

For the CATHOLIC RECORD.

GROSSE ISLE.

1847.

By JAMES M. O'LEARY, OF OTTAWA.

CONTINUED FROM OUR LAST.

"The island should, as it formerly was, be put under military government, which alone is adequate to maintain order amongst the thousands liable to be landed there, and a proper medical staff or establishment be appointed, and at all times in readiness, with suitable salaries, and all contingencies of the station controlled by two or three medical men at Quebec. As it is, the superintendent has a monopoly of the powers on the island, besides other bodies, without any efficient check.

"I beg to assure you that I am not anxious by an enquiry to give myself or others trouble in this matter, nor to put the country to an expense which an investigation must necessarily occasion, but will be content, if, after your submitting it to His Excellency, Lord Elgin, measures are taken to establish a police, and better regulations than have prevailed on the island, during the last and so far of this season, as I feel persuaded His Excellency will have pleasure in ordering it to be done.

"My residence in Quebec: the interest, in common with its citizens, I take for the health of the city; and, above all, my public duty, must be my apology for the present.

I have, etc.,

(Signed) ROBERT CHRISTIE.

"The Hon. D. Daly,
"Provincial Secretary."

In alluding to the police force on the island, the Reverend Father Moylean (at present a member of the Society of Jesus) said there is no available force to keep the peace, except six policemen, who, besides their small number, were, for the greater part, the first to give a bad example of drunkenness and immorality.

In consequence of the alarming state of affairs Lieutenant Studdart and fifty men of the 93rd regiment were sent from Quebec on the 1st of June to preserve order in the island.

The Government also appointed a commission, consisting of Doctors Joseph Painchaud of Quebec, R. L. McDonnell and George Campbell, both of Montreal, to enquire into the character and amount of sickness prevailing among the emigrants at Grosse Isle, and the best mode to be adopted to arrest the disease, and prevent its dissemination, with full powers to make at once such changes on the island as they thought proper.

In the event of all the passengers being landed Dr. Douglas stated that it would be impossible to keep up the necessary separation of the sick from the healthy, and suggested that the best means of carrying out the order would be by landing the healthy at Cliff Island, which he described as being about a thousand yards from Grosse Isle, easy of access, high and dry, covered with light wood available for fuel, and the ground well suited for tents.

He was also of opinion that landing the poor, emaciated beings, as the majority of them were, weakened by fasting and privation, on the rocks without covering and destitute as many of them were of everything but the wretched clothing that covered them, would only increase the mortality, while by remaining on board they had their berths, cooking places, and the convenience of water for washing. By obliging the masters to open the bow ports, with which all vessels in the timber trade were provided, and by likewise opening the stern ports, knocking down all the bulk-heads and midship berths, a complete current of air would pass through the hold; by whitewashing it daily, by washing every article of bedding and clothing, the health of the passengers would be improved.

Cliff Island was examined, but it was found impossible to pitch tents there, the rocky nature of the soil rendering it unfit for driving pegs. In fact the land at Grosse Isle, where the tents were, was either gravel, from which the pegs loosened in windy weather, or soft alluvial soil, into which one would sink after a shower of rain.

As for Dr. Douglas's second suggestion, it was found that the mortality on board the vessels was greater than on shore.

The Commissioners reported that Grosse Isle "is very well adapted for a quarantine station. It affords ample room, where the necessary buildings erected upon it for the accommodation and perfect isolation of even a hundred thousand emigrants. A deep bay forms its upper or western extremity into a small peninsula, upon which are erected the hospital tents and sheds for the accommodation of the sick." The lower or eastern extremity of the island, distant about a mile, contains a large portion of cleared and well cultivated land (this was Dr. Douglas's farm), "possesses good natural facilities for the landing and embarkation of emigrants, and is connected with the western end by an excellent road. It is at this latter situation that the tents are in progress of erection."

Of the sick in the hospitals, sheds and tents, they said, "we found these unfortunate people in the most deplorable condition for want of necessary nurses and hospital attendants; their friends, who had partially recovered, being in many instances unable, and, in most, unwilling, to render them any assistance, the common sympathies of humanity being apparently annihilated by the mental and bodily depression produced by famine and disease."

