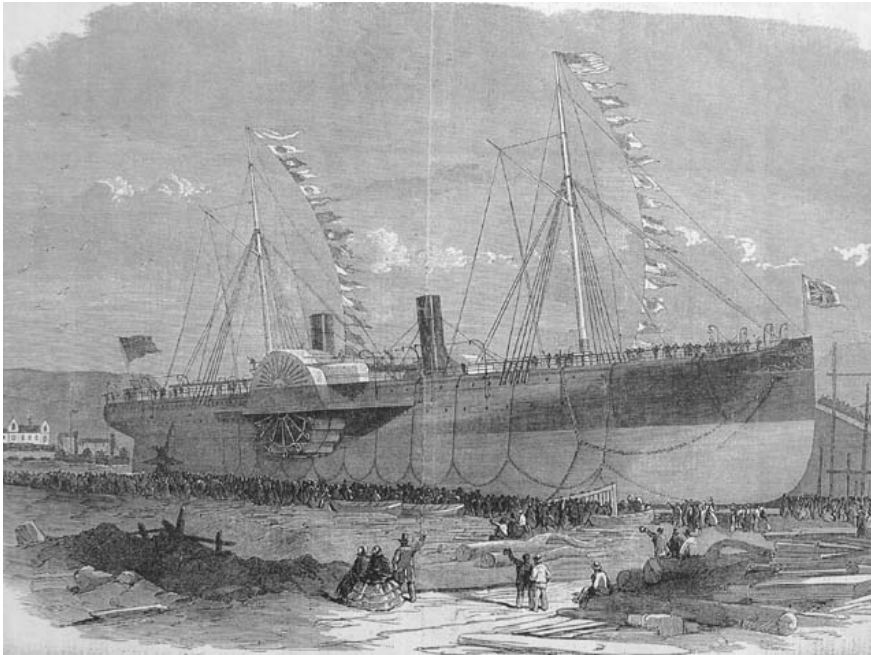


# THE LOSS OF THE CONNAUGHT – A GALWAY LINE PACKET SHIP

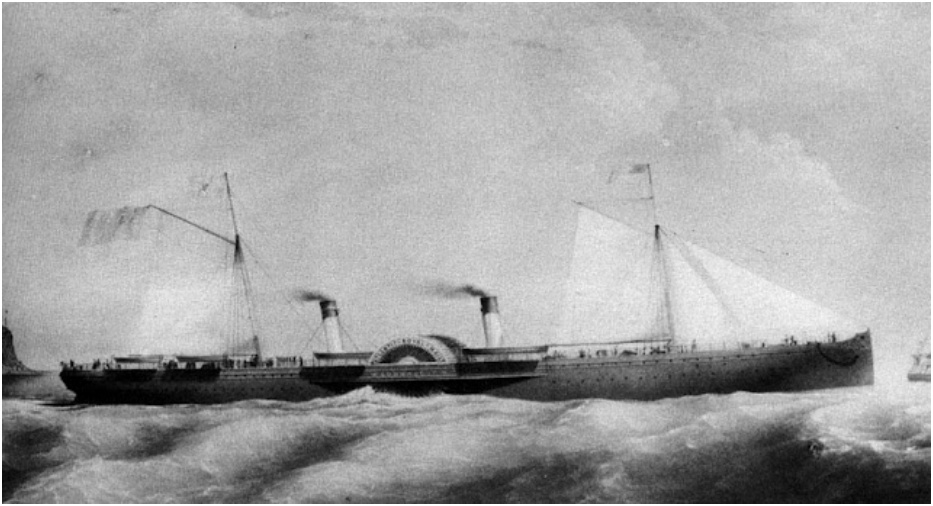
Frank Henry

The launching of any great ship is always a cause for celebration, representing as it does not only the culmination of a lengthy period of intensely hard work involving a vast array of trades, but also the expectation that the vessel will hasten the dawn of a new age of prosperity, brought about by increased communication and commerce on a global scale. So it was on 21 April 1860, when the *PS Connaught* was launched at Palmers' shipyards in Jarrow-on-Tyne to an expectant crowd of cheering and jubilant spectators numbering many thousands (*Fig 1 below & 2 overleaf*). The *Connaught* had an iron hull and a single steam engine which drove two side-paddle wheels and has been described in recent times as the *Titanic* of its day, due to its size (3000 tons; 380 feet) opulent fixtures and fittings, but also because of its eventual sorry fate.



