

**LIFE ON THE OCEAN WAVES:
A CHAPLAIN'S EXPERIENCE
ON ONE OF BISHOP QUINN'S MIGRANT SHIPS**

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In 1838 the British government set up the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission to control the shipping of British migrants to the new colonies overseas. This was in reaction to the infamous 'coffin ships' of the transatlantic trade, the use of which reached a murderous climax in the years after the Irish Famine in the late forties. In 1858, regulations to control the lives of migrants on board were laid down. These provided for the health - both physical and moral - of passengers. When the new Queensland Parliament legislated for migrant settlers under the Land Order system, it was determined that only ships observing the Commission regulations could provide access to Land Orders.

The First Colonial Secretary (Premier), R.G.W. Herbert, worked through the Commission itself; but the bureaucratic methods of its Civil Servants could not cope with the numbers Queensland wanted. The colonial parliament sent an agent - Henry Jordan - to London to attract the numbers required and contract their transport with a shipping line willing to observe the Commission's terms. He negotiated a monopoly with the Black Ball Line. This firm provided ships from the U.S. trade, some of which were notorious for the brutal management of the crews. The line was careless in fulfilling the Commission's requirements; but, at least, there were no 'coffin ships' on the Queensland run.

Bishop James Quinn set up his own Queensland Immigration Society (in Ireland: Emigration Society) to bring Irish settlers to build up his diocese. This did not suit either Herbert or Jordan, and the latter arranged with the Bishop's representative in Dublin (his brother Matthew) that the Society's migrants would sail, under his control, in

Black Ball ships. In the Society's brief period of existence, ten ships carried Quinn migrants. The seventh to sail was the *Golden City*.

On board was a chaplain appointed by Quinn, Henri Brun, A.A. He kept a diary which reveals invaluable information about the life of the migrants, the running of the ship and the observance – or lack of observance – of the Commission's regulations.

The Commission laid down the number (determined by size and tonnage) of migrants that vessels might carry. The very large numbers regularly carried by the Black Ball Line ships – including the *Golden City* – suggests that they pushed the numbers to the limit. The principal modification of normal ship's routine was that the daily life of the passengers was in the hands of the ship's surgeon. He was responsible for not only the health of the complement but for its moral life, especially that of the single women. In addition, his responsibilities included the meals, the access to liquor, the schools for children (who made up usually more than fifty percent of the passengers), the instruction of the migrants about life in the colonies and the maintenance of peace and order on board. He shared with the Captain, the duty of holding religious service when there was no clergyman on board. He was assisted by a matron, and a schoolmaster who was usually a student, intending to settle in the colonies.

In 1881 the British Medical Journal published an article on ships' surgeons. There were three classes: 1) the professionally competent; 2) the 'bad hats' of the profession; and 3) the 'professional' ship's surgeon. This last term was not meant to be flattering. The surgeon was frequently a doctor who, for various reasons, was travelling to a colony to set up a practice there. The bad hats and the professionals were often addicted to drink. Infant deaths were sadly frequent.

National differences were a delicate matter. The Scots, in particular, resented having to travel so close to the Irish. English agents shamelessly favoured the English. They were allocated places first, in Steerage (aft) which was regarded as the best quarters; then the Scots, and last, the ravening hordes of Irish. One man in 1855 wrote

that he was horrified to find himself 'lousey'. He attributed this to the proximity of the large number of Irish.

Class, as well as national distinction, prevailed. The best positions were always aft. The First Class passengers had full access to the top deck; the Second Cabin might enter a certain part forward. In Steerage, single women had the aft section, single men the forward and married people the middle. An interesting social problem arose from the fact that a companionway aft led to the single women's quarters. Wary eyes were kept on who went down and who came up. Cabin passengers might enter the Steerage quarters, but not *vice versa*. Crew members were not allowed in passengers' quarters; though they played all sorts of tricks to visit Steerage - especially the single women's section.

Religious services, too, were a matter for class and national distinction. Often English services were held in the First Class area; Presbyterian in Second and Roman Catholic in Steerage. The quality of each varied. If no minister of religion were travelling, the Captain or the surgeon would take service. Sometimes a passenger was allowed to organize more formally. John Burnett on the *Eastern Empire* in 1866 was impressed with the liturgical quality and reverence of the Anglican services. William Kirk, a sour Presbyterian on the *Chatsworth* in 1862, thought there was no Sabbath aboard at all but singing, swearing and everything that is bad; but he allowed that the service was adequate, considering it was Church of England.

