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and John Francis Campbell of Islay

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# The Missing Emigrants: The Wreck of the *Exmouth* and John Francis Campbell of Islay

Sara Stevenson

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## The Wreck

In the formal report to parliament, made by the insuring and registering agency Lloyd's of London, of *Collisions, Accidents, and Wrecks of Vessels* between the years 1847 and 1850, the listing notes, for 14 May 1847, the wreck of the *Exmouth* on the Island of Islay and the loss of 165 lives. The *Exmouth* was one of an international list of 173 vessels reported sunk, stranded, lost, attacked by pirates and wrecked in that one month.<sup>1</sup> The appalling loss of human life tidily (and inaccurately) accounted for here is one part of a multiple and long-suffered disaster. In many cases, sailing ships simply disappeared; when the wreck was total and there were no survivors, no one knew what had happened or even necessarily where the ship had come to grief. Lloyd's noted the wrecks so that the value of the ships and their cargoes could be paid to the owners; the deaths and injury were broadly regarded as 'Acts of God', and no man was necessarily answerable. Passengers paid in advance.



Figure 1: Unknown engraver, 'Wreck of the *Exmouth* on the coast of Islay', illustration to 'Dreadful Wreck of an Emigrant Ship on the Coast of Islay', *Tales of Heroism and Record of Strange and Wonderful Adventures*, 1847

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<sup>1</sup> *Return from Lloyd's Books of Collisions, Accidents, and Wrecks of Vessels*, House of Commons Papers (London, 1851), 18.

In the case of the *Exmouth*, we have surviving witnesses; three of the seamen who escaped the wreck. John Stevens, William Coulthard, and George Lightford were all from South Shields in northern England. Their testimony was extensively recorded in the press and periodicals, generally in much the same words, which implies that the journalists were repeating one interview; it is a long and painful story, which repays attention.

The *Exmouth* was a 320-ton, wooden sailing ship, originally built as a whaler in Newcastle in 1818. The captain, or master, was Isaac Booth from Sunderland. They sailed from Londonderry in Ireland, between three and four in the morning of Sunday 25 April 1847,

with a light south west breeze. She had a crew of eleven men (inclusive of the captain), and about 240 emigrants, consisting principally of small farmers and tradesmen, with their families. Many were females and children going out to join their fathers and protectors, who had already settled in Canada. There were also three cabin passengers, young, unmarried ladies of the middle classes, two of them being sisters, on their way to join their relatives at St John, New Brunswick. The vessel was registered for 165  $\frac{1}{2}$  passengers; but as two children count as one adult, and as a very large proportion were under age – there being only about sixty men amongst the passengers – the survivors of the wreck think that the total number of those ill-fated emigrants must have amounted to 240. The ship lost sight of land about 4 o'clock on Sunday afternoon. The breeze, which had been light in the morning, increased to a gale during the day, and about 11pm it came in terrific squalls, accompanied by heavy torrents of rain. They then furled the fore and main sails. The wind, which had been to the westward at first, veered northerly, and the storm increased in violence, which blew the two topsails from the bolt-ropes. The crew then commenced to bend other topsails, which they furled; but about three in the morning they were blown from the gaskets. The ship was now driving to the southward and eastward. The reason of the master not standing to the westward, where he would have ample sea room, was for the purpose of attaining some harbour of refuge, where he might repair damages and replace the sails.

On Monday forenoon, the long-boat was unshipped by the force of the seas, which broke over the vessel, and in the course of the same forenoon the bulwarks were stove in, and the life-boat washed

away. The gale continued with the same violence during the whole of Monday night and Tuesday.

