

by Patrick J. O'Connor

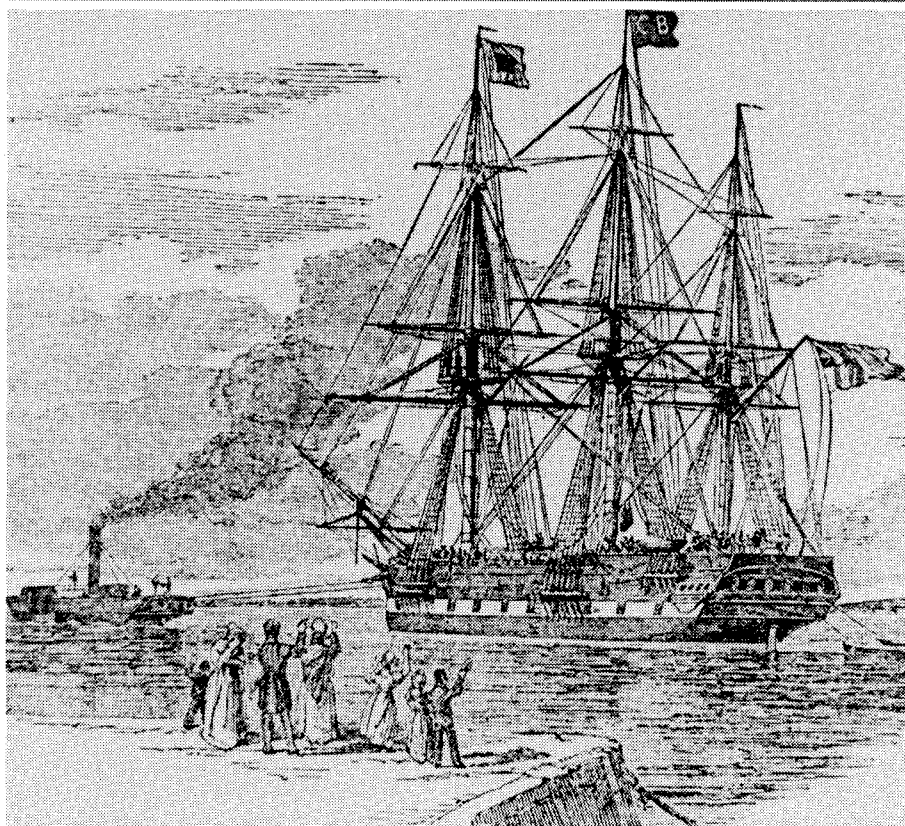
**B**y virtue of his role as a magistrate, landed proprietor and leading merchant in the south of Ireland, Francis Spaight was well placed to give evidence before a select committee of the House of Lords on colonisation from Ireland, when called before the committee in July, 1847.<sup>(1)</sup> As magistrate his sphere extended over counties Limerick, Clare and Tipperary. As landed proprietor he had purchased an estate in north Co. Tipperary three years earlier and was thus in a position to judge at first hand the impact of the famine on his tenantry. As merchant of long standing he commanded a broad overview of trade from the port of Limerick, and in his personal capacity plied commercial lines, mainly with North America. His own principal imports were in the timber trade, while the vessels going out for such cargoes took emigrants.

The outward trade to America for freight to accommodate emigrants had obtained for many years, and while numbers oscillated from one year to the next, the demands of the 1847 season had already set precedents in the scale of long-distance migration. In the last year alone Spaight himself had sent out nearly 2,000 emigrants, about one-third of whom had hailed from his own recently acquired Derry estate, by the shores of Lough Derg, above Killaloe-Ballina, in Co. Tipperary. As for the larger picture, Spaight was able to furnish official returns for the port of Limerick. Over the period 1842-7 these showed emigrant numbers varying from 5,002 in 1842, to 952 in 1843, to 1,224 in 1844, to 2,535 in 1845, to 4,462 in 1846, to an all-time high of 8,420 by 10 June, 1847. Spaight estimated that there would be at least a further 1,500 emigrants by the end of the 1847 season. Just how much of the totality of emigration these figures represented from Limerick port alone is difficult to estimate, especially in the last year of peak demand. By that time potential emigrants had created their own informal mechanisms,<sup>(2)</sup> and were no doubt adept at making arrangements that escaped the net of Emigration Office returns.