At our inspection of many of the vessels we witnessed some appalling instances of what we have now stated—corpses lying in the bed with sick and the dying, the healthy not taking the trouble to remove them."

Immediate steps were taken by the commissioners for affording temporary shelter on the island, by means of spars and sails borrowed from the ships and the putting up of shanties for the accommodation of the healthy.

On the 2nd June the Provincial Parliament opened in Montreal, and the session lasted until the 28th July.

The following paragraph appeared in the speech from the Throne.

"In view of the large immigration which may be expected to take place this year, measures have been adopted for providing additional accommodation and medical attendance for the sick, and for increasing the means of forwarding the destitute to places where their labor may be required. An increased grant (£10,000) has been made by the Imperial Parliament in aid of this service. Although it is to be feared that there may be much want and suffering among certain classes of immigrants who arrive this season, I have reason to believe that they will be accompanied by a greater number than usual of persons possessed of capital who will likely prove an acquisition to the Province."

On the 25th June a select committee of the

House of Assembly, consisting of the Honorable Messrs. Solicitor-General Cameron, Cayley, Baldwin, Lafontaine and Macdonald, were named to draft an address to the Queen, on the subject of immigration. The following address prepared by them was agreed to by the House:

"To the Queen's Most Excellent Majesty:

"Most GRACIOUS MAJESTY—We, Your Majesty's dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of Canada, in Provincial Parliament assembled, humbly venture to represent the apprehension which we entertain for the unprecedented influx of emigrants from Great Britain and Ireland, in a state of destitution, starvation and disease unparalleled in the history of the Province.

"We venture humbly to state that arrangements for the reception of the sick at Grosse Isle, the quarantine station, although made on an extensive scale, have proved wholly inadequate to the unprecedented emergency; that the entire range of buildings intended for the use of emigrants generally at that station have been converted into hospitals, and still are insufficient for the numerous and increasing sick; that the island itself, which is three miles in length and a half mile in breadth, has been reported as not sufficiently extensive to receive all those, who, by the regulations of the health officers, are required to perform quarantine; that the apparently healthy have consequently been forwarded without being subject to the usual precaution, and, as a further consequence, that fever is showing itself among the inhabitants of the populous cities of Montreal and Quebec, and, in addition, that the progress of emigrants into the interior is marked by disease and death.

"We feel bound to declare to Your Majesty that while we believe that this House and the people of the Province are most desirous to welcome to the colony all those of their fellow-subjects who may think proper to emigrate from the parent country to settle among them, we are convinced that a continued emigration of a similar character to that which is now taking place is calculated to produce a most injurious effect upon our prosperity unless conducted upon some more systematic principle.

"We beseech the interference of Your Majesty under the infliction with which this land has been visited, and is still further threatened, not to permit the helpless, the starving, the sick and diseased, unequal and unfit as they are to face the hardships of a settler's life, to embark for those shores, which, if they reach, they reach in too many instances, only to find a grave.

"We humbly pray, Your Majesty, that measures may be adopted by Your Majesty's Government that the emigrant ships may be large and airy—that ample space may be allotted to the emigrants, and that a larger allowance of better food than is now furnished, with sufficient medical attendance, shall be always provided on board.

"We humbly inform Your Majesty that in the opinion of this House an unusually large expenditure must be made in this Province, in the present season, to meet such unexampled destitution and distress, and we assure Your Majesty of our confident belief that the justice as well as the liberality of the Imperial Government will provide for this expenditure, from the Imperial funds.

(Signed) ALLEN N. MCNAB.

Speaker.

"Legislative Assembly Hall.
"Friday, 25th June 1847."

On the 6th July a similar address passed the Legislative Council, and both addresses were duly forwarded. Accompanying them was a memorandum drawn up by the Executive Council, on immigration to Canada.

Earl Grey, at that time Colonial Secretary, lost no time in acknowledging their receipt, with a promise that they would "receive serious consideration."

"In the meantime," he continued, "I have to direct your Lordships' attention to the importance of enforcing the strictest economy in affording such assistance to the emigrants as may be absolutely necessary, and of not losing sight of the danger that the grant of such assistance if not most rigidly guarded may have the effect of inducing the emigrants to relax their exertions to provide for themselves."

