

# Letter written by a ship's surgeon

**PRONI Reference: D693/7/1**

## Transcript:

To Rev Robert Campbell,  
Templepatrick  
Co. Antrim

From William Campbell, Surgeon,  
Care of James Ferguson Esq.,  
Peterboroh  
Upper Canada

October 28th 1832

Dear Father,

By this time you will no doubt have heard that I have met with a watery grave, and concluded that I, like Jonas of old, have been swallowed by some huge whale, digested in three days and spat up upon the sea shore. But the reverse is the fact. I am here in perfect health, sound of limb and wind, with spirits light and elastic as the fairy wind. The reason of my saying so is this; I understood when I arrived in at Quebec that news had gone home of the loss of the Billy Booth and truly, if ever a poor mariner escaped by accident from the mighty deep, he had just reason as well as myself to bless the planet under which he was born.

To give an account of the dangers, sieges, that I have passed would constitute a volume, however, I shall give you a brief outline. We left Belfast Lough on Sunday morning 1st of July, and the day following, the work of death commenced. The first death was that of an old man, of Cholera Morbus. Colonel Forbes Trantra Burbas or by whatever other name you choose to designate that dreadful complaint. Then came Tuesday when our carpenter lay down affected in the same manner. My professional skill and ingenuity were called into action. He died in the course of a few hours affected in the strangest manner ever I beheld. The fates preserve me from the ague of Upper Canada, but God deliver me from Cholera. Then four of the sailors took badly I think merely from imagination, and then the passengers began to take alarm; some would have the Captain to put into harbour, others wished to proceed, the storms arose and the winds blew direct in our teeth. The Captain cursed so that he might have been heard distinctly on the coast of Waterford, although some leagues off - all was bustle and confusion. I was as busy as a journey man gravedigger; sometimes in the cabin, then in the steerage, and as often in the forecabin. The sickness prevailed for the space of twelve weeks and before we anchored at Quebec we had no less than 24 deaths, mostly of Cholera. The Captain took it himself the very night we anchored at Grosse Island, 30 miles down the river

where we had to ride quarantine for a fortnight, and many was the prayer put up that he might meet the fate of the poor carpenter - but he recovered.

With regard to the Captain's conduct I have nothing to say, as he was bound to provide for me, and I took care that he treated me with civility, but it was well he was not tossed overboard by the passengers, there was a general scarcity of sea store. I saw a shilling offered for one pound of meal and a penny for a noggin of dirty water say, ten weeks old [the next few lines have been scored out]

However, with all those difficulties with which we had to contend, I managed to keep care and sorrow aloof. We had music and dancing (sometimes however with empty stomachs) every evening that permitted and tripped it upon the quarter-deck and sang till Neptune raised his hoary locks from out the raging ocean waved his trident in the air and with exstacy cried out encore!!!

The reason why I said in the commencement that you probably had heard of the loss of the Billy Booth is that we were driven ashore upon the island of Bic a short way up the St Lawrence. The storm was truly dreadful, our cordage and canvass was torn to tatters - aye to baby rags. The women of course screamed (that's natural) the Captain's countenance looked blue, the sailors behaved like jolly tars and most of the passengers assisted. There was one however that I could not but remark when the storm was at the worst. He was upon his knees, with his hands clasped round the mast beating his breast and vociferating with religious fear, 'Hail Mary! Sweet Mary! Mother of God save us!' I gave him a kick in the posterior and ordered him up to assist, told him there was no time to be lost in praying upon such an occasion. He turned round with a face! - Shade of Hogarth whether art thou fled! - a face that would have made a complete frontispiece to the book of lamentation, and sung out 'Sweet Mary Save us!'

At length we came to anchor in a small creek shut out from the view of every other vessel, and lay there repairing our sails for three days. I could not get landing at Quebec but was obliged to forward Mr McLean's letter to Miss Pemberton of which I suppose you now know. From there to Montreal in a steamer then by land on foot of Lachine, Cornwall, Prescott, Coburgh, Peterboro. My travelling companions (indeed the only ones with whom I associated) were a Mr Orr of Moneymore and his brother-in-law Mr Thistle 'Nemo me imfume laccessit', and three more pleasant warm hearted fellows never trod the road before us. I would advise every one in coming out to be particularly careful what ship and Captain they come with and when arrived at Montreal if they wished to proceed farther to come as I did by land instead of by the river St Lawrence. The country from Montreal is entirely woody except now and again. You will hear of a farmers house long before you go near it by a large bell hung round old Molly [?] that gives the children this milk. The whole country is in a state of infancy with regard to farming in comparison to 'Oul Ireland'. You could imagine nothing like it . A farmer gets probably two hundred acres at five shilling an acre in the wood. He builds himself a log house, and in the course of two or four years has got 10 or 20 of it cleared. He pays no rent, no tithe, no cess, in fact he just manages to eat and drink and keep himself clothed, they generally live well.

Peterboro is a very improving place, four years ago there was not more than four houses in it. Mr Ferguson's was one, now it is larger and more respectable by 100 to 10 than Ballyclare. If I had space I could give you a wonderful history of the manners of the French Canadians, the Yankees, the Indians of this country the canny Scotchman and the wild Irishman but I must reserve the next leaf for other matters.

I am residing just now at Mr William Whittaney formerly of Glenary now of this place. He has proved a particular friend. He is one of the most extensive farmers in this country. I believe he has eight or 10 hundred acres, keeps 30 or 40 men at work regularly, has erected a fine saw mill, which can cut two thousand feet of timber in 12 hours. Two steam boats come up to his very door. Of course his house is like an open tavern every day. Beautifully situated on the river Otowabec which flows into Rice Lake which you may see on the map. I start however, for the district of Cavan about 10 miles from hence where I intend to take up my headquarters for the winter and follow my profession. I hope with better success than at the French [Trench?] Mr Ferguson's kindness is unbounded he gives me a small stock of medicine. I have now in haste given you a slight outline of my proceedings and as yet I don't repent that I have left Ireland where I had too many companions (some of whom I [missing] and came to dwell among strangers, whose [missing] either sink or swim by his own moral conduct.

I need not tell you to remember me in the warmest terms to all, there are some I could mention but it is best not to particularise. I hope you are all well, and I may add there is only one thing has roused me to sorrow since I left you and that is not bidding you all a friendly farewell. That and that alone has grieved me. How is John and Mr McAlister getting forward I hope by this time there is some prospect of a congregation. I wish to know if you received a letter from Doctor Goudy of Comber after my departure, and how you settled with Mr John McAdam, what became of the fixtures. I have cost you a good deal of money in my time but I hope I have McAdamised my ways. I should have written to Mr Daniel Blow but the messenger, Dr Stephenson of Magherafelt is about starting. I hope however to hear from you shortly (via New York) and let me know if Mrs and Mr William Reid intend coming out, if so, this country is considered by far the most eligible place for a farmer or indeed any other business. Tell Mr Blow I wish to hear from him and again that time I shall be better able to give some information of the country.

I believe I have no more to add with regard to myself but remain your affectionate son (I don't like that word - too childish)

William Campbell

PS There is a man living in Mr Whittle's whose wife once lived with Mr Kennedy of the mountain. She wishes to inform him of the death of her two children. She lives there also but are to get a farm in the spring. W.C.

