



The Belfast Ship They Christened *with a* Bottle of Whisky

Transcribed by David Byers from the *Belfast Telegraph*, Friday 13 June 1941, page 4.

Note: A poor quality photograph included with the original article, but not reproduced here, was titled 'This illustration of the launching of the Aurora, the first passenger steamer ever constructed in Ireland, hangs in the Linen Hall Library.'

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Belfast's shipbuilding fame is in the news this week with the inclusion of the head of the Queen's Island in the Honours list. Here CAPTAIN R. H. DAVIS tells some interesting stories about another famous Lagan shipbuilding concern.

OUR local historians appear to have given very little prominence to the shipbuilding firm of Messrs. Charles (afterwards Alexander) Connell & Sons, and yet this name Connell has been continuously associated with shipbuilding in Belfast since the year 1808. It was this firm that in 1838 built the Aurora, the first passenger steamer ever constructed in Ireland. A writer of that day said she 'might be denominated as a floating palace.'

Connells built their ships on a site practically where our Harbour Office stands to-day, the same site whereon William Ritchie, our first shipbuilder, who had retired about 1820, turned out the majority of his ships. The blacksmiths' shop in connection with Connell's yard is the only trace left standing, and at present it is used by Messrs. W. D. Henderson & Son as a cement store.

All Connells' ships, of course, were built of wood. Their No.1 vessel was the schooner Jane, launched in June, 1825, so that they probably took possession of their site some time in 1824. Previous to this date Mr. Charles Connell must have been well known as a shipbuilder in connection with a most original salvage job in 1820.

In June of that year the sloop John and Mary, with a cargo of coal on board, stranded at the mouth of Belfast Harbour in such a way that she completely blocked the entrance and no vessel bigger than a rowing boat could get either in or out.

Belfast was a small port in those days, but the blocking of the channel even at that period was a serious matter for the inhabitants, and when the 'powers that were' gave Mr. Connell the contract for clearing the channel of this obstruction I am sure they gave it to the man whom they considered best able to carry it out successfully.

Connell went about the job in a most original manner; he did not trouble about pumps or pontoons or camels or any of the salvage equipment used even in those days. Instead he went to Captain Cockburn, the commander of the Belfast garrison, and prevailed on him to lend him a regiment of soldiers.

Next morning before high water every man of the regiment who could be spared from duty attended on the strand and tailed on to a seven-inch hawser which had been secured to the sloop. When all was in readiness, at the word of command, off they marched, and, although the hawser parted on two occasions, they finally succeeded in hauling the sloop for a distance of about fifty yards and into a position where she would ebb nearly dry and could be discharged. Thus the channel was again left open.

One of Connell's early vessels was a fine brig called the Brian Boru. She was coppered on the stocks, and was about 300 tons burthen. She was launched on December 4, 1826, and was the property of John, William, and Robert Murphy, of this town. Although only 300 tons, the Brian Boru traded all over the world.

Another fine brig called the Joseph P. Dobree was launched on September 13, 1829, for the old-established firm of West India merchants, Messrs. John Martin & Co., of Belfast. The Joseph P. Dobree was kept continually in the West India trade.

On one occasion when bound home she encountered very heavy weather, and had to jettison part of her cargo, and afterwards had to put into Falmouth with her decks lifted owing to her cargo swelling. Early in 1845 she stranded on the Folle Reef (Haiti) and became a total wreck.

In 1832 another particularly fine vessel, the Fanny, of 310 tons, was built for the Eastern trade, and she made history by being the first Belfast ship to bring a cargo of tea direct from Canton to Belfast. This tea trade at one time promised to be of considerable importance. Sir William Bateson at a dinner to the Lord Lieutenant in November, 1855, speaking of Belfast ships, said: 'They trade to China for teas which are shipped direct and landed here, and the shipping of Belfast extends over every part of the world where shipping can go.'

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THE next vessel built by Connells was a 500-ton ship, the Penninghame, for Mr. John Harrison, of Belfast, and in the same year he built for his own account the schooner Rowena. This latter vessel was lost some five years afterwards (1833) when bound home with a cargo of oak timber for her owner.

