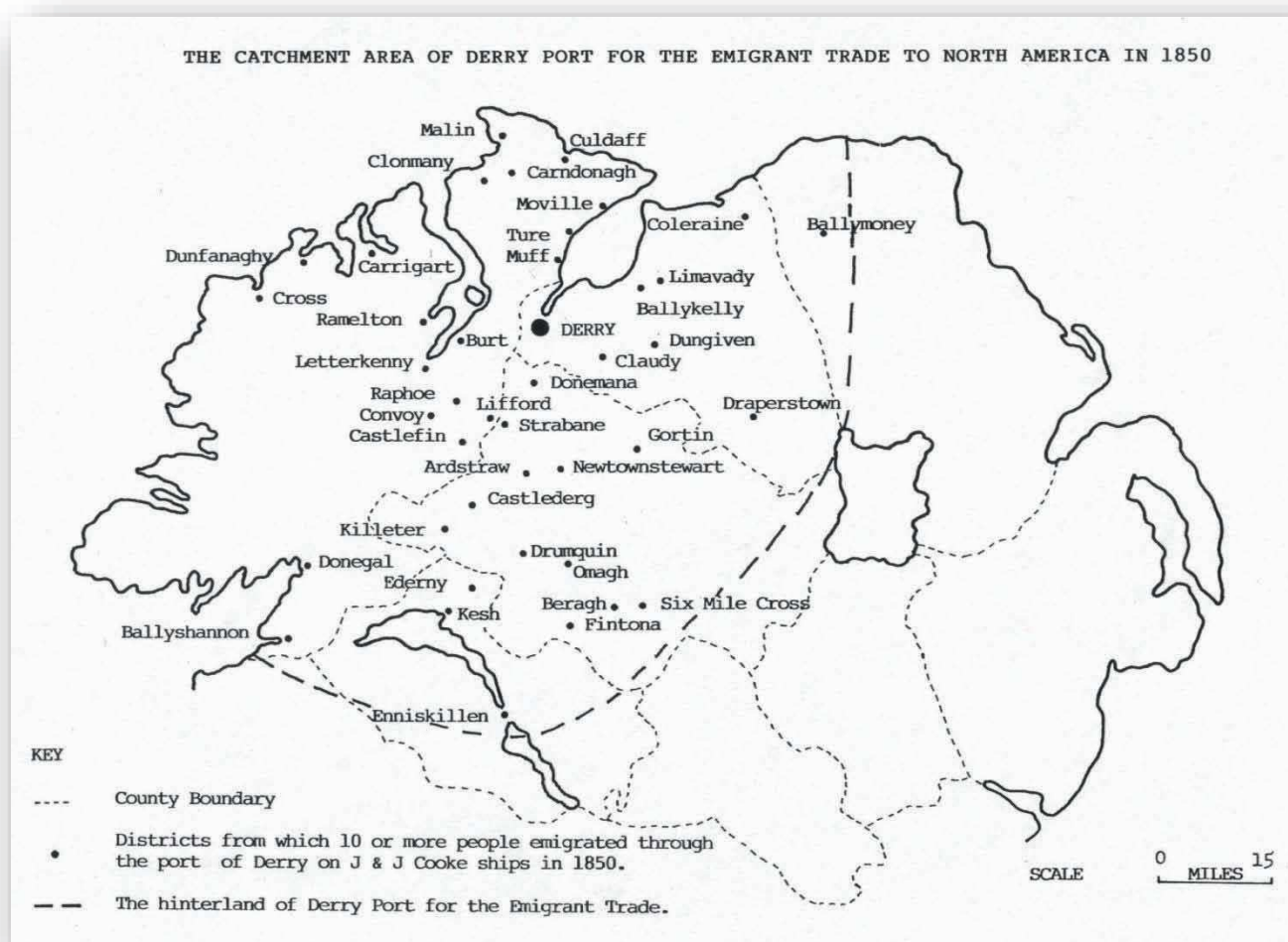
Derry, June 28, 1847.

Cooke began a partnership in 1837 that lasted until John Cooke's death on 25 February 1895. From humble beginnings, working for their uncle Joseph Young, a timber merchant and ship owner, J & J Cooke by the time of the Famine had built up a small fleet of ships suitable for the emigration trade. An outward cargo of emigrants, a homeward cargo of timber, together with two voyages per year to America, ensured a sizeable profit and enabled them to buy new ships. The

barque *Londonderry*, their first ship, was bought in 1839, to be followed by the *Envoy* in 1841, *Superior* in 1845 (see poster above), and *Mary Campbell* in 1846.

Between 1847 and 1867 J & J Cooke carried 22,199 passengers to North America. At the height of the Famine in 1847, of 12,385 emigrants leaving from Derry, 5,104 or 41% were carried by J & J Cooke in 20 ships; 8 of these ships were destined for Philadelphia, 7 for Saint John, New Brunswick and 5 for Quebec.

Prior to the 1860s, and the establishment of a railway network in Ireland, the port of Derry served as the emigration port for Counties Derry, Donegal and Tyrone. An examination of the order book of J & J Cooke, for 1850, confirms that 88% of passengers carried on their ships came from these three counties: with 40% from Donegal, 26% from Tyrone and 22% from Derry.



Papers of J & J Cooke shipping company (D2892, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland), which consist primarily of letter books, 1837-1847, and passenger lists, 1847-1867, contain a wealth of information about the timber and passenger trade between Derry and Canadian ports of Saint John and Quebec City.