It was Quinn's policy that a priest travel with each ship as Chaplain. On the *Golden City* it was Henri Brun, A.A. He belonged to a recently founded Society. The founder (Emanuel d'Alzon) had in view, mission work in France and overseas; especially in schools and colleges. Quinn had obtained the services of two priests, Cusse and Tissot. Cusse demanded his *Exeat* almost as soon as he arrived and in his place Lanzon sent Brun. The Bishop arranged for him to spend some time in Dublin, under the care of Matthew Quinn, to polish his English and arrange his passage. Brun complained that there was poor communication between them. Certainly Quinn could not get him to the train on time to travel to Cork, and Robert Dunne had to

arrange for Mass requisites at the last minute. Brun thought Matthew had not prepared him for his duties on board and was rather sensitive about this since he had little confidence in his command of English. Matthew did not want him to sail on the *Golden City* for that reason. As it turned out, he did very well.

When, after a few days of confusion, the *Golden City* sailed for Queensland from Queenstown on 13 December 1862, she had already picked up passengers (both English and Scots) in Liverpool and the 534 she now carried, created the demand for 461 Land Orders. She arrived in Moreton Bay on 28 February 1863; a record run - but not an uneventful one.

Brun was accompanied by a lay Brother, Polycarpe, with Brun in First Class and Polycarpe seemingly in Second. Father Brun reported that there were 200 non-Catholics on board; so his complement numbered about 334 and they were almost all Irish. Brun saw his role as apostolic, and he devoted himself fully and zealously to the pastoral care of the Irish migrants, some of who may have thought him too zealous. Brun approached his task at first cautiously and tactfully. He made his plans carefully, studying the ship's layout and deciding where and when he would celebrate Mass and hear Confessions, how often he would officiate and his availability for prayers, lectures and pastoral visits. He was diplomatic in his approach to the Captain and the First and Second Officers. His Gallic charm captivated the Captain, and the Second Officer proved to be a constant aid.

He proceeded to overturn the arrangements of the Commission and Black Ball. First of all he ignored the ship's divisions. The poop deck – he often called it the bridge – was the best place for Mass for a large number of people. The privileged preserve of the Cabin Class was invaded by the Steerage. It was an unfortunate start for Brun. The night they left was violently stormy and he stayed up till midnight, wishing to be available should disaster strike and the Captain had to tell him to go to bed when the worst was over. However Brun was very ill – as was the Captain – and he could not celebrate Mass the next day, the first Sunday of the voyage.

The following Sunday was 21 December and the wind was still wild; so he said Mass in what he called the Third Class Cabin. It was totally inadequate. This may have been useful, since it indicated that the only place suitable was the top deck. In the meantime Brun had a formal discussion with the Captain, and he agreed that Mass had to be on deck – weather permitting. Brun also said he would lead a daily Rosary. The Captain thought this a little excessive and not in the usual arrangements; but Brun suggested that it was a preparation for Christmas. After Christmas it simply continued and became Brun's main pastoral connection.

For Mass, a long section of the deck under three large lifeboats was covered with a tarpaulin and decorated with flags and bunting. The altar was forward and the entrance aft. This was left open to - as Brun said - let the Protestants see how the Irish kept the Sabbath. He said that one hundred could be accommodated. Where were the rest? At times he makes clear that he celebrated elsewhere as well; but one wonders what the Protestants thought of the other 230. The open entrance may have accommodated others.

Christmas was a special occasion. He celebrated three Masses, one in the women's mess, the second in the men's, the third unspecified. After all this activity Brun was too ill to eat Christmas dinner but he led the Rosary. He provided a bottle of sherry for Polycarpe to entertain his cabin and shared a beer and a piece of cake with him. On both New Year's Day and the Epiphany he celebrated on deck although the Second Officer thought this unnecessary. On a number of occasions there were Protestants in the congregation. Brun suspected they were checking on his sermons.

Whatever the number at Sunday Mass, the number at Communion was small. This was long before Pius X and frequent Communion. The highest number was 92 out of 330 on Candlemas Day (2 February), the Feast of the Purification. This was still a Holy Day of Obligation and Brun had made a special occasion of it. There were seventy-two Communion on the previous day which was a Sunday. At Christmas, Brun recorded only sixty; but this was at only two of

his three Masses. An intriguing fact is that there seemed to be more men than women.