In July, 1847, the Provincial Parliament named Messrs. Aylwin, Cayley, Chabot, Chauveau, Boulton, Dewitt, Murney, Moffatt and Christie, a committee of the House to enquire into the management of the quarantine station.

They reported soon after appointment that the shortness of the session precluded such an examination of the all-important subject referred to them, as to authorize the adoption of any conclusion to be recommended to your Honorable House, and the committee was accordingly dissolved.

Once again to the dark and dreary island. On the 1st June the Superintendent of Public Works was employed in erecting hospitals and cook houses for the passenger sheds used as temporary hospitals, and crowded in every part.

The number of patients entrusted to each doctor was infinitely greater than he could with efficiency attend to. In fact as many as four hundred and fifty were under one doctor's charge with a staff of attendants scarcely worthy of the name, while the sick alight could not possibly be visited daily or even on alternate days.

On the 5th June the steamers "Queen" and "Quebec" and "Rowland Hill" were sent to Grosse Isle to convey the healthy emigrants direct to Montreal. The fare was \$1 a head.

On the arrival of the steamers in the evening Dr. Douglas selected the perfectly healthy, in his opinion, from eleven of the ships that had been for the longest time at the station, retaining the sick and doubtful until accommodation could be obtained for them ashore.

On the 7th June the so-called healthy passengers of seven other vessels were transhipped by two steamers direct to Montreal, and this continued during the season.

There was no attention paid to overcrowding, or to the question of comfort, or convenience or shelter from the heat of the burning sun of midsummer, or the inclemency of the weather. In some cases crowds were stowed away in barges or bateaux.

It was indeed a heart-rending time. Families were scattered forever without a moment's notice. Friendships were ruthlessly broken. Little did the father or mother, or children, sister or brother, in the hospitals know that never again would they hear the voice or their eyes fall upon those who were nearest and dearest to them, or that they would never learn tidings of each other.

Few but could not disapprove of the plan of keeping a vessel in quarantine for any period however prolonged, whilst the sick and the healthy were congregated together, breathing the same atmosphere, sleeping in the same berths and exposed to the same exciting causes of contagion.

The melancholy experience of '47, in many instances proved that the number attacked by fever and the mortality of the disease increased

in direct ratio with the length of time the ship would be detained under such circumstances. As an evidence of the truth of the above statement, there was the case of the "Agnes" that arrived about the 20th May, with 364 passengers, of whom not more than 150 were in a healthy condition, the remainder being either dead, or sick on board, or in the hospitals.

On the 9th June His Grace the Archbishop of Quebec, Joseph Signay, addressed the following circular letter to the Catholic Archbishops and Bishops of Ireland:

"Quebec, 9th June, 1847.

"MY LORD AND VENERABLE BROTHER—The voice of religion and humanity imposes on me the sacred and imperative duty of exposing to your Lordship the dismal fate that awaits thousands of the unfortunate children of Ireland who come to seek in Canada an asylum from the countless evils afflicting them in their native land.

"Already a considerable number of vessels overloaded with emigrants from Ireland have arrived in the waters of the St. Lawrence.

"During the passage, many of them, weakened beforehand by misery and starvation, have contracted fatal diseases, and the greater part have thus become the victims of an untimely death. This was but the result of their precarious situation. Crowded in the hold of the vessels, unable to strictly adhere to the rules of cleanliness, breathing constantly a putrid atmosphere, and relying frequently for nourishment upon insufficient and very bad provisions, it was morally impossible to escape safe and sound from so many causes of destruction.

"Anchoring at Grosse Isle, about thirty miles below Quebec, where they are compelled to perform quarantine, the trans-Atlantic vessels are mostly infected with sick and dying emigrants.

"Last week more than two thousand patients were detained at that station, of whom more than a half had to remain on board—in some cases abandoned by their friends—spreading contagion among the healthy passengers who were confined in the vessels and exhibiting the heart-rending spectacle of a mortality three times greater than what prevailed on shore.

"Already more than a thousand human beings have been consigned to their eternal rest in the Catholic cemeteries, precursors of thousands who will join them there if the stream of emigration from Ireland continues to flow in the same abundance.