About eleven o'clock on Tuesday night (the 27<sup>th</sup> ult.), land, and a light, were seen on the starboard quarter, which Captain Booth, at first, took to be the light on the Island of Tory, off the north-west coast of Ireland, and, in the belief that he had ample sea room in the course he was steering, he bore along. As he drifted nearer land, however, and observed that the light was a flashing, instead of a stationary one, he became conscious of his error and dangerous position, and made every effort to repair it, by bringing the ship farther to the northward and westward; and with a view of 'clawing' her off the land, the maintop sail and the foretopmast stay sail were set, and the jib half hoisted [n.b. she crashed with all these sails set]. This effort however was an ineffectual one; the ship soon got amongst the broken water, and, at half-past twelve on Wednesday morning, was dashed amongst the rocks. If the above be a correct version of the impression on the captain's mind as to his position – and it is distinctly spoken to by two of the survivors – the result shows that he must have been fully a hundred miles out of his reckoning; but perhaps it could not well be otherwise. The sun was obscured all that time by black clouds; the moon was only seen through a heavy haze at intervals, and from these causes it was impossible that any observations could be taken. The light seen was in reality that of Oransey [Isle of Orsey] on the point of the Rhinns or Runs of Islay, to the north-west of the entrance of Lochindaal; and the land seen, and on which the brig eventually struck, was the western part of the iron-bound coast of the island. She went ashore, and after striking once was dashed broadside on alongside the rocks, which rose to the height of the masthead. She struck violently against the rocks three times, and at the fourth stroke the mainmast went by the board, and fell into a chasm of the rock. Captain Booth had previously taken his station in the maintop that he might personally keep a look out; and, as soon as the brig struck, John Cleat, the mate, and all the seamen, eight in number, joined the captain in the maintop, leaving the captain's son, a youth of about fifteen years of age, asleep in his cot below. After remaining in the maintop about three minutes, five of the crew went down for the purpose of ascending the foretop, thinking that they would have a better chance of gaining the shore from that part of the ship. At the same time, one of the crew, named John Scott, went out upon the

mainyard with a life-buoy on his person; thus leaving in the maintop the captain and three seamen, whose names are John Stevens, William Coulthard, and George Lightford, all belonging to South Shields. When the maintop, along with the wreck of the mast was thrown into a rift of the rock, Coulthard, then Lightford, and finally Stevens, scrambled up the rigging and obtained a footing on the crags. The captain was about to follow the men when a wave dashed over their heads as they clung to the rock, but they were enabled to maintain their position; and when they looked round after the sea had retired, they found that the captain and all were gone. The mainmast had been broken into splinters by the fourth collision with the rocks, and this recoiling wave had not only dragged the ship, but the fragments of the mast, which adhered to her by the rigging, further into the sea, and thus cut off from the dense mass of human beings on board every chance of escape. Had the wreck remained in the chasm where it was originally thrown, and from which the three survivors escaped, it might have been used as a bridge by the others; but unhappily this last possibility of relief was taken away. The same wave which effected this fearful havoc must also have prevented the five seamen from reaching the foretop, from which they might have had a chance of escaping. A quarter of an hour elapsed from the time of the brig first striking until the three survivors got up on the rock.

There was no cry from the multitude cooped up within the hull of the ill-fated brig; or at least it was unheard, for the commotion of the elements was so furious that the men on the top could scarcely hear each other at the top of their voices. The emigrants, therefore, must have perished in their berths, as the rocks rapidly thumped the bottom out of the vessel.

The three men who had escaped to the rock, so soon as the ship had entirely disappeared, searched anxiously for some outlet by which they might reach the mainland; but none such could be found, and they finally took shelter in a crevice, which, however did not shield them from the rain, which fell heavily all night, and here remained till grey daylight. They then discovered an opening through which they scrambled to the summit, and after day had fairly broken, they observed a farmhouse about a mile distant. Thither they proceeded, and were most hospitably nourished and put to bed. They were thoroughly worn out by exhaustion, not one of the crew having been in bed from the moment the ship left Derry. They were at the same time nearly naked,

from having divested themselves of their heavy clothing when the *Exmouth* struck, and lost part of that which remained when scrambling on the rigging and amongst the rocks. The hospitable farmer and others apprised by him went to the scene of the catastrophe, but of course too late to help, and only to gaze on the desolation. Mr Chiene, Islay's factor, soon heard of the event, and kindly furnished the men with a passage to Glasgow by the *Modern Athens* steamer, where they arrived on Saturday last. Here they were consigned to the care of Mr Fildes of the Naval Rendezvous, and assistant to Lieutenant Forrest, agent for the Shipwrecked Mariners' Society, and by him they have been clothed and comfortably boarded in the meantime.

At the latest date of our advices from Islay, about twenty of the bodies had come ashore. They were principally females, with one little boy amongst them; and as many of them were in their nightclothes, the probability is that they were those who had rushed on deck at the first alarm caused by the striking of the ship.<sup>2</sup>

The version of the story, printed as 'Dreadful Wreck of an Emigrant Ship on the Coast of Islay' in the sensationalist journal, *Tales of Heroism and Record of Strange and Wonderful Adventures, being a Collection and Register of Deeds of Bravery and Heroism, and Devotion* (1847), adds further detail exonerating the men, presumably from their own evidence, and declaring the soundness of the ship:

The *Exmouth* had nothing on board but ballast, and the provisions and little stocks of goods of the emigrants. She is the property of Mr John Eden, of South Shields, and though old is stated by the survivors to have been well found in every respect. All the crew and passengers were perfectly sober during this fearful time, and the three men state that they never saw spirits on board at all. The captain was in the prime of life, and has left a widow and family ... Whether or not this fearful shipwreck may have been partly caused by negligence, we cannot say. We have no reason to state that it is so, but still the public voice will demand a searching inquiry.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Anon, 'Loss of an Emigrant Ship, and Two Hundred and Forty Passengers', *Illustrated London News*, 10 (8 May 1847), 295.