Brun was an active confessor. He was delighted to notice that from the first days of the voyage the Irish were asking when he would hear Confessions. On 18 December he discussed with the Captain, the problem of confessing in crowded, public places. The latter 'volunteered' to allow people - even the underprivileged Steerage class - to come through the Holy of Holies: the First Class deck, to reach Brun's cabin. He probably did not realize how many there would be. Brun started hearing five days before Christmas with twenty penitents, though in typical fashion three more came before Mass. For Christmas he was introduced to what became Australian custom before Vatican II. On Christmas Eve he spent six hours in his confessional from 11.30 a.m. till 8 p.m. This is probably what caused his Christmas Day migraine. On 31 January he heard seventy-six confessions. When it was over he had a glass of cold punch. On 7 February he thought it was all over, but twenty people came. He noted that on 24 January some twenty came - mostly young men. Over the last days he had been very strong on the dangers of dancing on deck. They were approaching Brisbane and he advised that anyone who had not done so should come to him. In Brisbane he visited the Immigration Depot. On 10 March 1863, ninety-nine wanted Confession; the next day most left for Rockhampton. Again the majority of penitents were men.

Much of his day he gave to prayer, sermons, spiritual reading and instruction. He began the daily Rosary on 21 December at 5 p.m. in the Saloon. It was followed by the Litany of Loreto and devotional reading. The Saloon was packed and a week later it was in Steerage and the First Officer provided a lantern. From there two sessions developed: one in the men's quarters, the other in the girls'. The reading was from Bishop Challenor's *Devout Life*, a popular spiritual book at the time. An episcopal source for the men was Bossuet while the girls heard *St. Alphonsus' Novena*. Later Brun read from *Lives of the Saints* - possibly Butler - and *St. Alphonsus' Glories of Mary*. By then he was concerned about moral problems on board and his readings became more pointed. On 29 January he produced

Alphonsus on Blasphemy to the men. It is likely that he over-reacted to the casual Irish use of the Holy Name. The girls got sex - an unnamed author on the *Angelic Virtue* - and, even more sinister, simply an Italian book - one presumes translated. On 27 February he became more explicit and ordered five Paters and five Aves for sins committed on the *Golden City*.

Towards the end of February, contrary winds forced them back for some days. On entering Moreton Bay they ran aground on a sandbank. Brun offered the Rosary for their delivery but results were not quick enough. He arranged the continuous recitation of the Rosary for three days. The girls said it until 4 p.m., the young men all night. Brun added the Litany of the Saints since he had some relics in the crucifix of his beads.

On Candlemas Day he enrolled one girl in the Brown Scapular. He took the opportunity to refer to St. Simon Stock and pray for the conversion of England. This may well have caused some indignation in the Protestants. Others later asked to be enrolled. Before Candlemas there was a novena, which explains the big numbers for that day. On 9 January he conducted the Stations of the Cross - where and how, he did not report.

In the latter part of the voyage he began speaking *ex tempore* instead of relying on a book. Especially to the girls, he spoke very bluntly about sexual misbehaviour, though it is not clear that they were particularly outrageous. He also prepared sermons on Our Lady for the same purpose. Once he was emotionally overcome and had to stop when he realized he had overdone it; and another time - pleased with his increasing fluency - he noted: 'self-centered, you old fool'.

It is evident that Brun was concerned about moral questions, perhaps scrupulous, perhaps obsessed. A problem for long sea voyages in those days was the observance of fast and abstinence. The ship might not cater for abstinence, which was much more extensive than even pre-Vatican II. On 12 December, while they were still in the Queenstown harbour, he requested a fish meal that was not on the menu. He was edified to see the Irish pilot, much overworked by the

storm, ask for bread and butter. Yet, when the Irish passengers asked him what to do, he told them to eat what was put before them.

Alcohol could have been a problem. Brun himself had no hesitation in giving Polycarpe sherry to share with his mess; and he had a beer with him on feast days. He entertained the First and Second Officers with champagne. When asked to mediate in a quarrel between two of the cabin passengers, he did so over two bottles of champagne. But the amount of drinking in the cabins did worry him. He was not amused by drunkenness and did not hesitate to say so. If the surgeon had been doing his duty, he would not have allowed excess liquor on board; but the surgeon was the main offender. The Steerage seemed to be under control though he was disturbed to find two women drunk.