Bound from Liverpool to Rio, the Penninghame got ashore on February 22, 1854, and after being on the rocks for a fortnight (a hard test for a wooden ship) she was got off and brought into Holyhead, and some twelve months afterwards Mr. Heyn sold her to Liverpool owners.

Next in succession was launched the Tickler, Hindoo, Brigand, and Splendid. Of these four vessels the Hindoo was outstanding, and she made a record by being the first full-rigged ship ever built in Ireland. She was built for the China and East Indian trade, and was supposed to be of 800 tons, and was also one of the largest vessels built in Ireland up to that time.

Her owners were Messrs. Sinclair & Boyd, Messrs. John and Thomas Sinclair, and J. McNamara. Her career was a short one. On August 9 in the following year she was lost in a heavy gale at Regedopore Bay, 38 miles south of Bombay, and became a total wreck. It is mentioned that for a period of seventeen days the sun had not been seen at Bombay, an

almost unprecedented experience there. (This date would be about the change of the Monsoons).

In 1837 and 1838 Connells built two steamboats and a schooner. The ss Victoria (1837) was the third steamer to be built in Ireland. Her engines, which were the work of Messrs. Coates & Young, are described as being of 200 h.p. The ss Aurora (1838), which I have mentioned at the commencement of this article, was a well-known craft, which in the following year made the record passage between Glasgow and Belfast, and in 1847 she very probably broke another record when more than two days on the same passage.

The James Duncan, which was launched in September, 1839, for McConnells own account, got ashore near Bangor in 1840 and filled with water, but was successfully salvaged and brought to a safe anchorage at Garmoyle. In 1841, bound out to the Black Sea, she made the record passage of the season to Constantinople (Istanbul), and in the following year made another fast passage of 22 days to Leghorn.

The output of Connells Yard appears to have averaged about two vessels annually, as in 1842 he constructed his No.32 ship. This was a brig named the John Cunningham of 300 tons. Three of his vessels were particularly described as clippers — the Mischief, Faugh-a-Ballagh, and the Vivid.

The first appears to have justified her description, as in 1845 she went from London to Cronstad in 12 days, and the report says: 'This is the quickest run we have ever heard of.' On another occasion, when she sailed from the Cove of Cork with 16 other vessels, a heavy on-shore gale came on, all with the exception of the Mischief put back for shelter. A writer who describes the incident says that she weathered the gale, going to windward like a powerful steamer. In 1833, when bound out to Demerara she had a deck load of mules, every one of which was washed overboard in a gale.

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ON a Sunday night a few weeks ago. with a number of friends I was listening-in at question-time and trying to answer each question as it came along. The announcer asked who was Catherine Hayes, and I was the only one in the company to answer. Connells built a clipper schooner of that name, and naturally I was curious as to who she was.

I discovered by the Press of the period that she was a world-famous Irish vocalist who sang not only in Belfast, but to audiences all over the world. The announcer informed us that she was born in Limerick, and was reputed to have been the model for the Statue of Liberty at the entrance to New York Harbour.

The Oceanica was also one of Connells ships. She was owned by Mr. James Lemon, and was built specially for the East India trade, in which she remained for many years. She was a very Irish craft. Her hull was painted a bright green, she flew a green burgee with an Irish harp in it, and she was christened with a bottle of Irish whisky.

The Oceanica was lost in 1868 near Great Orme's Head when bound out from Liverpool to Merimachi.

In 1841 the new cut to the first bend of the river [Lagan] was completed and the river channel from the Queen's Bridge had been deepened. Improvements to the harbour and port were made for the next decade in all directions. These necessitated the removal of Connell's and other shipyards on the County Antrim side of the river. In 1854 the old Harbour Office was removed to make room for the proposed new Custom House and a new Harbour Office was built practically on the site of Connells shipyard.

During the 'forties' Mr. Alexander Connell was the head of the firm. He was a well-known figure in Belfast and was often to be met with at the Plough Hotel in Corn Market, where there was a sporting club of which he was a prominent member. His residence was at Rifle Lodge, Whiteabbey.

He died in 1875 and was buried in Carnmoney Old Churchyard. The business of shipwright, ship-joiner, etc., was carried on by his son, Alexander, and is today being carried on by his grandson, William Connell, whose office stands on a patch of ground which at one time was adjacent to if not part of Connells shipyard.