<sup>3</sup> Anon, 'Dreadful Wreck of an Emigrant Ship on the Coast of Islay', *Tales of Heroism and Record of Strange and Wonderful Adventures, being a Collection and Register of Deeds of Bravery and Heroism, and Devotion* ... (London, 1847), 787.

The account of the wreck was given principally by two of the crewmen. How far their testimony was, or indeed could be, accurate (given that they were exhausted and distressed) is open to question. But, however doubtful we might be, we have no convincing – or indeed honourable – way of interrogating their evidence.

Despite the scale of the tragedy, there appears to have been no searching official inquiry. Yet the widely published response was far from a calm acceptance of the laws of Providence. *The Nautical Magazine and Naval Chronicle* printed an account in June 1847, broadly similar to that above, on the grounds that, 'Although the painful facts relative to the loss of the Exmouth have been some time before the public, we think it a duty to preserve their record here, and to make such comments thereon as may serve the interests of humanity.'<sup>4</sup> They added the critical remarks:

No blame seems to be ascribed to the master, except an apparent *deficiency in judgement*, and this charge, considering his life paid the forfeit, must be made with charity ... but had emigrant vessels, in which so many lives are periled, a crew more adequate in *number*, as well as in skill to the performance of their duties, fewer sails would be blown away, and without question, fewer lives sacrificed ... for the sake of saving a few pounds in wages and provisions, to secure a competent number of efficient hands to the performance of their duties on board an emigrant ship crowded with passengers, and therefore paying her owners handsomely, the *sails are lost*; for want of the sails, the vessel is lost; and with the vessel hundreds of valuable lives, and a large amount of property. Expecting relatives are plunged into bitter distress, and also, in many cases, into extreme poverty by the loss of those on whom they depended for support ...

As great results often arise from small beginnings, so, in appalling contrast, we have overwhelming magnitudes of misery from a spirit of petty economy. The important question – How to reach the evil? – has yet to be solved. Victims, by thousands, perish annually; victims to the *inadequate finding* of the vessels that undertake their conveyance. Master, seamen, passengers, are all, perhaps, equally objects of compassion. The master, indeed, *it may be*, more than all, - For who can imagine the agony of a mind whose indiscretion or incapacity has plunged hundreds

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<sup>4</sup> Anon, 'Loss of the Exmouth' *The Nautical Magazine and Naval Chronicle*, 16 (June 1847), 324.

of his fellow beings into such gulphs of horror? and again, – What ought to be the feelings of those who either entrust incapable masters with the charge of their ships, or by an ill-advised and unprincipled penuriousness in relation to the number of crew, render the abilities of the master almost nugatory?<sup>5</sup>

The sympathy and passion expressed in the *Nautical Magazine* – a journal based on experience – is more dramatic in its effect than the article in the sensationalist, *Tales of Heroism*. The practical truth was dramatic enough to evoke horror.

And in times that saw the impact of the potato famine and starvation in Ireland and the Highlands of Scotland, the desperation and poverty of the people would have added further to the use of badly-found ships, inept sailors and the overcrowding evident in the *Exmouth*. One evil would help to drive another.



*Figure 2:*  
John Francis Campbell,  
'Geodh 'ille Mhioire, from  
the outside,' watercolour  
and white heightening on  
buff paper, National  
Galleries of Scotland, D  
4126.4 B

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 326.