"One Catholic clergyman alone, in ordinary circumstances, ministered to the spiritual wants of the quarantine station, but this year the services of even seven at a time have been indispensably required to afford to the dying emigrants the last rites and consolations of their cherished religion. Two of these gentlemen are actually lying on the bed of sickness from the extreme fatigues they have undergone, and the fever they have contracted in visiting the infected vessels and the hospitals on the island, to accomplish the duties of their sacred ministry and gladden the last moments of the Irish emigrants.

"The details we receive of the scenes of horror and desolation, of which the chaplains are daily witnesses, almost stagger belief and baffle description. Most despairingly and unmeasurably do they affect us, as the available means are totally inadequate to apply an effectual remedy to such awful calamities. Many of the unfortunate emigrants who escape from Grosse Isle in good health pay tribute to the prevailing diseases either at Quebec or Montreal, and overcrowd the hospitals of these two cities where temporary buildings are erected for the reception of a great number without still affording sufficient accommodation. Amid the present confusion we have had neither leisure nor opportunity to ascertain the number of orphans and families that are thrown for support on public charity.

"I deem it also necessary to mention that those who have escaped from the fatal influence of disease are far from realizing, on their arrival here, the ardent hopes they so fondly cherished of meeting with unspeakable comfort and prosperity on the banks of the St. Lawrence. To attain so desirable an end they should possess means, which the greater number have not and which cannot be rendered available and efficacious unless emigration be conducted on a more diminished scale.

I submit these facts to your consideration that your Lordship may use every endeavor to dissuade your diocesan from emigrating in such numbers to Canada, where they will but too often meet with either a premature death or a fate not less deplorable than the heart-rending condition under which they groan in their unhappy country. Your Lordship will thus open their eyes to their true interests and prevent the honest, religious and confiding Irish peasantry from being the victims of speculation and falling into irretrievable errors and irreparable calamities.

I have, etc., etc.,
(Signed) J. JOS. SIGNAY,
Archbishop of Quebec.

On the 10th June the number of sick at Grosse Isle reached 1,800, who were crowded into any place that could afford shelter—hospitals, sheds and churches—these last, through the kindness of the Archbishop of Quebec and the Protestant Bishop of Montreal, were given up for the sick. In the meantime, the greatest exertions were made by the Government to put up new buildings. Contracts were entered into by the Board of Works for the erection of two sheds capable of accommodating one hundred and twenty sick each. Two others of equal size were building under the direction of the superintendent of the Board of Works, and a fifth was contracted for in Quebec by the chief emigrant agent, to be sent to the island in frame ready to be put up.

On the 11th June the healthy passengers from those vessels where fever had prevailed were landed at the east end of the island, where tents had been pitched on the cleared land, capable of lodging three or four thousand. The most destitute of these were supplied with fresh meat and soft bread, under the control of the Commissariat department, an officer from which was now stationed permanently on the island.

The police of the station were increased to ten men.

Military guards were mounted around the hospitals to prevent intercourse between the healthy and the sick. No one was allowed to visit either the sick or the healthy without the written permission of the commandant.

A medical assistant resided permanently at the east end of the island to afford aid to those taken ill, and to pass them over to the hospital, for which purpose a horse and cart were expressly left to convey them.

At first the healthy passengers if taken ill could not be removed to the hospital immediately. The regulations were that they should be sent on board their respective ships and thence conveyed

to the hospitals. But they were Irish, mere Irish, you know!

A deputy agent from the emigration department and a clerk also resided at the tents to afford assistance and advice, and to forward by steamer to Montreal those unable to pay for their passage.

In the hospitals the number of sick continued to increase, being limited only by the amount of accommodation.

The accumulation of so vast a multitude of fever cases in one place generated a miasma so virulent and concentrated that few who came within its poisonous atmosphere escaped.

The clergy, doctors, hospital attendants, servants and police fell ill one after another.

With respect to the clergy, a judicious plan was adopted, of when the fever had broken out in its intensity, retaining them for one week only. By this means many escaped, but with the medical men and their attendants this could not be done. The average period of time which a medical man withstood the disease was from eighteen to twenty-one days. Out of the twenty-six employed during the season in the hospitals and visiting the vessels, three alone escaped the fever, though otherwise severely affected in general health, from breathing the foul air of the vessels and tents.