Of those officially returned, the vast majority were destined, in the first instance at least, for British North America, and specifically for the port of Quebec. A very small proportion reached a landfall in New Brunswick, and while great numbers headed onwards for the United States, only 303 persons out of a total of 22,595 in 1842-7, went straight there.

Spaight drew a distinction between two types of emigrant. Firstly there were those who went of their own accord and were able to pay their own passage money. Secondly there was assisted emigration undertaken by landed proprietors from their own estates. The poor and indigent fell into the latter category. Spaight estimated that, as between the two types, the proportions were about equal.

## Emigration and Famine: The evidence of Francis Spaight, July, 1847



"Every ship that sailed was filled at once".

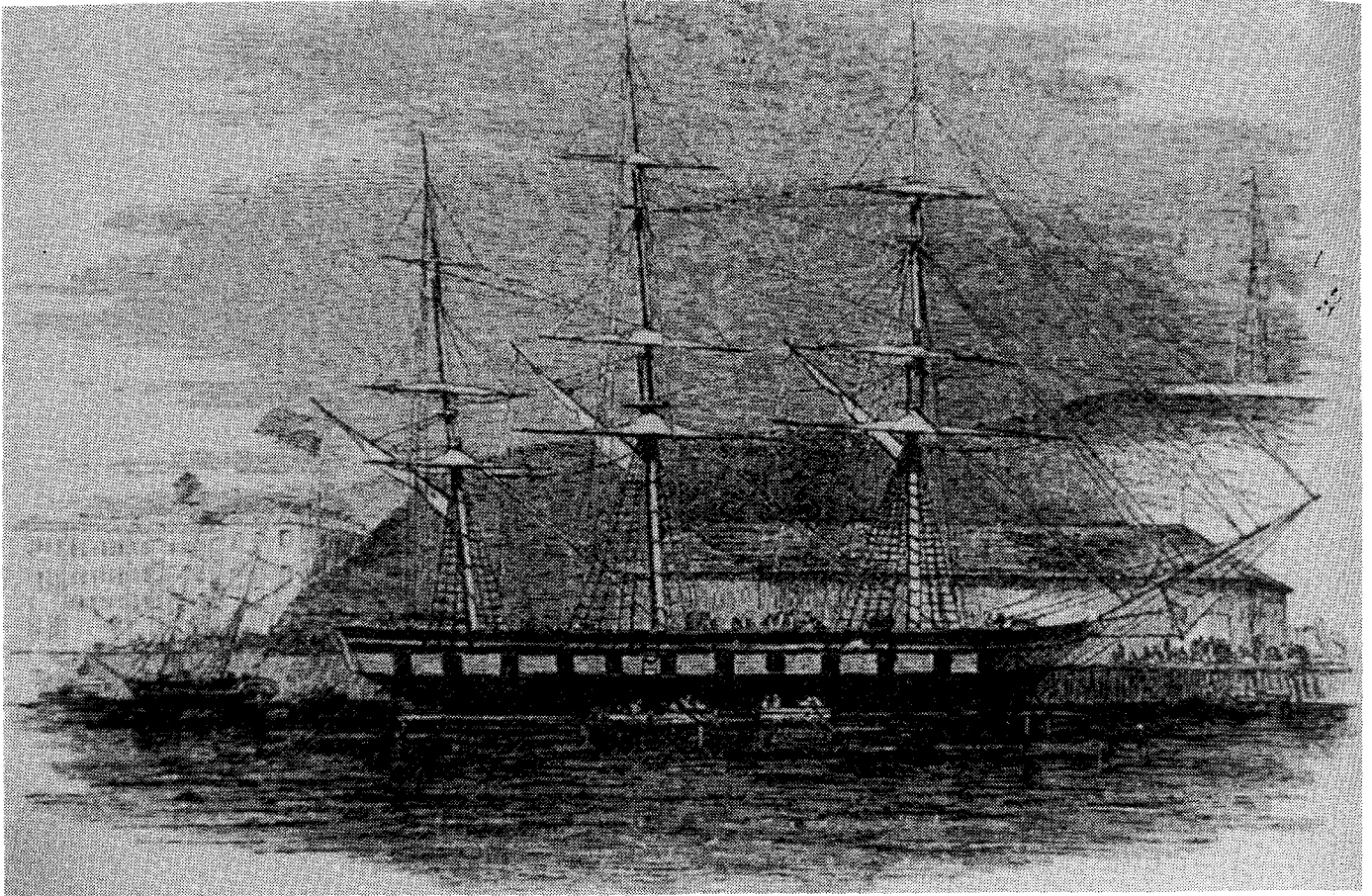
Representing the second, he had for some years been shipping out several hundred emigrants from the fragmented Co. Clare estate of Colonel Wyndham of Petworth.<sup>(3)</sup>