### The Broad Issues

Many of the technical problems encountered in long-haul shipping, which had arisen, had been identified, and almost as many solutions proposed by ingenious inventors as there were problems. The multiplicity of invention often fell afoul of the impulse to tinker, and solutions were as often 'kludges', in the modern expression, as they were efficient. The development of the great sailing ships – particularly during the Napoleonic Wars – is arguably a spectacular example of this kind; they were and continued to be critically dependant on the direction of the wind coming from behind the ship. Captain Booth, with his square sails set in a gale, could not turn aside from the cliffs of the island, which would wreck him.<sup>6</sup> Even where the navy had made improvements, the builders of the merchant ships did not necessarily follow their lead. By the 1830s and 1840s, too many of these ships had comparatively thin hulls – naval ships had hulls with perhaps fifteen inches of timber, merchant vessels were more likely to have about three inches or less. The appalling vulnerability of such vessels can be illustrated by another migrant ship, *The Lady Sherbrooke*, 'where *two hundred and forty-one human lives have been lost ...*' which sank on entering the gulf of St Lawrence 'in no very tempestuous weather' in July 1831.<sup>7</sup> These ships were, moreover, often designed, should the ship run aground, to flood the whole hull from a single breach and sink it. Such ships were cheaper and easier to make.

One of the consequences of the extensive elaboration of difficulties raised by the Industrial Revolution in the sea trade was that the commissions which were set up by the government to address specific issues found themselves reporting more widely than their remit might suggest. One of these, The Tidal Harbours Commission, reported between 1845 and 1847.<sup>8</sup> In January 1848, *The Nautical Magazine* was able to quote from the second appendix to the second report on evidence taken at all the Scottish ports.<sup>9</sup> This contained the Commission's comments on the frequency of shipwrecks around the shores of the United Kingdom:

The Appendix to this Report contains long lists of wrecks off Dunbar,

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<sup>6</sup> With the eccentric quadrilateral sails used in a dhow, he would have stood a chance of sailing across the wind. I am indebted to William Stevenson for discussing sailing ships with me.

<sup>7</sup> James Ballingall, *The Mercantile Navy Improved; or A Plan for the Greater Safety of Lives and Property in Steam Vessels, Packets, Smacks and Yachts* (London, 1832), 97.

<sup>8</sup> *Tidal Harbours Commission: Report of the Commissioners* (London, 1845–7).

<sup>9</sup> 'Tidal Harbours Commission', *The Nautical Magazine and Naval Chronicle*, 17 (January 1848), 20.

Peterhead and elsewhere, along the east coast of Scotland, and a reference to Lloyd's list will show a loss of about 600 British ships every year, and including foreigners trading to this country, vessels not registered at Lloyd's, and wrecks unrecorded, we shall not err greatly in assuming the loss at two vessels a-day throughout the year, with life and property to a great extent. Many causes, probably, combine to produce these casualties, as stress of weather and want of good harbours, rapid tides, shoals, want of lights, buoys and beacons ... bad charts, unseaworthiness of vessels, being ill-found with anchors and cables, incompetency and neglect of masters, and drunkenness. The recent regulation by which masters may be examined will do some good, but as the examination is not compulsory, much cannot be expected from it. As the case stands at present, it is difficult to say to which of these several causes wrecks are to be chiefly attributed, and we are thus, in some measure, liable to legislate in the dark. I would submit, then, that a public Court of Inquiry be held on the spot in every case of wreck along the coasts of the United Kingdom, whether attended with loss of life or not.<sup>10</sup>

The *Exmouth* was one of more than 600 ships lost annually off the coast of Great Britain; and this report is an appendix.

In the same month that Lloyd's reported the loss of the *Exmouth*, an angry complaint was signed in Australia, where the 'Port Phillip Immigration and Anti-Shipwreck Society' had held a public meeting. The Society was severely concerned about the loss of life and property in the wreck of ships heading their way, and both the damage and the discouragement to migrants 'for the want of whom employers of labour are suffering to an extent that in its continuance must seriously retard the progress of this flourishing portion of the Empire'. The committee considered that the fault lay partly with a sinister combination of interest between the owners and insurers of the ships:

The Shipbuilder constructs weak ships in order to increase his trade, and that the public may insure, and put money into the pocket of the Underwriter. The Merchant is quieted by being taken in as a partner with the Underwriter, the Shipowner being insured, suffers no loss of his vessel, and hence is concocted (wheel within wheel), the infernal plot,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

which carried into effect, yearly destroys as before quoted, nearly two-and-a-half millions of property, and consigns nearly fifteen hundred human souls unwarned to their last account ...

