

# NEWSLETTER

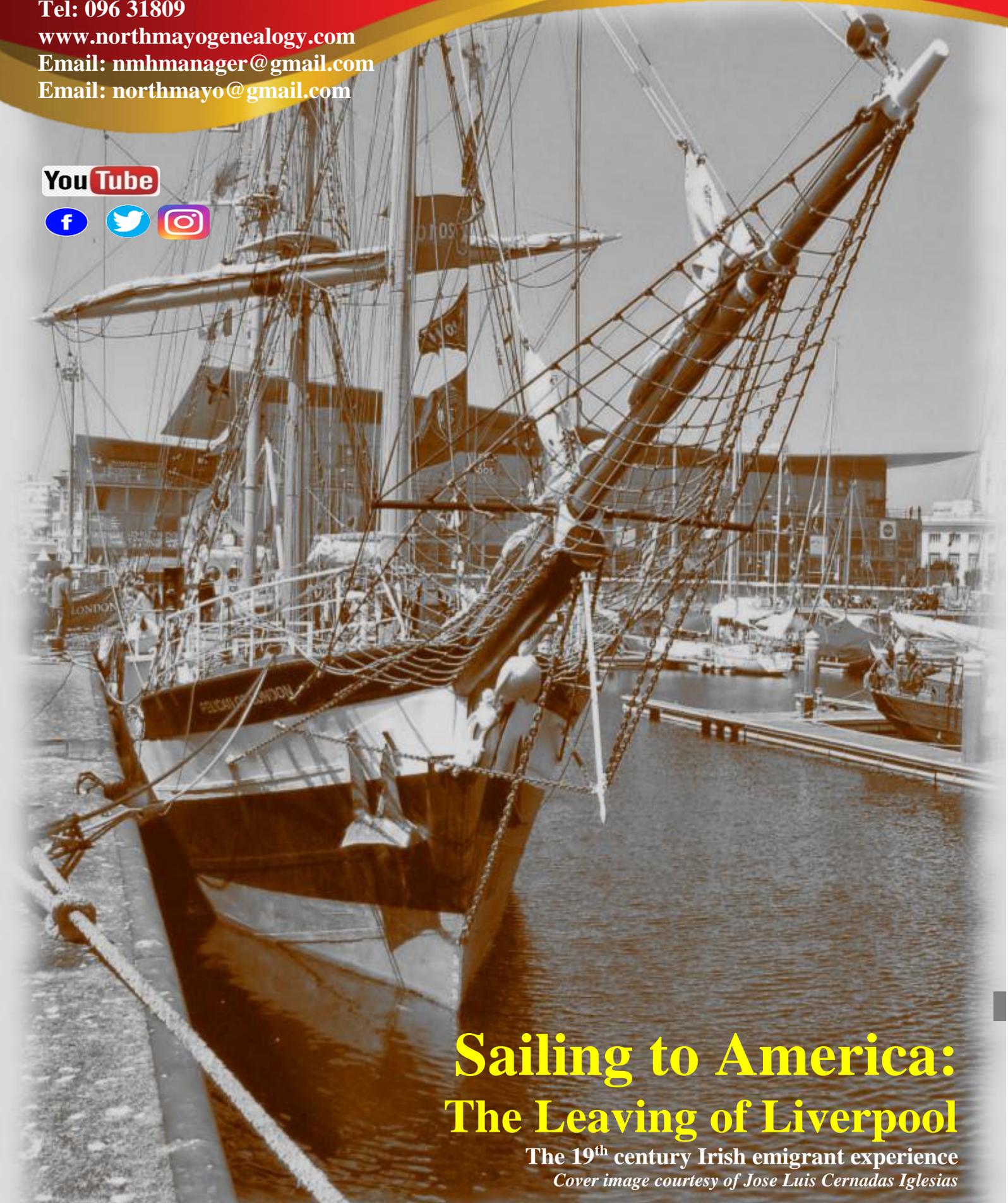
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## Sailing to America: The Leaving of Liverpool

The 19<sup>th</sup> century Irish emigrant experience

*Cover image courtesy of Jose Luis Cernadas Iglesias*

## Sailing to America: THE LEAVING OF LIVERPOOL

### The 19<sup>th</sup> century Irish Emigrant experience



From the news these days we are all too familiar with the fate of the economic migrant in the English Channel or in slowly sinking boats in the Mediterranean. Fleeing disaster at home, they end up in the hands of unscrupulous middlemen who sell them a seat on a dodgy boat for extortionate prices, bound for a country they know nothing about and which is hostile to them and their kind. Irish emigrants to North America in the 1840s and 50s would have recognised this scenario, albeit the ships then were sailing ships.

