THE TRANSATLANTIC CABLE – AN IRISH PERSPECTIVE

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Between 1845 and 1850, more than a million Irish people starved to death while massive quantities of food were being exported from our country. A half million were evicted from their homes during the potato blight, and a million and a half emigrated to America, Britain and Australia. It began with a blight of the potato crop that left acre upon acre of Irish farmland covered with black rot. Peasants who ate the rotten produce sickened and entire villages were consumed with cholera and typhus.

Landlords evicted hundreds of thousands of peasants, who then crowded into disease-infested workhouses. Other landlords paid for their tenants to emigrate. But even emigration was no panacea – ship-owners often crowded hundreds of desperate Irish onto rickety vessels labeled "coffin ships", which usually lost up a third of their passengers, disease and hunger.

While Britain provided much relief for Ireland's starving populace, many Irish criticized Britain's delayed response - and further blamed centuries of British political oppression on the underlying causes of the famine.

The combined forces of famine, disease and emigration depopulated the island; Ireland's population dropped from 8 million before the Famine to 5 million years after. If Irish nationalism was dormant for the first half of the nineteenth-century, the Famine convinced Irish citizens and Irish-Americans of the urgent need for political change.

This is a picture of Ireland, approximately 10 years before the laying of the Trans-Atlantic cable.

In the early 1800's the principal landowners in Co. Kerry were the Knights of Kerry. Sir Peter George Fitzgerald, the 19th Knight of Kerry, began his life in the banking house of his maternal grandfather David Latouche. From the time he succeeded his father in 1849, he resided almost constantly on the island of Valentia, fulfilling his duties as a landlord. His landholdings in Co. Kerry, which in 1876 consisted of 4,769 acres, were not very extensive, comparatively speaking.

But the reality that was Peter Fitzgerald and indeed Valentia's memory of him was far more ambivalent than what his memorial, which was erected by his family, would suggest.

Co. Kerry in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, contained a wide diversity of people stratified roughly into three groups. At the top were the Knight and one or two other 'gentlemen' in big houses. The intermediate grade contained the cable station staff, professional people, Knightstown shopkeepers and the like. At the bottom were the ordinary Irish country folk, usually very poor and living in miserable cabins.

As landlords go, he meant well but he opposed Home Rule and the disestablishment of the Church of

Ireland. The Knight of Kerry was proud of Co. Kerry and Valentia Island, eager to promote its interests – and thus his own investment - as a railway terminal, a seaport and as the European end of the new Trans-Atlantic cable.

The first laying of the cable was made in 1857: on 5th August, amidst great rejoicing, the shore end of the cable was landed at Ballycarbery Strand, Valentia Harbour. The attempts were covered by reporters, who dispatched long accounts of the events and descriptions of Kerry weather and scenery and artists who sketched the scenes; Valentia must have had some resemblance then to Kennedy Space Centre in Cape Canaveral, when their first space and moon flights were blasted off.

For the first attempt, the Knight of Kerry entertained, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, the Atlantic Telegraph Directors and those of the Great Southern and Western Railway, but also a number of 'scientific gentlemen'. They travelled by road from Killarney and were then entertained by the Knight. Speeches were made, toasts drunk, the Church of Ireland clergyman composed and read a special prayer for the cable laying. The cable ships sailed on August 7th, but the attempt failed when Niagara broke the cable 280 miles out from Valentia.

The second attempt was made the following year. The cable had been brought in on the island itself this time, at Knightstown. 'Scientific gentlemen', reporters, all and sundry crowded round the little group of men in a darkened hut trying to read weak electric signals.

In 1865, they tried again. This time, Foilhomurrum Bay, beside the old Cromwellian fort opposite Port Magee, was chosen as the spot where the cable would be brought ashore. Vast crowds assembled: it was like fairground. People of all sorts, rich and poor, old and young, assembled. There were tents selling drink, potatoes boiling in pots outside, fiddlers and pipers, dancers and games of chance an improvised roulette wheel, a 'find a pea' merchant. The old drawings show the gentry in top hats, the ladies in voluminous skirts and the peasantry beyond, almost another race, ragged, barefoot. The cable was brought in from Great Eastern, till it could be hauled ashore by some hundred local men heaving it over a bridge of twenty-two local boats to the cliff foot. Again there were speeches and rejoicing and prayers. Sir Robert Peel was among those present. The electricians secured the cable in a little instrument room erected on the cliff top and Great Eastern sailed away, paying out the cable.