The fact of unseaworthiness is allowed by the Shipowner and Underwriter to arise from the incompetency of the master, and insufficiency of the crew, as well as from want of repairs to the vessel, &c.; and yet unseaworthiness is never made a bar to the recovery of insurance ... The Underwriters encourage to the last degree, the employment of deficient masters and crew, and of defective vessels, and offer a premium on total wrecks and wholesale murder, by their custom of paying the full insurance upon a total loss, and only two-thirds of the amount of damage in the case of a partial loss!<sup>11</sup>

The advice quoted by such reports goes back two or three decades – melancholy evidence of political inaction. One of these, on the inadequacy of ship building and design, written by the surveyor, James Ballingall, from the port of Kirkcaldy in Scotland, had been published in 1832. He himself cited earlier experts and addressed the authoritative Royal Society and Royal Institution with the ironic and telling evidence of ‘cases in point, in merchant vessels which are not insured being strongly built’ by the firm of Robert Menzies and Sons, operating out of Leith.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Public Attack**

There are a number of critical issues raised by the appalling story of the *Exmouth*. First, we have the history of the disaster, and we have the intense, adverse criticism which was published at the time. In this episode, as suggested by the accounts above, political and social theory and the apparently splendid drive of the industrial revolution had collided with social dislocation, economic slumps and spreading poverty, epidemic and endemic illness, overpopulation, and the potato famine, which first struck in 1845. The accounts of the wreck of the *Exmouth* were designed to attack the corruption and complacency of the mercantile elite.

The freedom of speech inherent in the publishing revolution, which was itself a significant component in industrial advance, ultimately enabled public

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<sup>11</sup> W. M. Bell, ‘Report by a Committee of the Port Phillip Immigration and Anti-Shipwreck Society, instituted in Melbourne, Port Phillip, at a Public Meeting held on 14<sup>th</sup> December 1846’, *The Nautical Magazine and Naval Chronicle*, 17 (January 1848), 32.

<sup>12</sup> Ballingall *The Mercantile Navy Improved*, 170.

opinion to address the social evils that had grown up. Moreover, much of the theoretical basis of such large issues as the organisation of society and the conduct of economy came from the pens of a minority of educated men with time on their hands. Yet the published reports we have of the wreck come from two of the seamen who lived that disaster, and they are quoted as authorities on the matter. This is important, for in this way, the many and immensely complicated aspects of a tragedy, from corruption to accident, were humanised, and hence opened up to critical examination by everyone who read a newspaper.

### **The Visual Image and John Francis Campbell**

One of the greatest emotional difficulties in understanding the nature of a tragedy is that we are not there to see. The account given in the *Tales of Heroism* does indeed have a picture of a ship attacked by storm (See figure 1); we know it shows the foundering *Exmouth*, because the caption tells us so. It does not, however, require much in the way of cynicism to doubt the likelihood of a draughtsman, pencil in hand, standing fortuitously on the cliffs at Islay in the driving rain and wind. The engraving is generic, and quite likely a second-hand plate; the editor has imposed specific reality on a fictional drawing. The sophisticated pictures of this kind would be drawn from a study of such weather, combined with a realisation of verbal accounts.

Disasters are rarely, even now, effectively pictured while they are happening. In 1847, the new technology of photography would have been unable to cope with the chaos of storm conditions; and the distant Hebridean islands would seem to be an unlikely place for a visual record, even of the aftermath. But, a week after their first report of the disaster, *The Illustrated London News* gave an account of the rescue and burial of the bodies from the wreck, illustrated with two sketches. The text adds further information, provided by ‘an obliging Correspondent’:

By the exertions of Mr Campbell of Ballinabey, and Mr Henry Campbell of Rockside; aided by three men, whose names are Turner, Mr Neivin, and Macdonald (the latter one of the gamekeepers of Campbell, of Islay), no fewer than 108 bodies have been recovered and interred. These persons, slung over the rocks by turns, succeeded in hooking the bodies in the surf; and the two gentlemen named above wrapped the women, all of whom were naked, in sheets, and had them hoisted up to the summit of the cliff.

The bodies were dreadfully mutilated; some without faces, others without heads or limbs, and all in a far advanced state of putrefaction. The country people would not touch the bodies, and this threw this heavy and most painful duty entirely upon these five fine fellows, who had, up to May 14, decently buried no less than 108.

The conduct of the Messrs Campbell, who are small proprietors in Islay, is very warmly spoken of; and if they had not the strength and nerve of two ordinary men each, they could not have borne the fatigue and horrors which they have endured. The three fine fellows, also named, are very little behind the gentlemen in their most meritorious exertions; and they deserve a higher reward than mere praise.

Very few men have been found; the bodies are almost all those of women and children. The body of the Captain has been found, the only one with a stitch of clothes on; all the others were quite naked.