*Fig 1 the launch of the Connaught 21 April 1860.*

Following the successful launch, the *Connaught* was delivered to Galway on the west coast of Ireland, where it was hoped that it would revive the fortunes of the Atlantic Royal Mail Steam Navigation Company (the "Galway Line") which had had to deal with a host of contractual and mechanical problems since it was first awarded a contract, commencing in January 1859, to carry the mails between Galway and New York, with a stop-over at St John's, Newfoundland. From 1860 onwards, fortnightly sailings were



*Fig 2 The Connaught underway*

supposed to alternate between New York and Boston, but this schedule proved to be unachievable, due to countless problems encountered by vessels at sea and the lack of replacements.

The *Connaught* was due to sail from Galway to New York on 26 June 1860, but no sooner had the mails been loaded and anchor weighed than the vessel's port engine cylinder blew off and what would have been her maiden journey had to be postponed until the necessary repairs had been made. In the event the vessel's first voyage was re-scheduled for 11 July when she departed for Boston via St John's, where she off-loaded the mails and set off again for Boston, arriving on 24 July. So far, so good! However, on the return journey the port piston fractured and, although an attempt was made to land the mails at St John's despite prevailing ice and fog, the Captain decided for safety reasons to press on to Galway arriving back on 20 August. Inevitably, this led to considerable delays in dealing with the Newfoundland mails, which had to await the arrival of the next vessel (*Prince Albert*).

On 25 September, the *Connaught* departed Galway on the first leg of her journey to Boston, with a scheduled stop at Newfoundland, where she arrived in the early hours of 3 October and off-loaded the mails, including a recently acquired letter in my collection (*Fig 3 opposite*), which is clearly marked "via Galway" and bears on reverse a St John's arrival mark for that same date. A number of passengers disembarked at the port, at least two of whom did not wish to continue their journey on "the unfortunate *Connaught*, the worst ship that was ever built" in the words of the Rev. Peter Conway, who had intended to travel all the way to Boston, but clearly feared for his life if he were to do so. At a later inquiry, Capt. Leitch played down any problems encountered en route and claimed that "during the bad weather the vessel behaved very well indeed". He went on to say that "we remained at St John's 11 hours, taking on board 12 more

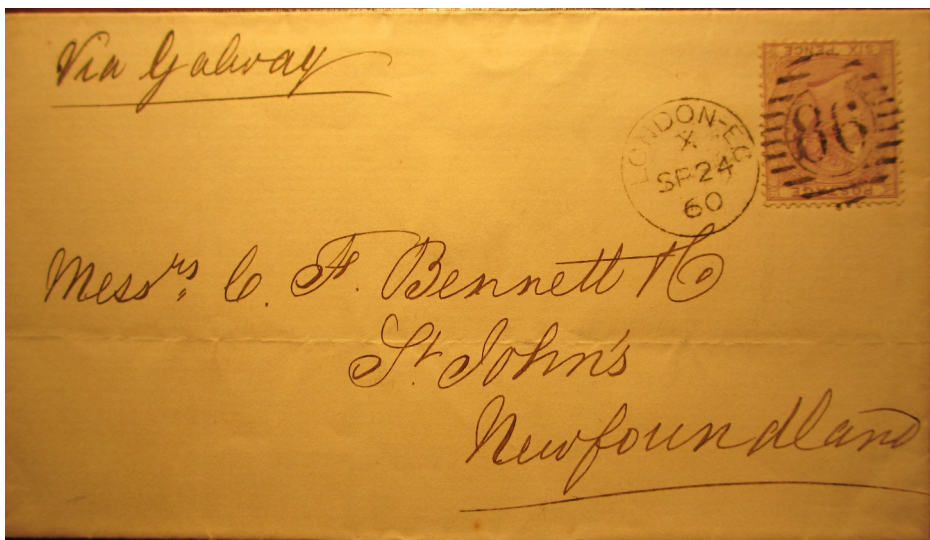


Fig 3 Letter from London UK to St John's, Newfoundland via Galway dated 24 September 1860.

passengers and luggage, and also silver bullion for the conveyance to Boston, of the value of £10,000". Subsequent press reports added a bit more detail: the bullion was contained in two boxes, consigned by the Union Bank of Newfoundland to the Merchant's Bank of Boston and was made up of gold rather than silver coins.