It was a much quieter beginning, the following year, when they tried again, with only a small crowd to watch. But this time the whole cable was successfully laid. The men of Valentia who had been keeping a twenty-four hour watch on this cable end suddenly read: *"Ship to Shore. I have much pleasure in speaking to you through the 1865 cable."* So Valentia was linked to Newfoundland by two cables.

A reporter from the Telegraph noted on July 25th 1865 *"It was a strange crowd to look at - half the men were barefoot, and none of them were decently clad; but all of them, I suppose, could have conversed in two languages; and the chances are that three or four could have seen the point of a joke, and given a smart answer*

themselves." On Valentia there was always the two languages, the Irish of the ordinary folk and the English of the cable-men and the 'gentry'. When the Knight made his long speeches on Fenianism or the distribution of his land, he spoke in English, but a number o the listening crowd may not have understood, for some of the elders had only Irish. In spite of the strong English forces at work in the island - all education in English, the English-speaking management of the slate-mine, the English-speaking cable station – Valentia remained strongly Irish speaking, with its own local cadences and strength, until very recently. The unique feature of island life was the insertion of the Atlantic Cable Station into an Irish-speaking community of poor farmer-fishermen. Knightstown the foot of the island had the ferry to the mainland, and became with the Slate Yard and the Atlantic Cable Station, another world to many of the ordinary farming islanders. The poor lived in wretched hovels of stone and clay, their only food dry potatoes and labourers' wages a shilling (5p) a day. The labourer's clothes – frieze coat, breeches, and flannel waistcoat – cost a guinea (£1.05). Shoes and stockings were worn only on Sundays; when digging they might wear an old stocking to protect the spade foot.

In those days there was very little work on Valentia and a lot of poor people. In the past, to try and make enough money to survive, islanders walked to the rich farms in counties Kilkenny, Tipperary and north Cork, to help with the harvest. Both young men and women went to do this seasonal work.

The original cable station was a wooden hut designed by Mr Watlock of the Atlantic Telegraph Company, with six rooms and here the staff lived and worked. The instrument room had solid table of Valentia slate, providing a firm base for the batteries, galvanometers and magnets in the equipment. The first messages were received in the dark. A mirror was fixed to a coil hung between two magnets and as the current passed through the coil from the cable, the mirror swung right or left according to the polarity of the signal. A beam of light focussed on the mirror reflected along a calibrated scale, spelling out the letters. This system was very hard on the eyes of the operator but even so, the alphabet could be read twice in a minute.

The station quickly outgrew the wooden hut, even when augmented with a stone building, and was transferred to Knightstown, where a fine office and houses for the staff were constructed. There was a billard room, a library and reading room, with such papers as The Times. A bungalow (of which no trace now stands) was added as bachelor quarters and, at the end of World War 1, when there were about 200 hundred men working in the station, another terrace of houses was built, west of the original blocks. An engine and battery room was placed behind the office block, and electricity was supplied to the graffers' homes as well as to the cable station itself. A windmill on a timber tower, nearly 100 feet high, behind the office block, pumped water to the station and the houses; it was later replaced by an electric pump. Piped water, electricity, baths – the cable station men had all these long before anyone else on the island.