Of the forty-two Catholic priests who attended Grosse Isle, nineteen contracted the fever and four died.

Of the seventeen Protestant ministers, seven were laid up by fever and two died.

Much difficulty was experienced in retaining any nurses or attendants, and on those days of the week when the opportunity of leaving the island offered by the arrival of the steamer from Quebec, great number of servants insisted upon their discharge. But such applications were firmly refused, unless the applicant could produce a substitute. It is needless to observe that many so retained against their will neglected their duty to the sick and sought by every means to provoke their dismissal.

Dr. Douglas stated that the servants sent to Grosse Isle to be engaged "were, in many cases, the vilest and most profligate of both sexes, and were influenced by the most sordid motives."

On the 12th June a new hospital capable of accommodating one hundred and twenty was completed, and occupied. Two others of the same size were finished by the end of the month.

On the 15th June 1700 were sick in the hospitals, and 500 aboard the vessels, and on the 16th June 1500 were sick ashore, and 1,000 afloat.

Prior to this time a circular was addressed by the Archbishop of Quebec to those of his clergy who were intimate with the English language to hold themselves in readiness to proceed to Grosse Isle.

On the 21st June there were 1,935 sick on shore, 260 afloat and 199 deaths in the hospitals and ships.

From the 19th to the 26th of June much rain fell, with a high temperature and fog. This had a most pernicious effect upon the sick under canvas. The tents were, in the first instance, floored with boards, on which the straw beds, if procurable, were laid. Iron bedsteads were afterwards substituted as soon as a supply of the same was obtained from the military stores, yet the tents afforded insufficient protection from the weather when wet, and the mortality was in consequence much greater than in the hospitals.

During the prevalence of this rain it was found impossible to wash or dry the vast quantities of hospital bedding.

On the 27th June there were 1,758 in the hospitals, 155 died during the week and 228 were discharged.

Great blame was attached to Dr. Douglas for the unsatisfactory state of affairs at the island. In the Reverend Father O'Reilly, now Monsignor O'Reilly, S. J., of New York, he found an able defender, as the following letter will show, and which was addressed to the editor of the Quebec Mercury:

"Quarantine Station, Grosse Isle,
"Saturday evening, July 11, 1847.

"MY DEAR SIR—I cannot allow the Reverend Mr. Halle to leave the island without writing you a few words. You may consider this letter as private or not, and make such use of it as circumstances may prescribe or your own judgment consider expedient.

"With the scenes that I have every hour of the day and night under my eyes, it may be allowed me to make a few observations on the state of things here.

"Dr. Douglas is blamed, it is said, for all the unrelieved misery that prevails on the island, and on him the press and the giddy tongue of rumor make to fall all the censure which should be brought home to another quarter.

"Now the facts are these: Dr. Douglas is making superhuman exertions to provide for the comforts of the wretched hundreds that are thrown into this charnel house. He is at the present moment unable to walk, yet he finds means to see every thing. But what can he do? Emigrants arrive in the tents, and the new hospitals continually, but they are for days and nights without a bed under them or a covering over them, wasting and melting, under the united influence of fever and dysentery, without a nurse or any other person to give them a drink during their long hours of raging thirst and horrible suffering. Whose fault is it if medical attendance is not provided for the unfortunate who are thus thrown helpless and friendless on this rock? Whose fault is it if the medical gentlemen who devote themselves to the cure of the plague-stricken thousands can neither get servants, nor medicine, nor drink for their respective patients? Who is, who ought to be, blamed if we are here since last Tuesday morning without ever seeing a sight of the steamboat chartered by the Government for the regular service of this station while it is absolutely necessary that that steamboat should in the present dreadful emergency perform a daily trip to Grosse Isle? I leave it to you, and the public, to say what must be the consequence of all this neglect?

"The consequence is that for want of bed and bedding, for want of attendance, hundreds of poor creatures, after a long sea-voyage, consumed by confinement and hunger, thirst and disease, are brought here and compelled to spend the long, long night, and the sultry melting day, lying on hard boards, without a pillow under their burning heads, without a hand to wet their parched lips, and fevered brow, without a hand to help their tottering steps to any place where they can satisfy nature's most urgent wants, under the wasting influence of dysentery.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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