His main preoccupation was the girls. He had persuaded the Captain to allow the Steerage passengers to come on deck by the aft companionway. He could not stop the cabin passengers going down; and the way finished at the girls' quarters. He decided to stay up late at night and patrol the deck. He realized that some people objected to this, but he said he had as much right to fresh air as the rest of them. At first it was quiet on deck - at least by 11 p.m.; but very soon they were in tropical or sub-tropical climes and the girls did not want to go below. Brun was in anguish about the dilemma. To insist that the girls go below meant torment for them; to let them stay above might be worse. He compromised by extending the curfew start to 11.45 p.m. It was a matter of concern for the Black Ball Line as well. Laxity produced Letters to the Editor and Questions in Parliament in Brisbane and the matter might find its way to the Colonial Office which could cancel the Line's monopoly. So one night when the Second Officer twice ordered the girls below and they refused to go, he turned the hoses on them. This cooled their ardour but outraged their fathers and brothers, not to mention their boyfriends. The Officer had to call on Brun to restore order - much to Brun's smug satisfaction. There might well have been more danger from the crew than from 'the wrong type' of passenger. One cabin boy (steward?) was rude to an Irish girl. Two Irish lads decided to beat him up. Brun had to intervene quite sharply.

He extended his nightly patrol to the hold. There were a couple of girls, in particular, he worried about. He noticed that they were not at Mass for the Epiphany and that they mixed with certain non-Catholics of 'dubious behaviour'. One night he caught them 'provoking the sailors'. Brun felt he should do penance. He spoke to the Captain who ordered the crew to stay away. Some of the girls developed a trick that worried Brun since it was difficult to declare it reprehensible. They combined to walk towards young men and 'accidentally' bump into them. The young men did not try to avoid them. Brun and the poor Second Officer spoke to them about it and one of the girls bumped the officer. They did not dare to bump Brun.

It was not only the crew who went to the girls' quarters at night. Some had fathers and brothers on board and they visited at night. Brun was convinced that some of them were not fathers or brothers, so he asked the real relatives to call only in the daytime.

By mid-January, Brun was threatening to name some of the girls at Rosary. This did not have the desired effect. He offered Mass for all who offended and placed the girls under the protection of Mary Immaculate. When they reached Brisbane there was confusion in the Depot. Brun went to see 'my girls' and they were all glad to see him.

However, his main problem and - main triumph - was about dancing. In the warm regions people were on deck at night, and on New Year's Eve there was a dance. This was common practice on the migrant ships but Brun was deeply stirred and he took to his Moral Theology textbook to prepare his attack. A popular master in the seminaries of the time was Père Gury, and Gury was a mine of information on the sinfulness of dancing. Brun was disappointed to see that he was only lukewarm in his condemnation of the contredanse, which he was horrified to see one of his Irish girls dancing; but Gury forthrightly condemned the polka and did not want to even contemplate the lasciviousness of the galop. Brun put his views very strongly in his Rosary talks and was pleased to see that the numbers at the deck dances fell off sharply.

Brun was far from ecumenical. When he went on board in Queenstown on the evening of 12 December 1862, he was followed

by a 'Bible puncher'. There were no officers about and Brun did not want to stir up a fight between the Irish and the Scots. He went into his cabin. Later, Matthew Quinn came aboard and was incensed at this invasion of his brother's ship by the enemy. He had no sensitivity on the issue and they 'got rid of the preacher'. However, there was a Baptist minister among the passengers and they could not get rid of him. A week later someone was found distributing Protestant tracts. Brun urged the Irish not to react. He consulted the Captain who advised him not to get into confrontation with the Baptist. Brun assured him that his English was not good enough for debate, and that he thought the other did not speak French or Latin. The Captain was amused. Later anti-Catholic graffiti appeared on the walls of the 'sanitary area'. Brun again urged the Irish to stay calm and pray for the vandals. An Irish girl complained to him that non-Catholics harassed her. He simply had her mess changed. However, he blessed some holy water to expel the 'demons' from the ship.

Services were a delicate problem and Brun and the Baptist watched each other like hawks. Brun had occupied the field effectively by his reconnoitring and planning with the Captain. The Baptist invaded Brun's deck for a service for 'High Anglicans, Methodists, etc' on Christmas afternoon. The 'etc' included the Scots Presbyterians. Brun presumed that he would be criticized for not stopping it, but he was broadminded enough to say that he could see no reason to stop 200 Protestants having a service.

On 4 January 1863 he noticed the Baptist in the congregation up to the sermon time. Fortunately he preached on *The Dignity of Being Christian*; but he prepared his sermons even more carefully after that. On 11 January the Baptist held another service, unannounced, on Brun's deck at 3.30 p.m. Brun thought it might be an opportunity for the preacher to attack the Church. He approached the Captain who stopped the unauthorized service. After the spectacular celebration of Candlemas the Baptist decided to hold a service in the First Class lounge. To Brun's unconcealed delight, no one came. The Captain tried to avoid clashes by asking Brun to hold Mass at the same time as the Baptist conducted his service. Brun who, at the request of the Catholic sailors, had moved his main Mass up to 9.30 a.m., said he

could not defer it till 11.00a.m.since the Catholics were bound by the eucharistic fast. Game, set and match to Brun.

