

# SHIPWRECK OF THE DICTATOR

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Situated on Europe's western edge, Ireland's coastline is famous for its picturesque scenery and majestic, raw beauty. The serene ebb and flow of rolling waves have sculpted a stunning masterpiece of jagged inlets, coves, and beaches. But these same inviting waters have also produced a graveyard of shipwrecks that fell victim to nature's thunderous fury.

The start of the new year in 1801 brought both heavy storms and political turbulence to the area. The recent Acts of Union had abolished the Irish Parliament to create the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland under the tyranny of "Mad" King George III. Although long-standing rebellion against the Crown remained strong, independence on the Emerald Isle would have to wait.

With that backdrop, locals living near Rossbeigh in County Kerry braced for the worst during the first week of January when an unexpected bounty suddenly appeared on the horizon. Valuable cargo from the recently shipwrecked Dictator began to wash ashore, spreading a surplus of cotton, coffee, sugar, and puncheons of rum. A newspaper article from the Aberdeen Journal later reported that precious goods "were for three days exposed to the pillage of the natives as no magistrate resides in that neighbourhood".

The Dictator had begun service in 1799 as a first-class fully rigged sail vessel. Built in Liverpool, the fast and sturdy ship featured three decks, 24 mounted brass guns, and copper sheathing on its hull. However, its maiden voyage would engage in a particularly lucrative type of commerce at the time: slavery.

## Transatlantic Slave Trade

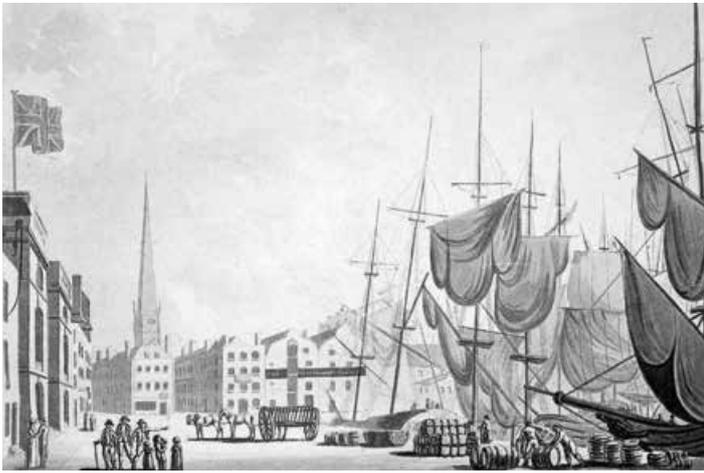
For well over 200 years, millions of African people were transported across the Atlantic to European colonies as a captive labour force, primarily to toil on large plantations under brutal conditions. The vast enterprise operated on a triangular system: manufactured goods (textiles, guns, spirits, etc.) were traded on the West African coast for slaves later sold as chattel in European outposts in the New World. The final leg of the journey



*A 18th century map of 'The Kingdom' published in Charles Smith's The Ancient and Present State of the County of Kerry (courtesy of Michael Lynch, Archivist, County Kerry Library)*

involved ships returning to the port of origin loaded with valuable commodities. From start to finish, the ordeal could take well over a year at sea and involved unimaginable suffering and cruelty during the dreaded "middle passage".

On June 10, 1799, the Dictator and its crew of 51 men sailed from Liverpool for Angola. The veteran captain, Edward Lovelace, had previously served in the Caribbean trade, sailing small boats between the Dutch and British Leeward Islands during the 1780s, hauling timber and other supplies. But in 1792 he began his career as the skipper of slave ships that culminated with



*Liverpool Old Dock: By the late 1700s, Liverpool had emerged as the largest slave trade port in the Atlantic world. There, the Dictator embarked on its ill-fated journey, never to return.*

his largest command to date. It would also be his last.

After arriving in West Africa in the Fall, the crew spent the next several months trading goods with local merchants and making any necessary repairs to the ship. A total of 445 slaves were taken on board and shackled below in the Dictator's cramped hold. Lovelace then set a course for the north coast of South America in modern-day Guyana. For expeditions of the era, sailing times varied considerably depending on weather, military confrontation, and pirates' attacks. The possibility of slave rebellions and mutiny posed additional threats to the heavily outnumbered white captors.