As for the first, they were generally snug farmers, able to convert their assets into cash by the sale of property or by selling their cattle and/or their interest in land. Thus they were enabled to pay their passage and in general take out with them a small sum of money. However, the anxiety to emigrate had become such that as long as they could provide passage money, they were prepared to go with scarcely anything else. The failure of the potato crop had concentrated minds to an unprecedented degree.

According to Spaight, the two classes he spoke of mixed together indiscriminately aboard the same ship. No distinction was made between them, other than a positive one in favour of the poor.

Landlords assisting migration invariably granted a larger food allowance than that required by Act of Parliament, whereas those paying their own passage were obliged to provide for themselves over and above what the Act required. As a consequence the poor were generally allocated two pounds of food per day; the others got one. Representing those who were landlord assisted, Colonel Wyndham had been very particular in making provision for the comfort and safety of the emigrants he sent out. He invariably made a selection of the best ships and he made ample allowance by way of provisions. However, extrapolating from the particular to the general appears hazardous, especially when it is considered that less than 40,000 emigrants are known to have received subsidies from either landlords or the state in the entire period 1846-50.<sup>(4)</sup>

The hazards of estimating are again



The American war ship, the *Jamestown*, delivering relief supplies at Cork, April, 1847.

evident in the next sequence. Here attention was focused upon the emigration of a particular ethnic group, namely the Palatines. These were the descendants of the German colonists who settled in Ireland in 1709-12, especially around the Rathkeale area of Co. Limerick, and subsequently in other locations in counties Limerick, Kerry and Tipperary.<sup>(5)</sup> According to Spaight, a very great proportion of them had emigrated. In highly stressful times their ethnic and religious apartness had marked them out, and provided the ostensible reason for their going. Thrifty and industrious farmers had been lost. Their leavetaking was reckoned a 'national calamity'. Pressed as to numbers, Spaight could scarcely form any idea beyond stating that a great many had gone every year. Asked if several hundreds had gone in black '47, the year of by far the heaviest emigration, he replied quite properly that there were never many hundreds of them in the country. However, relative to the population at large, a far greater proportion of the Palatines had emigrated.<sup>(6)</sup> Up until 1847 the cost of passage to Quebec had been from £2 to £3 per head; in that grim year of pressing demand it rose to five guineas.

Every ship that sailed was filled at once. The demand in the number of applications was more than double that of the normal demand for inward freight. Never in Spaight's recollection had there been so many enquiries about outbound passage; there were simply not enough ships to take the applicants aboard. Accounts of successes abroad had helped in no un-

certain measure to fuel demand at home.

Turning to specifics, Spaight then went on to instance his own Derry estate, which he accounted in a manner typical of the time, as the 'most over-populated property in Great Britain'. Located in the parish of Templeachally by the banks of Lough Derg above the village of Ballina, the property contained about 3,000 Irish acres, together with a tract of the Arra Mountains. It was previously a Head property, but for minority or other reasons was sold under the Court of Chancery. Spaight gave £40,000 for it.

Typically of land held under the Court it had been allowed to go to rack and ruin, and when Spaight purchased the property *circa* 1844 he found that a large number of paupers there had not paid their nominal rent for years. The only way to improve the land was to clear it, and the new landlord determined that the best course of action was to send his impoverished and unwanted tenants off at once.<sup>(7)</sup> As an inducement he offered free passage and provisions for the voyage. No other pressure was used.