The last report adds the names of John McCaffer, Donald McLaughlin, and Dugald Fergusson (workmen of Campbell of Ballinabey) as having added their exertions in preparing graves, and hooking the bodies, although still averse to handling them. They are all buried in a beautiful spot – soft green turf, surrounded by wild rocks.

These sketches have been made by Mr J. F. Campbell (of Islay), the son of the noble-spirited Lord of that domain; who, with his cousin, Mr W. Campbell, have had some share in the good work.

We understand that Her Majesty's Government has been pleased to notify to these gentlemen their sense of such meritorious example and exertion, and to add a gratuity to the men engaged in assisting them.<sup>13</sup>

This second report is led by the pictures, which were sent down to London from Islay, and it may be assumed that the further account of the islanders' response was written by the draughtsman. John Francis Campbell (1821–85) was one of the few people who had encountered photography at this early date. He had been photographed by the partnership of David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson in Edinburgh at some point between 1843 and 1847 and had a personal interest in the practice of photography. But throughout his life he drew. The two pictures reproduced in the *Illustrated London News* were part of a set of four studies of the rescue.

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<sup>13</sup> Anon, 'Wreck of "The Exmouth" Emigrant Ship', *Illustrated London News*, 10 (29 May 1847), 348.



*Figure 3*  
John Francis Campbell,  
'Fishing Out the Bodies  
of the Passengers of  
the Exmouth', pencil  
and white heighten-  
ing on buff paper,  
National Galleries of  
Scotland, D 4126.4 C



*Figure 4.*  
John Francis  
Campbell, 'Geodh  
'ille Mhioire, The spot  
where the wreck of  
the Exmouth came  
on shore - April 27th  
1847', pencil and white  
heightening on buff  
paper  
National Galleries of  
Scotland, D 4126.4 D



*Figure 5*  
J F Campbell,  
'The Grave of  
the crew of the  
Exmouth', pencil  
and white height-  
ening on paper,  
1847, National  
Galleries of  
Scotland, D 4126.  
4 A



*Figure 6*  
John Francis  
Campbell,  
'Port Ellen  
Lighthouse.  
Islay', pen-  
cil drawing,  
1847, National  
Galleries of  
Scotland, D 4126

Campbell's artistic response is focussed. It gives us the physical setting of the disaster – the 'iron-bound coast' of the cliffs, which destroyed the ship and broke the people – and the little figures of the rescuers, working in extraordinarily difficult circumstances. The care of the pictures reflects the respectful, humane care of the rescue, bringing in broken and distorted bodies for burial on land, rather than leaving them to destruction and the anonymity of the sea.

While many of the migrants of this time were driven by desperation, they were unquestionably required to be heroic. Moreover, while the consequence of such disasters is generally expressed in terms of the dead and injured, it is rarely considered from the perspective of the people who inherited that disaster; here, the people of Islay. Individual and social heroism and suffering was brought to light in consequence, and the voice and presence of socially 'unimportant' figures was reclaimed – it is observable and deeply shocking that here we do not have the names of the emigrants: the men, women and children who drowned. The people on Islay who could bear to do it rescued and buried the broken corpses where they could. It is good that we have their names, and John Francis Campbell evidently thought that we should. By communicating, both with the popular journal, *The Illustrated London News*, and with the government, he ensured attention and action in London.

### **Leaving Islay**

Although the migrants on the *Exmouth* were Irish, their death would have been of direct interest to the islanders. They were also in a situation where the land could not well sustain the population, and they were expected to consider emigration. The Highlands had been hit with the same population growth as the rest of the United Kingdom; the existing practice of farming and fishing could not keep pace. In these circumstances, the response of the landowners was critical to the people: some here, as in Ireland, drove their tenants out to disencumber the estates, and this was often attended by brutality.

Walter Campbell, John Francis' father and the owner of Islay, had spent several decades attempting to alleviate such problems and extend the island's ability to sustain human life. Among other things, he established the town of Port Ellen, and commissioned the lighthouse there in memory of his wife, Lady Eleanor Campbell. The verse carved at its entry includes the lines:

'Tis she that bids me on the steep  
Kindle this beacon's flame



To light the wanderer o'er the deep  
Who safe shall bless her name.<sup>14</sup>

Walter Campbell was also credited with having improved education on the island, in part so that those who did migrate would have learnt English along with their native Gaelic and would be better able to communicate abroad. Other island owners funded people to leave; Islay was better balanced:

The late Mr Campbell of Islay and his uncle, the late Captain Walter Campbell of Sunderland ... with their well-known benevolent desire to promote the welfare of every individual on their estates, took an active interest nearly forty years since in establishing efficient schools throughout the island and in encouraging the regular attendance of the young. And the result has been, that although there have been few enforced removals during that period, and no outlay has ever been incurred by the proprietors to promote emigration, the diffusion of education has not only arrested the increase of the population, but has so promoted voluntary removals, as to bring about a great diminution of their number.<sup>15</sup>

However, in 1845 the Highlands and Islands were hit with the same potato famine which crippled Ireland. Walter Campbell was already in financial difficulties, having incurred an appalling debt of £800,000. In December 1847, he was declared bankrupt, and his estates were sequestered. He and his second family retreated to Normandy.

John Francis Campbell was known throughout his life by the term 'of Islay', but he had been 'cleared' from his own land. He earned the honorific title by becoming a notable collector of oral Gaelic tales – and his reputation stands nowadays on this impressive achievement. He earned his living working in London as Secretary to government commissions designed to address problems raised by the Industrial Revolution: the Heating and Ventilation Commission; the Lighthouse Commission; the Coal Commission. He was responsible for active research and experiment, and the Lighthouse report for example contained, 'nearly 1,000 pages of close-set print, virtually the work

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<sup>14</sup> The whole inscription is published in 'Carraig Fhada Lighthouse Port Ellen', [http://blog.islayinfo.com/article.php/rhinns\\_of\\_islay\\_lighthouse](http://blog.islayinfo.com/article.php/rhinns_of_islay_lighthouse) [accessed August 2016].

<sup>15</sup> John Ramsay, *A Letter to the Lord Advocate of Scotland on the State of Education in the Outer Hebrides in 1862* (Glasgow, 1863), 6.

of Campbell himself.<sup>16</sup> When the government and civic authorities took more active control of the economy in the 1850s and 1860s, it was appropriate that John Francis Campbell should have been so employed.

However, he would have preferred a more active life. Campbell's father set him to be a lawyer; he wrote of this:

It was a queer fancy to make a lawyer of a young fellow of twenty-six ... who never had a thought of law but was well known to have a gift of tongues, an artist's uncultivated talent, a fondness for natural science of all sorts and a very active strong body. They might have made an engineer of me ...<sup>17</sup>

In the journal he wrote at the time, Campbell expressed how he felt trapped by London and the law, and his mind drifted to juvenile longings for adventure:

I have had fits of Blues of darkest Hue, but they are getting rarer & in the intervals *I am getting either careless or content* and pass my time at least without much repining but now and then comes a storm and I am for Borneo or the antipodes ... or I am in Canada in the Backwoods settling a Colony of Islay Men, Myself Prime Minister. & Islay Men bring me back to [the loss of] Islay. The future fades away in the Past. The past gives way to the Present & I start to find my eye at the bottom of a page while my thoughts had never got beyond the first line [and he returns to] the leaden wheels of stern reality.<sup>18</sup>

The serious temptation to migrate came on him in the summer of 1848. On 2 June he made an extensive note in his journal:

Last Friday I shirked altogether, having heard of a new scheme to colonize Vancouver's Island, this has been on foot for about three years under the guidance of a certain [James Edward] Fitzgerald who wants to get up a regular formed society consisting of Rich & poor, Gentlemen, workmen Artisans & all, and having purchased food sufficient for a

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<sup>16</sup> Francis Thompson, *Lamplighter and Story-Teller: John Francis Campbell of Islay 1821–1885*, National Library of Scotland Exhibition Catalogue (Edinburgh, 1985), 8.

<sup>17</sup> Campbell writing a marginal note in one of his journals, quoted *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> John Francis Campbell, 'Journal', 12 to 16 May 1848, National Library of Scotland, Adv. Ms. 50.3.15

couple of years & has even obtained the assistance of Government to sail at once and set up a new kingdom of our own. Adam Dundas [Lieutenant Dundas of the Royal Navy], who has just returned from the place, speaks in the highest terms of the country. He says that the scenery is that of an English Park – Large oaks growing from a green turf; Fine hills covered with forests yielding the most magnificent spars [poles used for masts] in the world; Rivers full of Salmon, deer, Bears & otters abounding on their shores & now & then a Beaver; Coal in abundance and a climate like England only finer and less variable.

The Indians friendly and not very numerous and the prospect of commerce with China by means of American steamers very promising ... the difficulties are that the Company cannot be formed, for no one with funds will expatriate himself, & that the country is Far away, four months and a half at least and in danger of falling into the hands of the Hudson's Bay Company when, say my informers, all chance of success vanishes...