### **Fortunes To Be Made**

Christopher Columbus had first sighted the lush rainforest and tropical lands of "Guiana" in 1498. A century later, the Dutch established permanent settlements with the colonies of Essequibo, Demerara, and Berbice. The fertile soil, as well as the prospects of precious metals, soon attracted other European powers. As a result, guilders, pesos, and quid frequently changed hands in a mad scramble to plunder riches on the other side of the Atlantic.

By the time the Dictator disembarked on October 6, 1800, the ship had been away nearly 500 days. Captain Lovelace had arrived in the colonies with a payload of 408 slaves, a delivery that would have been deemed successful for having only 'lost' 37 people. But for those who managed to survive the horrific ordeal, the nightmare was just beginning.

African men, women and children were typically sold at auction on the docks before facing a process known

as "seasoning". As their legal owners' property, slaves would be branded like livestock and forced to endure relentless physical and psychological abuse designed to break their will and submit to a lifetime of servitude.

In response to rapidly increasing demands, slave ships were expected to conclude business and sail back to England as quickly as possible. It's worth noting that in the second half of the 18th century, Liverpool's Merseyside hub emerged as the slave-trading capital of Europe. Once the highly profitable goods (especially sugar) were distributed, and investors had been paid, the cycle would start up again. For Lovelace, the pattern coincided with the added incentive of returning home in time for Christmas and new year's celebrations.

### **A Fateful Journey**

Most likely, the Liverpool-bound West Indian departed the tropics sometime in late-October of 1800, loaded with cargo and a select group of passengers that included a wealthy Scottish businessman named James Fraser of Pitcalzean. He and fellow Highlanders owned cotton fields in Berbice, which they called Nigg (a village near the entrance to the Cromarty Firth). The slave-owning Scots were also merchants in the colony's only town, New Amsterdam.



*Map of the Colony of Berbice: European powers relied on slave labour to establish colonies along the north coast of South America. Lucrative commodities included the production of cotton, sugar and rum (courtesy of Netherlands National Archives).*



*Nigg, Berbice: Plantation owners in the West Indies often adopted the name of their home towns such as Nigg, a village located in the Scottish Highlands. (courtesy of [www.davidalston.info](http://www.davidalston.info))*

The most direct route from South America to England, a distance of roughly 6,000 km, cuts through the North Atlantic on a diagonal line and into the Irish Sea. But that is not the path the Dictator travelled. Nor did it cover the expected 150 km per day. Somewhere along the voyage, the vessel, carrying 60 on board, veered terribly off course and experienced a violent wreck near Inch as the relentlessly churning ocean (and presumably gale force winds) spilled flotsam and jetsam in all directions. Only three crew members survived.

On January 6, 1801, the first authorities arrived on the scene. Ralph Marshall, the county's former High Sheriff, recovered Fraser's portmanteau trunk and nearly £20,000 in London Bank notes and bills. According to a subsequent report in the Kentish Gazette, "Mr. Frazer's (sic) body was found, many miles from the wreck, by some country people, which was identified by the three surviving sailors, and was decently interred in the church of Inch".

## Epilogue

Although the slave trade was abolished in 1807, plantation owners would continue to grow wealthier from human bondage. Ironically, the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 handsomely compensated some 46,000 British slave owners for the loss of their "property". The great Irish leader, Daniel O'Connell, a renowned abolitionist and native of 'The Kingdom', would have been especially appalled at the Dictator's vile backstory.

Recent storms such as 2017's Hurricane Ophelia serve as a constant warning of Ireland's potent weather environment. An estimated 12,000 shipwrecks are scattered off its shores, including the infamous Spanish Armada fleet, German U-boats, and obscure craft which never made it back home.

Finding these wrecks often requires more than just sophisticated equipment but also a bit of luck, dependent on a confluence of location, depth, and the ravages of time. Elsewhere, on terra firma, scores of unmarked tombstones in ancient burial grounds provide a more tangible and haunting discovery, reminders of the long-forgotten souls claimed by the untamed sea.

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*Only three people survived the shipwreck. The recovered bodies were most likely buried at Inch Graveyard on the Dingle Peninsula. (courtesy of author)*