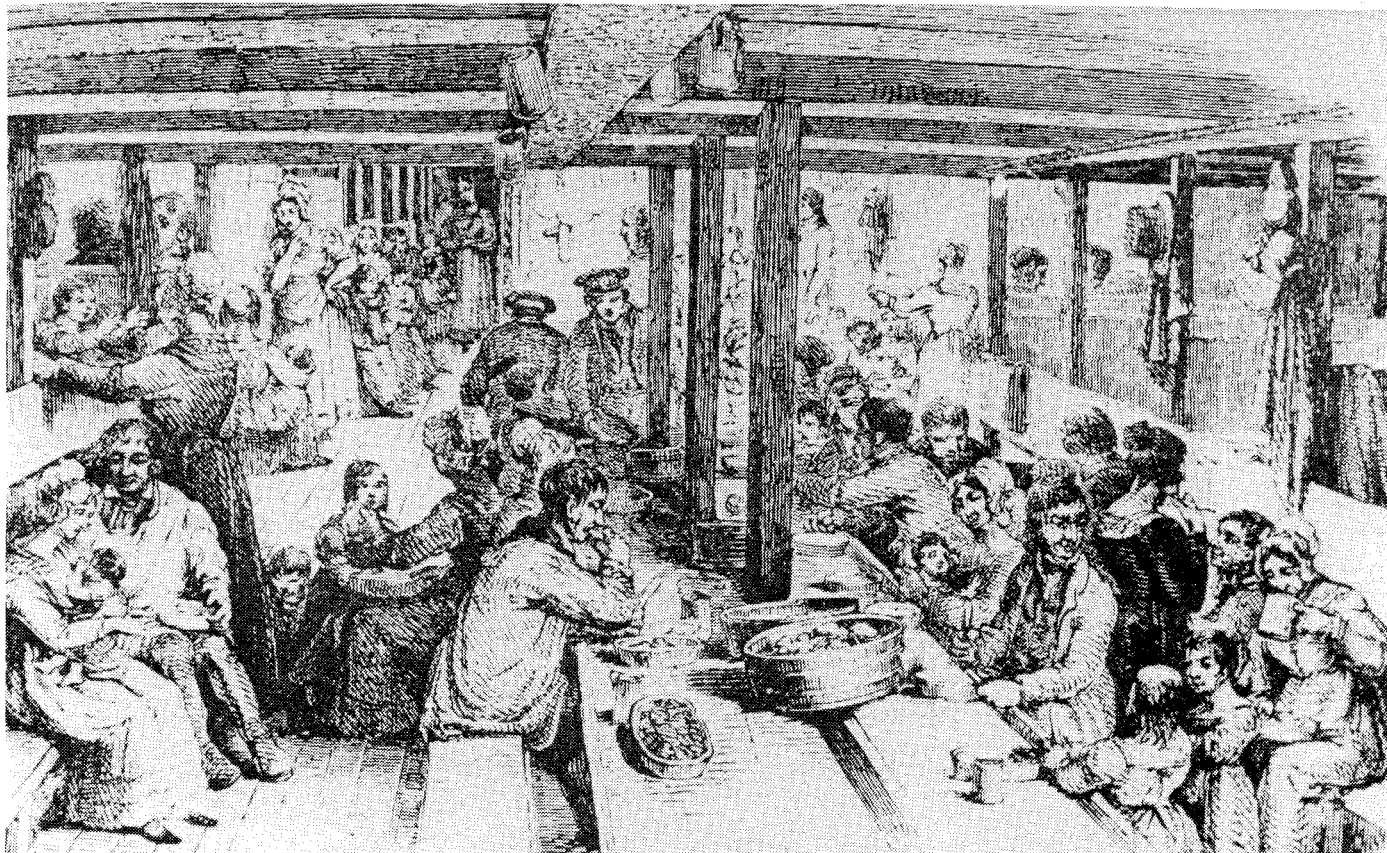
On its commencement in 1845-6 the scheme attracted about 100 applicants. All were facilitated. Not only that, but on the basis of a single over-wintering in North America, they had written home in such glowing terms that hundreds more had been induced to go out. In direct consequence 710 more would be going in 1847. Already by July, 1847, the Derry population which by Spaight's account was recorded as 1,201<sup>(8)</sup> in the census of population of 1841 had been reduced by