I keep quiet for to seem to waver in my pursuit of law may do me much harm ... I am sure I could easily find the people to go if I went into the highlands, but I should be sorry to move myself or cause others to move without seeing my way much more clearly than I do. Time will shew.<sup>19</sup>

Campbell was still entangled in his father's affairs, and short of money.

He was a man of energy, intelligence and courage. In 1848, Europe saw revolutions in France, Germany, the Austrian Empire and Italy. On 10 April, the Chartist meeting led by Feargus O'Connor on Kennington Common roused fear of revolution in England. Campbell wrote, 'all London is in moral fear of Fergus and his tail of 300,000 Chartists' and he joined the 'Specials' [special constables] in response; in the event the day passed quietly, but he was there, out on the streets. He also travelled briefly to Paris to witness the revolution in France.

In August 1848, when he was sailing to Sutherland, he encountered a fierce storm at sea. Some of the passengers panicked, and one pale man rushed down to the cabin to 'warn you all to prepare for your latter ends. The rocks

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<sup>19</sup> John Francis Campbell, 'Journal', June 1848, National Library of Scotland, Adv. Ms50.3.16, 16–17. For an account of this movement, see Jeremy Mouat, 'Situating Vancouver Island in the British World, 1846–49', *B. C. Studies*, 145 (Spring 2005), 5–30.

are close to us and we shall be upon them in a few minutes. May the Lord have mercy on our miserable souls'.<sup>20</sup> Campbell, though alarmed, went up on deck, and discovered that the ship had lost way in an attempt to pick up a drowning fisherman. The force of the storm decimated the fishing fleet around the steamer he was sailing on, but it made the land. He was angered by the cowardice of the pale youth.

This energy, direct curiosity and courage was stifled in London, and Campbell obviously took every opportunity he could afford to travel. He made a serious study of the great physical forces of the weather, of glaciers and geomorphology.<sup>21</sup> When Campbell was fifty-five, he retired, and decided to take a journey round the world. In the introduction to the book he wrote subsequently he was still haunted by the idea of emigration:

One object this time was to visit places to which the writer once thought of migrating, boy and baggage, horse, foot, and dragoons. He wanted to see how it felt to judge what the past might, could, should, or would, have been like, after 1848, if it had been done; to visit old friends who went and did it then honestly and manfully, like men and Britons.<sup>22</sup>

### **Writing History and Imagining the Present**

The shipwreck of the *Exmouth* should give us pause. In their extensive work on Irish migration, Patrick Fitzgerald and Brian Lambkin observe: 'It has always been easier to study presence than absence. Immigration has thus traditionally received more attention than emigration, and scholarship has been concentrated in countries of reception rather than regions of departure.'<sup>23</sup> My intention here is to recollect the impact of complete absence, through fatality. In considering this, and given the evidence cited above, we can contest the assumption made in mid-sentence by Fitzgerald and Lambkin that:

On the route to Canada between 1845 and 1851 about fifty ships were wrecked with a loss of about 5,000 lives, a very small proportion of the

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<sup>20</sup> Campbell, 'Journal', 29 August 1848, 27

<sup>21</sup> John Francis Campbell, *Frost and Fire. Natural Engines, Tool-Marks and Chips* (Edinburgh, 1865)

<sup>22</sup> John Francis Campbell, *My Circular Notes, Extracts from Journals, Letters Sent Home, Geological and Other Notes, written while Travelling Westwards Round the World from July 6, 1874, to July 6, 1875* (2 vols, London, 1876), I, 2

<sup>23</sup> Patrick Fitzgerald and Brian Lambkin, *Migration in Irish History, 1607–2007* (London, 2008), xi.

thousands of crossings being made in these years to carry about one million emigrants overseas, but sufficient to make a lasting impact on popular perception of the danger.<sup>24</sup>

This ‘very small proportion’ of ‘about 5,000 hides a story of trauma and loss.’<sup>25</sup> Statistically – economically or politically – the loss of so many travellers within six years may be regarded as ‘very small’, but in terms of the authority of the individual it is a growing compound of grief, lost opportunity and emptiness. The absence of 5,000 individuals – grown women and men, small children – is more shocking for their silence, caused by our lack of knowledge of the dead. And the contrast with our detailed historical and emotional knowledge of John Francis Campbell is stark.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>25</sup> I am aware that mortality reached unprecedented heights at this period, and migration would be affected by other lethal issues such as fever.