The *Connaught* departed for Boston mid-afternoon on Wednesday, 3 October, accompanied by strong breezes and boisterous seas, none of which seemed to bother the Captain who subsequently reported that on the Friday "the steamer was in the very best possible condition". However, the weather situation deteriorated until Saturday evening, by which time it was obvious that the vessel was in trouble: rolling in an alarming manner and taking on water from a leak in the engine-room, which the Engineer immediately reported to the Captain. Leitch ordered all hands on deck to stop the flooding using a variety of pumps, bilge injections and portable fire-engines, assisted by a manual bailing operation carried out by crew and some of the more robust passengers.

By 9.00 am on the Sunday (7 October) and after 12 hours strenuous work, it seemed as though the situation had improved somewhat, but this didn't last and it soon became apparent that the flooding in the engine-room and forward bunkers was out of control. The water did, however, help to extinguish a fire which had developed under the forward boilers. As if this weren't enough, the Engineer then discovered smoke coming up from the aft stoke-hole, which he reported to the Captain stating that he thought that the ship was on fire. Leitch immediately gave his orders but, despite all the efforts of the crew to contain the fire using force-pumps, wet blankets and buckets of water, it was now spreading at an alarming rate and preparations were made to save the passengers by taking them off the ship and transferring them to one of the available boats (de-

scribed as three life-boats, a mail-boat, two cutters and a gig). Boats were launched over the next few hours, but this was an extremely hazardous operation in turbulent seas and with the *Connaught* lying almost on her side.

By early afternoon it was obvious that the fire could not be extinguished and in the words of Mr Whittell, one of the 'First Class' passengers, it was "... expected to burst out and sweep the decks ...". He went on to state that "the side of the ship was then so hot that when she rolled it would hiss and make steam of the sea water". The only hope was that a passing vessel would respond immediately to the three distress signals which had been hoisted on the masts, but this seemed very unlikely. One can only imagine the agonising scenes on the smouldering deck of the *Connaught*, as both passengers and crew members contemplated their likely fate, whether it be in the cold waters of the Atlantic or on a burning ship. Just at this point and when all seemed lost, a miracle happened with the arrival out of the gloom of a small brigantine - the *Minnie Schiffer* – whose Captain, John Wilson, alerted at a distance by the fire and then responding to the steamer's distress signals, had without fear for his own safety sailed towards the stricken *Connaught* and hove to alongside.

The rescue operation then began in the most difficult of conditions, as described by Capt. Leitch in his statement before the Inquiry and quoted in full by the New York Times on 11 October. It was an operation which was to last between 8 and 9 hours, and by dint of masterful leadership and sheer determination resulted in no loss of life. Remarkably, in the midst of this potential human disaster, the two mail-bags were also saved and transferred via one of the *Connaught's* boats to the *Minnie Schiffer*; the New York Times subsequently reported their safe landing at Boston. At one point as it was getting dark, and with no more than 200 people transferred to the brig, Capt. Wilson was heard to say, "this is a horrible affair, to see the sun going down, and so many people yet on board ... I will do all in my power to save them". He continued, "I will go almost alongside and take a hawser from on board, and then you will be in little or no danger. I must get everyone from the wreck". And he did. (see fig 4 overleaf).