718 persons. This represented a decline of 60 per cent and provides the most vivid and profound testimony of clearance on a vast scale from a small suite of townlands. In addition the very alacrity of the clearance bespeaks a process of contagious diffusion. There was 'a great rage for emigration'. Spaight offered the contents of two emigrant letters in support.<sup>(9)</sup>

The first, to judge from internal evidence, was written from Albany in upper New York state and within striking distance of the city of Boston. It is addressed in the first instance Job Kennedy, to be forwarded to Jeremiah Howard of Tountinna<sup>(10)</sup> on the mountainy edge of the Derry estate. One sister is writing to another.

**Alborney,  
March the 26nd, 1846.**

*Dear sister, I take the favour of writing those few lines to you, Hoping to find you all in As good health. Dear sister, i received your Kind And Affectionate letter, which gave me great pleasure to hear you were in good health. Let me know how Jermiah howrd And family is getting on, And my sister mary; it would give me greate pleasure to think that you would Come here, for i think you would do verry well in this country, for labouring men earns 10 shillings per day here in summer time; do what you can to Come to this country as quick as possible, for you would get plenty of washing to do here, And earn 4 shillings per day. Let me know how Patt Holliran and family is getting On, and if my sister Judy know that if she was here that she*



"Spaight ... took a whole family or none".

would get trades for them, And in summer time he would get from 10 shillings to 12 per day. Let me know how my brother martin And family is getting on, And my sister bridget do what she can to come here. Let my sister Ellen know that she would get from 5 shillings to 6 for making one dress here; And if she Could possibly come here Let me know. Did you here from my sister seare since i left home. Let ye know, let ye go to now rounds about warribles, for the cloathing ye have will do ye very well here, and year Cloaks will do ye verry well. Let ye bring bonnots with ye her, for the servants weres As well As miss Leas. It was a great mistake that I did not mention Mr. Leas and family, for the were my best friends when At home. Let me know did Miss Lease get married, And let me know how Mrs. Mary and Miss cate. Let me know how My Ant mary and her son Patt is; And if Anne came here she would do very well in this contry. Let me know if ye Are to come, And sind me an Account if ye are to come or not. And dont be in doubt of money, and if ye dont i will remit what i can in summer, and i will sin you; bring second flour, And some herrings. There is nothing doing here, onlay house busey. Dirrect your letter to Patt driscoll, montgomery street, No. 134. Let me know Mrs. Scanlon and family, And margret back and family. Mary Whealen parteded me the weeke after we landed, and she told me she would go to boston. Let my sister Mary Write to me as quick as possible, and let me know will she come, or Anny of her sisters, and i will have what I can for ye when ye come

here. The winter was bad, And i had to buy splendid cloathing, for ther would be no respect for you if you did not go respectable. Give my best respects to all my friends and connections, r if ye dont come i will sind what i possibly can afford.

Addressed

to Job Kenedy of Killowe, County Clare, ireland, to be for warded to Jermiah hourd of thown thinna, parish of ballana, Killaloe.

If anything, the lack of literacy made the letter all the more riveting when read aloud upon receipt and transmission in the idiom of north Tipperary. Certainly the bait of chain migration, as couched above, appears a powerful enough incentive to attract the participation of family, friends and neighbours. With the promise of free passage and provisions as well, the lure of long-distance travel must have swept through the confines of an entire neighbourhood.

The second letter, directed from Vaughan township to the north of Toronto in Canada West, is addressed to Michael Gleeson of Newtown,<sup>(1)</sup> near the lakeside core of the Derry estate (fig. 1). It was written by his daughter Johanna and carried in addition a brief note from his son-in-law, Oliver Kelly. Again the possible import of what is on this occasion a highly literate, well-structured letter soon becomes clear.

