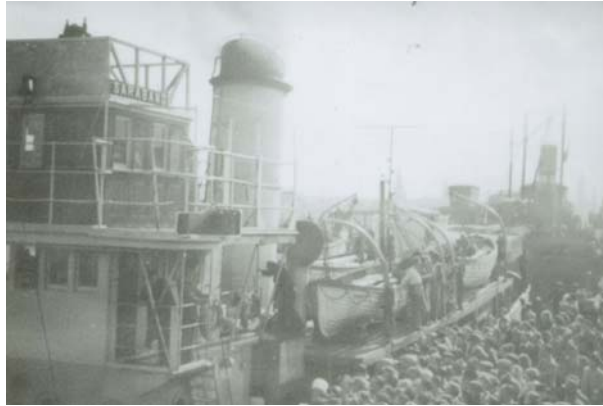


Bóithrin na Smaointe: Criostóir de Baróid's "Little Road of Memories"
By Carrie-Ann Smith

The Irish potato famine of the 1840s was so horrific that thousands of Irish emigrants boarded what history would call 'coffin ships' to seek salvation in the United States and Canada. Their bravery and the tragic loss of so many to starvation during the sometimes five week long crossings and to the cholera epidemic, made an indelible impression on future generations of their countrymen. Those bound for Canada and lucky enough to live through the crossings would be quarantined at Grosse Isle. Like all newcomers in early Canadian history the survivors would help build modern Canada contributing to all areas of social and political life.



It was the struggles of his ancestors that filled the thoughts of Criostóir de Baróid when in August of 1949 he read about the arrival of the Sarabande in his hometown of Cork, Ireland. The Sarabande was one of the 'little boats'. In addition to the 100,000 refugees who arrived at Pier 21 with the aid of the International Refugee Organization were hundreds of individuals from the Baltic States who arrived illegally. Fleeing Soviet oppression many Baltic refugees had fled their homes into Western European countries, the easiest destinations, were not safe for long as Latvians, Lithuanians, and Estonians were considered citizens of the Soviet Union and liable for deportation.



Sweden, for example, accepted 22,000 Estonians between 1944 and the end of the war, and integrated almost three-quarters into universities or skilled work. However, by the late 1940s the Soviets pressured Sweden to turn the Baltic peoples over. Many chose to flee Europe in 'little boats' like the Sarabande. Of the nine such crossings seven were to Pier 21, where the refugees were held in the detention quarters.

Most passengers were eventually given landed immigrant status but first there was a stop in Cork for fuel, supplies, and an inspection to determine that their ships were seaworthy. For the passengers of the Sarabande the brief stay in Cork would also bring them unexpected friendship.

Almost fifty years after the Sarabande's crossing a gentleman visited Pier 21's research department and remembered a friend in Ireland with a special interest in the vessel. He collected information on the ship including a passenger list and mailed his findings to Ireland where they kindled the memory Criostóir de Baróid. A few months later a letter and an envelope of photographs arrived at Pier 21. Mr. de Baróid wrote,

“I was then a young man just entering my twenties. Touched by the reported conditions under which the refugees were obliged to travel I organized a small group of companions to befriend them and to collect some necessities and comforts for them.

My friends and I were motivated to come to the assistance of these people partly because of our own race memories of the hundreds of thousands of Irish people, who, fleeing from famine and the oppression of British colonialism in the 1840's and beyond, found refuge in Nova Scotia and in the Gulf of the St. Lawrence, as well as other parts of Canada and the wider world.”



Mr. de Baróid concluded his remarks by writing, “I have often thought of the Sarabande's passengers and hoped that fate treated them kindly.” If any listeners know a man named Mathau who arrived in Canada aboard the Sarabande please tell him that we have a picture of him at Pier 21 and a message from an with an old friend.

Criostóir would love an opportunity to say hello and perhaps Mathau, wherever he is, would like a chance to say thank you.