Prior to 1890 surviving passenger lists in Ireland largely owe their existence to ship owners, who kept them for business reasons. The port of Londonderry is especially fortunate in this regard, having two series of such lists - the shipping lists of J & J Cooke, 1847-1867, and William McCorkell & Co, 1863-1871. These lists generally provide the name, age and address of the passenger with the name of the ship. These lists were indexed and published in *Irish Passenger Lists, 1847-1871 - Lists of Passengers sailing from Londonderry to America on the ships of the J & J Cooke Line and McCorkell Line* (Brian Mitchell, Genealogical Publishing Company, Baltimore, 1988).

By the 1870s sailing ships could no longer compete with the speed, comfort and reliability of the transatlantic passenger steamers. In 1873 the McCorkell Line's *Minnehaha* made the last transatlantic passenger voyage by a Derry-owned ship to New York.

### **Emigration in the Age of Steam: In the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> Century**

From 1861 right through to 1939 ocean-going liners called at Moville, in the deeper waters of Lough Foyle, some 18 miles downstream from Derry, to pick up emigrants who were ferried from Derry in paddle tenders. During this period, at various times, four shipping lines – Anchor Line, Anchor-Donaldson Line, Allan Line and Dominion Line – made Derry a stage on the voyage from Liverpool or Glasgow to Canada or the United States.



Photo: Anchor Line paddle tender *Seamore*, departs Derry quay with 300 emigrants to connect with a transatlantic liner, anchored off Moville circa 1929 (Bigger and McDonald Collection, Libraries NI).

The Allan Line, or the Montreal Ocean Steamship Company, was contracted, in 1856, by the Canadian Government to provide a mail service between Quebec and Liverpool. In November 1859, the Canadian Postmaster General agreed to establish a weekly mail service that also included Ireland. Sidney Smith, the Canadian Postmaster General and Hugh Allan, owner of the shipping line, were hosted to a reception by the Mayor and Harbour Commissioners in Derry on 5 May 1860. Sidney Smith declared that ‘the Canadians had been the first to discover the plain geographical truth that Londonderry was the nearest port to the Canadian continent.’

In 1861, the Allan Line introduced weekly steamship sailings from Liverpool, calling at Moville, to Quebec and Montreal during the summer and to Halifax, Nova Scotia and Portland, Maine during the winter. This service, from Liverpool via Moville to Canada continued until the First World War.

This was followed, in 1866, by the Anchor Line’s Glasgow to New York steamships calling at Moville. This service to New York, except during the First World War, continued until 1939. In 1916 the Anchor Line and another Glasgow company, the Donaldson Line, merged their services and formed a joint company, Anchor-Donaldson, to operate the route, via Moville, to Canada.

From 1887, departing from Derry every alternate Friday, the Dominion Line of Liverpool was operating a passenger service to Canada (to Quebec and Montreal during the summer and to Halifax and Portland during the winter). By 1902, however, the Dominion Line was absorbed into the White Star Line and its transatlantic ships picked up passengers at Cobh, not Derry.

In *Derry Almanac and Directory* of 1861, the Montreal Ocean Steamship Company was advertising “All the Year Round, Every Friday from Londonderry to America” the “Cheapest and Shortest Sea Passage by Steam.” By 1890 the Allan Line advertised that the average passage time from ‘Londonderry to Canada Direct Every Friday’ was seven days. In *Derry Almanac and Directory* of 1930, the Anchor-Donaldson Line were advertising their ‘Londonderry and Belfast to Canada’ service which sailed ‘in Summer to Quebec and Montreal; in Winter to Halifax and St. John, N.B., or Portland, Maine.’

Derry now became the major emigration port for the northern half of Ireland. Annual Emigration Reports from the Port of Londonderry published in the *Londonderry Sentinel* show that between 1877 and 1897 inclusive 193,887 passengers embarked at Moville for North America: with 153,886 destined for USA and 40,001 to Canada. In one year, 1883, 15,217 emigrants boarded 154 steamers calling at Moville, with 10,496 destined for the United States and 4,721 for Canada. The extensive rail network that converged on Derry carried intending emigrants, from the northern half of Ireland.





Photo above: The **Monteith** family from Castlederg, County Tyrone on 13 April 1929 leaving on the Seamore to connect with the Anchor Line ship *California* to Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. They settled at Peterborough in Central Ontario (Bigger and McDonald Collection, Libraries NI).

The passenger manifests of transatlantic liners departing Derry, listed, not only passengers from the city's traditional catchment areas of Counties Derry, Donegal and Tyrone, but also emigrants from the other six counties of Ulster (Antrim, Armagh, Cavan, Down, Fermanagh and Monaghan), the cities of Belfast and Dublin, the northern counties of Connacht such as Leitrim and Sligo and the northern counties of Leinster such as Longford and Meath.

All passenger departure lists from Derry to North America from 1890 to 1939 inclusive are held in the Board of Trade records in National Archives, Kew, London and, furthermore, they have been digitised and indexed and are available on websites such as [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) and [www.findmypast.com](http://www.findmypast.com). Pier 21, a new integrated ocean liner and railway facility, opened in Halifax, Nova Scotia on 8 March 1928. Between 1928 and 1971 Pier 21, Halifax was the gateway to Canada for one million immigrants. Special immigrant passenger trains would take passengers from Pier 21 to their new towns across Canada. Today Pier 21 hosts the Canadian Museum of Immigration; Atlantic Canada's only national museum ([www.pier21.ca](http://www.pier21.ca))