October 25th, 1846

Dear Father Vaughan,  
For the first time since our landing in this country I send you a few lines

hoping the will find you all in good health as the leave us in at present, thanks be to God for all his mercies us. We had six weeks passage, during which time myself and John had good health, but Johanna and Margret was sick during the voyage. When we came to Montreal we went over to the States and spent three weeks traveling, which is very expensive in this country, and Retured back to Toronto. I have from ten to thirteen dollers per month, four Shilling Sterling makes one Doller, with board of the best, every day is like a christmas day for meat. Dear Father, we are as comfortable as we can wish to be, but I feel lonesome for the leaving of my friends; but there is no doubt but my Brothers could do will here; but I leave them to themselves, least any thing might happen them crossing the Atlantic; but for my own part if I was in the old country I would come back gain. But if none of my friends come out, I hope, with a blessing, to go home in the course of three years, that I may see Father and Fatherinlaw both alive. The land sells from fifty to one Hundred pounds per Hundred acres wild, acording the goodness of it. We send our love to Martin Brien and family; and I will never will forget their friendship the showed to us when coming away. We both sends our love to John Hanley and family; Hoping the time will come we can make some recompense to them for their friendship to us when coming away. Summers in this country very warm; for the winter I cannot speak about it yet; but I have a prospect of plenty of work. Flour in this country is from four to five

*Dollers per Barrel; there is 196 pounds in the barrel. Beef from two to three pence per pound, and every thing else cheap. Potatoes has failed in this country as we have heard the did so at Home From Johanna. Dear Sister Margret, I feel very sorry that you did not come with Brother Oliver and me, as woman has from three to four Dollers per Months; but if my Father sends you, shoose who you will have for company; Oliver wishes his brother Con and you to come together, and send him word when you land in Quebec; and he will send money and bring yous both up, as the distance is five Hundred miles. Dear Father, mother, I feel very lonesome after you, also after Sister Bridget, and brothers Patrick, Matthew, Denis, and Micheal. Dear uncle, I hope that you family and is all well, as we are at present. Mrs. Spaid and the young Lady give our love to all our friends Seperate, Hoping to see yous all gain, and if not, to meet yous all in Heaven is the wish of Johanna Kelly.*

*Dear, Fatherinlaw, send us a letter, and us know how my Father is, also whether Con and Margret will come out or not; no more at present.*

*Remains your  
Affectionately to Death  
Oliver Kelly.*

*Direct your letter to Oliver Kelly, near Pine Grove, Township of Vaughan, Canada West.*

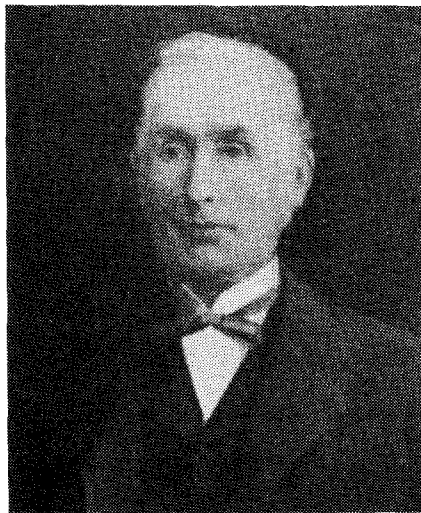
*Addressed  
For*

*Micheal Gleeson,  
Newtown, near Killalue,  
County Tipparera,  
Ireland.*

Written soon after arrival, the letter has its own distinctive resonances calculated to strike a responsive chord at home in famine-stricken Ireland: 'every day is like a Christmas day for meat', 'we are as comfortable as we can wish to be'. Images of well-being are tempered only by loneliness and again the inducements are powerful in seeking to re-unite with family and friends in a new and promised land, far away from starving Ireland.

Because, make no mistake about it, Spaight's clearances were predicated upon the repeated failure of the potato crop. He could not have shed his unwanted tenants otherwise. Nor could he carry out improvements on an estate where many possessed nothing more than a kitchen garden or a little hay-yard given over exclusively to the production of potatoes. Crop failure on a disastrous scale had induced the tenants to think of emigration. This was the real push factor to go with the pull factors of glowing emigrant accounts, remittances from abroad, and landlord assistance at home.

Under the system of emigration invoked by Spaight, he made it a rule never to take an individual or some of the members of a family. Rather he took the whole family or none, and the house was levelled. As well intending emigrants were



James Spaight, son of Francis Spaight.

obliged to give up possession of the land, for which no payment was made. This proved no impediment. They applied voluntarily; they were most anxious to go. They were sent off in Spaight's own ships and in some additional ships chartered by him. The cost per head in 1847 was £3.50.