The 'graffers' of the Cable Station were well-paid and lived in good houses, whilst the rest of the island remained poor and primitive. The small group of telegraphists was a highly-skilled, well paid elite in

Valentia. Against the general poverty of the ordinary people of Valentia, the cablemen enjoyed good pay and conditions and sons followed their fathers into the station. Pay, up to 1919, was comparable to that of a bank manager. There was great job satisfaction, in that the work was skilled and varied, for it included both transmission and maintenance of the equipment. Edward Condon, who celebrated his ninetieth birthday in 1974, said: *"I think we had as good a life as any man could have wished to have"*. The cable houses had their own trim gardens, front and back; there was three grass tennis courts and one hard; the cricket pitch was in the middle of the sports field. Cricket matches were played against the other cable stations of Waterville and Ballinskellig. Every man had his own boat, and the yacht club raced regularly in summer on Wednesday and Saturdays. A nine-hole golf course was made on the slopes of the hill from the Fitzgerald monument down to the lighthouse. There were dances, billiards, but not so much card-playing.

The original staff numbered twelve, English and Scots, the superintendent being James Graves, an electrician who had been with the company that made the cable and then had travelled in the Great Eastern during the laying. Three generations of Graves were to work in the Valentia station.

The cablemen came from all parts of the world. Island boys entered the service, first in the Atlantic Telegraph Company, later in the Western Union, by which the original company was taken over. Some of the Valentia men held important posts in other parts of the cable world. Dan Sullivan, went to Delago Bay to become coast superintendent of all African stations. David Lynch was head electrician

when the longest cable in the world was laid, from Bamfield in Vancover to Guam, the Fiji islands, Yap and Doubtless Bay. Island boys learned Morse painlessly as a kind of secret schoolboy language.

The station itself was a relay one – the messages coming to it by this overland 'magnetic telegraph' as it was first called, and then being copied and fed into the submarine cable. At the start of operations, it cost £1 a word to cable to America with a minimum charge of £20. By 1883, it was 2 shillings a word, 1 shilling in 1888 and 6p by 1911.

During World War 1, the station became an armed camp, guarded and barricaded by troops and the cablemen were issued with identity passes. Censors checked messages for concealed meanings sent by spies. But in 1916, with the help of a man in the station, a coded message did go out to America with the news of the Easter Rising. When the final struggle for Irish Independence came, the cablemen tended to be pro British. On several occasions, the Irish forces were able to do some damage to the cable station equipment, but the Company had already temporarily re-routed most of the transmissions. No attempt was made to cut the actual cable. During the Emergency (World War 2) Irish troops were on guard.

The working of the station spanned the whole development of undersea cable operation, from the mirror and lamp to the technological development, which made such relay stations unnecessary. About 1950, Valentia was involved in the experiments with undersea repeaters, which would boast the signals automatically along the cable. When these repeaters were found to work, there was a new era of cable-

laying, in which repeaters were built in every 50miles.

During its heyday, the Valentia cable station was one of the show pieces of Ireland. The closing of the station left a great gap in island life and employment opportunities. A combination of advancing technology and United States anti-monopoly laws brought about the closure of the Trans-Atlantic Cable station in Valentia in 1966.

The other two Irish cable stations, which were opened on the mainland are:

Ballinskellig Cable Station

At Ballinskelligs, the company, Direct United States Telegraph, a British one, was granted a license in 1873. The German company Siemen Bros, manufactured and laid the cable with their ship, Faraday.
The station was linked to Valentia by a land and sea line and Western Union, successes to Angle-American Telephone Company; leased the line until 1920, when it was bought by the British Post Office. The European end was diverted to a Mousehole, Cornwall in 1923 and the Ballinskellig station closed. The buildings then became government property, and in the 1930's and 40's were used as a summer college for Irish students. They later fell into disrepair and all have been demolished.

Waterville Cable Station

The first message from Waterville to St. Johns, passed along the transatlantic cable on Christmas Eve, 1884. The original Waterville station was a shooting lodge of the Lansdowne Estate. Later a magnificent cut-stone office and several staff houses were built. During its hay-day, the station operated 6 cables to America, 4 to Britain and 2 to France. The Commercial Cable Company broke the monopoly on transatlantic communication previously held by Atlantic Telegraph Company (later Western Union) and employed over 300 people at its busiest period. Cable was diverted to Britain briefly during the Civil war and Waterville became a relay station. Landing licenses were renewed by the Irish Government, and a military guard was placed on the station during World War II. The station ceased operations in 1962.