It is generally agreed that this was one of the most courageous, daring and successful rescues in maritime history. Capt. Wilson won high praise for his gallant actions and attention was drawn at the official Inquiry to his "intrepid coolness" throughout the dramatic operation, and both he and his crew were hailed as heroes. Wilson received from a variety of sources (including the management of the Galway Line, the British Government and public subscriptions in the US), substantial financial gifts and awards, including "a splendid silver pitcher and salver" with "appropriate inscriptions," which he cherished afterwards through "thick and thin." Members of his crew also received generous financial rewards. It is typical of the measure of the man, that Wilson's own statement to the Inquiry (as quoted in the Newfoundland Express of 20 October) is both modest and concise, mentioning only that "... the occurrence has caused me considerable trouble, still I feel happy to have saved the lives of so many of my fellow creatures". The New York Times reported on 11 October that the *Minnie Schiffer* had arrived at India Wharf, Boston at 1.0'clock on Tuesday afternoon (the 9th). The paper describes



*Fig 4 Minnie Schiffer rescuing the Connaught. A painting by Sir Oswald Brierly.*

the scene as follows, “*The roughly clad, unwashed, but comparatively joyful-looking passengers feebly acknowledged the kindly sentiments of the first whom they were to see in the new country – in the land of freedom and of brilliant promise – and many a poor emigrant lifted the remnant of what was once a substantial hat in quiet but no less earnest response.*”

The paper also gave an account of the final hours of the *Connaught* as witnessed by the crew of the schooner, *Lamartine*, from Nova Scotia. The doomed vessel was completely engulfed by fire and on Monday morning (the 8th) she went down with a loud explosion. The only sign of her was a boat, upside down, a few trunks and light portions of the deck and cargo. According to a report in the *Boston Pilot* a couple of days later, the underwriters had decided for the moment not to take any steps to raise the steamer, nor to attempt the recovery of the two boxes containing £10,000, which was probably fully insured. In fact, it was to take more than 150 years before a serious attempt was made to locate and salvage the cargo of the steamer. In 2014, the Endurance Exploration Group announced that they had positively identified the location of the *Connaught* through sonar imagery and video footage; the following year, they were granted exclusive rights by the US Federal Courts enabling them to return to the site to begin salvage efforts. Some items have been retrieved, but not the bullion, and it remains to be seen if the Company will be able to raise the working capital required to fund an extremely expensive and complex salvage operation.

The loss of the *Connaught* was a severe blow to the fortunes of the Atlantic Royal Mail Steam Navigation Company and spelt the beginning of the end for the Galway Line sailings, which from then on were irregular and unreliable. There were no mail sailings from November 1860 until April 1861, and the contract was then terminated by the British Government in June of that year. The contract was revived in August 1863 and stayed in place until January 1864, when it was finally cancelled. It was a sad end to an undertaking which had started with such enthusiasm and high hopes. As Timothy Collins writes in his excellent book on the Galway Line, “*As an heroic failure, its record is impressive*”. He goes on to write, “*Although three Galway Line ships held the record for the fastest crossing of the Atlantic at various times, becoming Blue Riband holders in the process, the crossing was seldom made within the time stipulated in the coveted mail contracts which were essential to the company’s financial well-being*”. One has only to look at the details of the various voyages, as listed in Hubbard & Winter, to conclude that many of the ships (including the *Connaught*) were just not strong enough to survive Atlantic storms, particularly during the icy winter months.

The Galway Line schedules displayed in Hubbard & Winter indicate that between 11 January 1859 and 19 January 1864, there were some 41 westward sailings where mail was carried and a lower number of eastward sailings due to breakdowns and/or adverse weather conditions, which particularly affected stop-overs at St John’s. These are very low numbers when compared to other transatlantic shipping lines during the same period and account for the scarcity of surviving letters, as noted by previous postal historians. Three nice examples of Galway Line letters carried from Newfoundland to Baltimore (1859, 1860) are illustrated in Sanderson & Montgomery and Allan Steinhart discusses an interesting 1863 letter from Bristol to St John’s in a 1997 article for BNA Topics. Collectors of transatlantic mail at this period will find it challenging to locate further Galway Line covers, but they do turn up from time-to-time, and they might just have a dramatic story attached to them like the *Connaught* letter, which I now enjoy having in my own collection and which gave me the idea for writing this article.

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See also displays at The Galway Maritime Museum website:  
<https://galwaymaritimemuseum.ie/>