Brun's conduct on board is remarkable. He has shot through the elaborate plans of the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission and seems to run the life of the passengers. The Captain, perhaps, is as diplomatic with Brun as **he** is with **him**; but Brun gets his way. He seems even to be asked to intervene in the discipline of the crew. A cabin boy refused to obey the Second Officer. The Captain ordered him to the masthead, but he was allowed to come down to speak to – whom? – to Fr. Brun. An anonymous letter criticising the Captain was circulated on board and the Irish were suspected as the authors. Brun wrote a letter strongly lauding the Captain in the name of all the Irish. He and the Captain celebrated over a glass of sherry. On arrival in Brisbane Brun organized a fulsome address to Captain Browne, pledging eternal friendship. It is no wonder he seemed to have the run of the ship.

The principal loser was the surgeon. According to the regulations he was in charge of the daily life of the passengers, but he rarely appeared. He was always drunk. Brun tried to get people to treat him decently, but with little success. By mid-February he managed to get the unfortunate man to take the pledge. In the meantime Brun was prescribing for the patients in the hospital, though only for minor illnesses.

The matron should have shared the surgeon's control. She does receive a couple of references and Brun does come to respect her opinions; but **he** held the girls' mess in an iron grip. He did not attempt to run a school though he did give some lessons in French to some cabin passengers. He gave much thought to catechetics; but, like much educational effort on ships, it failed through lack of trained helpers and the distractions of ship life. Brun concedes defeat on this field.

Brun's diary presents a lively picture of Catholic life on the ocean wave; but it suggests a broader canvas. James Quinn planned pastorally for his people. He did not leave the turning point in the lives of thousands of his people – then a high proportion of his flock

– to chance. We do not have such information about all his ships but this is a picture of what he planned.

The diary reflects very well on Brun himself. He found himself in circumstances for which he had not trained and for which there was little precedent. He was not at ease with the language of his charges and he was ignorant of their culture. He threw himself wholeheartedly into their pastoral care, sparing himself nothing.

The picture that emerges of the Irish passengers is a snapshot of the Queensland Church of the time. With a few exceptions, they were devout; they were solidly Catholic; they were, perhaps, passive in following the leadership of the priest; and they were inclined to be pugnacious with their fellow Christians (though Brun introduced them to the irenic policy of Quinn and Dunne).

Their spiritual and devotional life was plain, practical and centered on a few features that characterized the Queensland Catholics for a century. They were satisfied with little, ready to enjoy life and even bend a few rules laid down by fussy priests; but when the chips were down, they closed ranks and were Irish Catholics.

Something more peeps through the lines of the general picture. Brun did not understand the conditions under which bishop, priests, religious and laity lived in the vast, sparsely populated, rapidly spreading colony of Queensland. He is not to blame for that. Quinn himself was unprepared for what he found on arrival. There is his famous first remark: ‘Where is the city of Brisbane?’. But Quinn had to live with it; more - he had to plan for it. His plans may not always have been practical and were at times, unjust; but plans he had to make, or vast areas of Queensland would be lost to the sects, as in the American Middle West.

Few of his collaborators had the big picture approach. Mother Vincent was one who did; but the Augustinians of the Assumption did not. They had a special bone to pick with Quinn. They thought he wanted them to found a school or college. He did; but the 1860s were not the time for a European-style college. In the meantime there were rapidly growing parishes crying out for priests. Brun complained of

the lack of communication. By the time he sailed, Quinn should have known the problems, but nobody told Brun.

When the *Golden City* arrived in the River City, 6 March 1863, James Quinn went on board and stayed the night. Brun respectfully gave him his cabin. He took Polycarpe's, and poor Polycarpe had to fend for himself. Brun expressed himself surprised at Quinn's courtesy: a sign that Cusse's criticisms were firmly rooted in his mind. Next morning he complained to Quinn that he had not given him help on the voyage. Brun had no notion that that was how priests had to live in Queensland; but even he should have realized that Quinn had no one to send. Brun's behaviour illustrates, I believe, the failure to appreciate the problems Quinn had to face as bishop of such a vast new colony.

Brun worked well in Brisbane for a time, but he never managed to lose the chip on his shoulder where the Bishop was concerned. He had found Robert Dunne helpful where Matthew Quinn failed him and Dunne, when he joined Quinn in Brisbane, appreciated him. However, Brun joined, and perhaps fostered, the unease of the young clergy. He eventually left for France and finished his life in New York - that wonderful, well-provided town.

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