Such were the benefits accruing to the landlord that every possible effort was made to procure ships for those willing to go. Supply therefore had virtually kept pace with demand. A large part of the estate was already completely cleared. Farms of 100 to 150 acres had been assembled by amalgamating small lots and levelling fences.<sup>(12)</sup> It had all made for great improvement and the landlord was anxious to carry it a little further with the benefit of some more clearances. Had it all not happened, he would never have been in receipt of rents; the resident population would have resorted to robbery, plunder and depredation; and ultimately Spaight as their landlord would have been obliged to feed a large proportion of them.

However, once cleared, it was imperative that the process of ruinous subdivision should be prevented forever more. Spaight cited the case of Colonel Wyndham's Co. Clare estate which Wyndham had been clearing for some years by emigration, and which as a consequence had appreciated enormously in value. The greatest care was taken to ensure that no new tenant went into occupation there without the explicit permission of the landlord or his agent. Spaight was confident that he could do the same on the Derry estate.

He was proved successful. Already reduced by 718 from a recorded population of 1201 in 1841, the estate underwent a further reduction to 459 by the time of the 1851 census of population. It is of course by no means certain that all this was achieved through clearance, although the figures do correlate closely with Spaight's projections. Generally population loss on the Derry estate was significantly higher than that encountered elsewhere in the Templekelly electoral division, which was co-terminous with the parish of Templeachally. No other proprietor in the division had followed Spaight's example.

Therefore the losses require other forms of explanation.

It is imperative in the search for causation to marry history with geography. Templeachally represents a stunning example of how an area had been changed by the Great Famine. The historical question of what actually happened remains, as yet, a challenge to be fully met and answered.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Report from the select committee of the House of Lords on colonisation from Ireland*, H.C., 1847 (737) vi, 332-44.
2. D. Fitzpatrick, 'Flight from Famine', in C. Póirtéir (ed.), *The Great Irish Famine*, Cork, 1995, 178.
3. See, F.B. Enright, 'Pre-Famine reform and emigration on the Wyndham estate in Clare', *The Other Clare*, 8, 1984, 33-8.
4. D. Fitzpatrick, 1995, *op. cit.*, 178.
5. See, P.J. O'Connor, *People make places: the story of the Irish Palatines*, Newcastle West, 1989.
6. *Ibid.*, 177-80.
7. Emigration was widely prescribed at this time to solve the problem of overpopulation. For example, Archdeacon Michael Fitzgerald, the parish priest of Ballingarry, Co. Limerick, gave graphic evidence to this effect before the Devon Commission in 1844. As he identified it, 'the great evil is the immense overpopulation' and he advocated by way of solution 'emigration on the largest practicable scale possible'. See, *Report of the commissioners of inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland*, Part 2, Dublin, 1845, 792.
8. Tabulating the population of all the townlands known to have been purchased by Spaight gives a total of 1194 persons, which is just seven short of Spaight's total for the Derry estate in 1841.
9. For an insight into the possible significance of emigrant letters at local level, see P.J. O'Connor, *All worlds possible: the domain of the Millers of Coolybrown*, Newcastle West, 1993. At a more general level, see the magisterial survey by D. Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of consolation: personal accounts of Irish migration to Australia*, Cork, 1994.
10. As between 1841 and 1851 the demographic profile of Tountinna townland was radically re-cast. Consequently its population declined from 75 to 21 persons. To judge from the Griffith Valuation *circa* 1850, there was no continuing sign of Jeremiah Howard or of anyone bearing the family name. The lure of the emigrant letter may have proven irresistible.
11. Like Jeremiah Howard of Tountinna, there is no trace of Michael Gleeson or any of his clan in Newtown at the time of the Griffith Valuation. The population of Newtown was decimated in the intercensal period 1841-51, from 244 persons to 63. All the Gleesons appear to have gone.
12. The evidence of the Griffith Valuation *circa* 1850 is not nearly as unequivocal as the impression conveyed here. What is clear, however, is that Spaight took large extents of land into his own hands.