

## YESTERDAY'S NEWS.9

1885

### THE LOSS OF THE 'NANCY OF DUBLIN'

'The brigantine *Nancy* of Dublin, 232 tons, went ashore on a rock in the island of Tíree on Sunday morning the 8th [February], and out of a crew of seven men only one was saved. The following is a statement of the survivor, the captain of the vessel: The brigantine left Liverpool with a crew of seven men, on Friday the 6th, for Newcastle with a cargo of salt. She rounded Skerryvore Light on the following Sunday morning, and struck at 2am on the [Dubh Sgeir] Rock [three miles] off Craignish Point. The vessel immediately split in two, and went down. Three of the seamen were in their berths when the ship struck, and had no time to get on deck before the vessel sank. The other three were on deck along with the captain, but as he was washed away off the poop, he neither saw the men nor heard any cries for assistance. Supported on a piece of the wreck, he drifted three miles landward, and eventually was washed ashore on a small island off Craignish Point after having been about thirteen hours in the water. He remained on the island the rest of the Sunday, though his position was observed from the shore of Tíree, and he could see men trying to launch a boat, but the sea was so high that no relief was possible until the following morning, when he was taken ashore. The captain has returned to Ireland. The crew was composed as follows: Richard [Kearon], captain, Ferrybank, Arklow; [Matthew Byrne, 27], mate, married; [Robert Mackey, 27], A.B. [Able seaman], single; [Thomas Wedick, aged 21], A.B.; [James Donnelly, 24], A.B.; [James Kehoe, 21], A.B., single; Herman Hallander, cook, single. With the exception of the last named, a native of Sweden, the others belonged to Arklow [a busy port 60 km south of Dublin]. None of the bodies have yet come shore. Portions of the wreck in small pieces have been found strewn along the beach. The vessel, it stated, was not insured.' (*Aberdeen Evening Express*, 16 February 1885, 2)

The local policeman Murdoch MacLeod prepared a report for William Sproat, the Procurator Fiscal in Tobermory. (This is available on An Iodhlann's website, the fruits of our collaboration with Inveraray Archives.) At the time of the shipwreck, the captain had been standing on the poop, a raised section of the deck at the stern of the vessel. Given that this was at 5am on a stormy February morning, this suggests that he knew this was a tricky part of the voyage. After the vessel had broken up, he was able to cling to part of the wreckage for ten hours until he was washed ashore on a rock at the tip of Craignish known as *Urra Chràignis*.

Miraculously, he had made dry land, but he was still tantalisingly out of reach. Constable MacLeod took up the story: 'In the afternoon of Sunday, he was seen by some men from the shore of Tíree, and they tried to launch a boat to go to his assistance, but the surf on the beach was so great and the wind so strong on the lee shore that they were unable to do so. The

island on which the man was standing was within 100 yards of the shore, and when the men found themselves unable to reach him, they tried to pass a rope to him but failed in this also, and darkness coming on they had to leave. They returned the next morning about six o'clock, and the weather then having somewhat moderated and the tide being low, they waded into the sea and got within forty yards of the rock, and by attaching a stone to the end of a rope they succeeded in throwing it to him, and after attaching it round his waist, they pulled him through the surf to the shore and so rescued him.' MacLeod gave the rescuers' names as Alexander Cameron from Moss, along with the Balevullin fishermen William McNeil and Niel McMillan.

This is an extraordinary story of endurance. The sea off Tiree in February is 7–9 °C, a temperature at which your survival is reckoned to be less than two hours. This suggests that Captain Kearon was out of the water, floating on a substantial part of the wreck. The fact that the *Nancy* had a wooden hull is likely to have saved his life.

A brigantine is a two-masted sailing ship with a fully square-rigged foremast. The *Nancy* had been built in Cornwallis, Nova Scotia, just twelve years earlier. Diarmaid from the Arklow Maritime Museum told me that she 'was regarded as one of the finest vessels in the Arklow fleet and had cost £2,000 [the equivalent of £320,000 today] when bought a few years previously. She was principally engaged in the Baltic trade [presumably where the Swedish cook joined the crew], and also made "several smart voyages across the Atlantic"'. She was owned by the captain's relation, another Richard Kearon, and Frank Tyrrell.

The bodies came ashore over the next few weeks. On the coast between Craignish and Balevullin, there is a small rectangular enclosure known as *An Tunga* 'the small graveyard'. It was there that the old folks told me, more than a century later, that local people buried the crew of the 'Nancy of Dublin'. It was said that three were buried inside the enclosure with another three, presumably washed up later, outside. It was said that one body was identified by the initials on his stockings.

Professor Donald Meek tells me that 'the traditional understanding was that, if unidentified bodies which had been washed ashore were buried in a normal graveyard, the sea would come to fetch them.' They were therefore usually buried at the shore, as the three Tiree place-names *Port an Duine* 'the inlet of the man' in Caolas, West Hynish and Greenhill attest. This custom was outlawed by the Burial of Drowned Persons Act of 1808, amended in 1886, which specified that bodies found at the shore should be interred in a proper graveyard.

Sailing the high seas was a tough way to make a living. When Captain Kearon was sent papers about the accident, just six weeks after his feat of survival, he was back in command of another brigantine, the *Belle Star*, in port in Newry. And it was a brutal industry. Twenty years after the loss of the *Nancy*, her owner Richard Kearon was reported to have lost seven vessels worth £20,000 [around £3 million today] over two years (*Bray and South Dublin Herald*, 17

September 1904, 8). This was from a town whose population was just 4,700, around half the size of Oban today.