From the time they said goodbye to home, Irish famine emigrants were prey to every vulture that passed for human between Ireland and America. Almost all Irish and British ships used by emigrants were cargo ships. The cargo came first, passengers could board only after the cargo was safely stowed. And boarding wasn't done on a gangway from the dockside, but by scrambling up netting on the side of the ship as it was departing. Most Irish emigrants had to get to Liverpool first. Steamships ran regularly from Dublin and Cork and smaller Irish ports. From Cork, the journey to Liverpool took 36 hours. Passengers packed together were made to stand on deck for the entire journey in all weather conditions. Liverpool docks was teeming with swindlers, pickpockets and scammers.

Together they were known as Runners, and they operated in league with the ship brokers - who sold tickets on behalf of the ship owners after taking their slice - with the boarding house keepers - who rented rooms - and with the local stores, all of which paid kickbacks to the Runners.

Barrister Sir George Steven described how the emigrants were set upon the moment they landed; *“Actually I do not know how to describe it, except tearing to pieces, only they do not separate the limbs; but they pull them by the collar, take them by their arms and generally speaking, the Runners who lay hold of the boxes (baggage) are pretty sure of carrying the passenger with them.”*

Arriving in Liverpool, soaked, frozen and exhausted, anyone travelling with baggage was easy prey. Dockside thieves waited for them to move so they could grab their baggage.

Runners would drag emigrants' baggage to a boarding house and then demand payment, the fraudster would get a kick back from the boarding house. Woe betide the emigrant who couldn't pay.

Bewildered and traumatised emigrants, many of whom had never left their parish, would be offered tickets to America which turned out to be for a boat going to Canada, many presumed they were paying for a berth but in fact berths, a six-foot span of bare planks, were shared by as many as four people.

At the height of the famine this could mean sharing with those who died from fever on the journey. The crew was too scared to move the corpses.

Once on board the passengers were sealed in to the hold and were at the mercy of the captain and crew for food and water for the duration of the voyage.

For those who made it, similar blackguarding awaited them at the New York dockside on arrival. Hostility was everywhere. There was even a new American political party opposing immigrants, particularly the Irish, set up at the time.

Such were the numbers of emigrants, that it has been estimated that between 1830 and 1930 over nine million emigrants sailed from Liverpool bound for a new life in the US, Canada and Australia.

## TRACE YOUR ROOTS

**Are you interested in professional help to Research Your Family History**

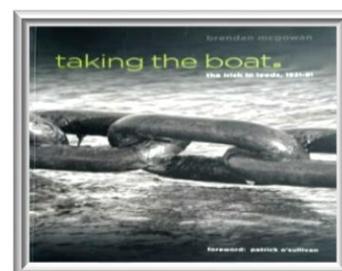
All work done remotely.

For more information,  
Tel: 096 31809  
Email: northmayo@gmail.com

## BOOK OF THE WEEK

*Taking the Boat*

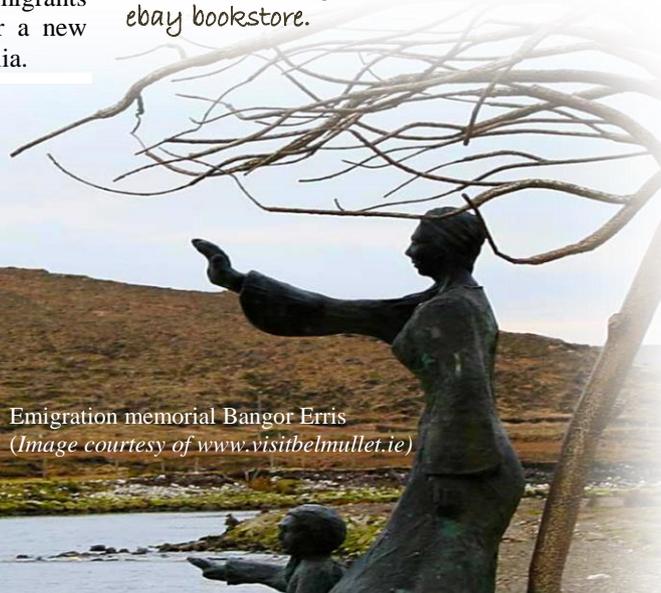
by Brendan McGowan



€15 (+postage)

The book is a wonderful account of those who were forced from Ireland through unemployment primarily to adopt Leeds as their "home".

Available from Reception and from North Mayo Heritage Centre ebay bookstore.



Emigration memorial Bangor Erris  
(Image courtesy of www.visitbelmullet.ie)