

The Voyage of Vengeance.

The recent report of the brutal killing of the double agent, Denis Donaldson, in County Donegal gave rise to a great deal of speculation in the Irish and United Kingdom press. The revelation that Donaldson, the Head of Administration for Sinn Fein, had been on the payroll of British intelligence for some 20 years infuriated many Republicans and it was almost inevitable that, once his whereabouts were known retribution was bound to follow.

It is a sad truth that Irish history –particularly the history of “The Troubles” – often repeats itself and the more one read about the fate of Mr.Donaldson the greater recall one had of events some 124 years earlier.

In 1882, the struggle for Irish independence was in a particularly brutal phase and in May of that year the world was shocked to read of the murder of Lord Frederick Cavendish, Chief Secretary for Ireland and Mr. Thomas Burke, the Under-Secretary.

Both men were walking in the tranquil surroundings of Dublin’s Phoenix Park when they were attacked by a group of men, armed with knives, and, in full view of many Dubliners enjoying the evening sun, stabbed repeatedly. Fortunately, a plain clothes policeman recognised one member of the gang and it soon became obvious that all were members of a notorious group called the “Invincibles” – a Republican splinter group.

Events moved slowly but in January of 1883 six men were arrested and charged with the murder of the two men. One of the five, a man called Carey, turned “Queen’s Evidence” and, as a result of his testimony, his five co-conspirators were convicted and publicly executed by hanging. Carey was a marked man and the “Invincibles” swore to take their revenge on him and his family.

The English authorities moved quickly to protect their valuable informant and it was decided to send the Carey family to South Africa where they could begin a new life.

In conditions of great secrecy, Carey, his wife and six children fled Ireland and, a few days later they embarked on the Castle Line’s “Kinfauns Castle” bound for Port Elizabeth.

This was an era in Ireland when secrets were hard to keep and, not surprisingly, the “Invincibles” network had informants at many levels of government administration. Scarcely had the travel arrangements for the Carey family been finalised before the terrorist organisation made arrangements for one of their members, a man called Patrick O’Donnell, to join the same ship. Carey did not know O’Donnell and the two soon became friendly and spent many hours together drinking and playing cards.

In those days coastal passengers transferred to coasting vessels at Cape Town and, on Saturday, July 28th. 1883, the Castle Line coaster “Melrose” left Cape Town for Algoa Bay with Carey and O’Donnell sharing a cabin.

On Sunday, July 29th. “Melrose” was off Cape St.Blaize and many of her passengers were enjoying an afternoon sleep. On the ship’s bridge the Second Officer, Mr. Becher, was taking a compass bearing when he was startled to hear the sound of a gunshot – followed, almost immediately, by two more. Leaving the quartermaster on the wheel, Becher immediately rushed to the Second Class Saloon where he found O’Donnell with a revolver- and an obviously-dead Carey.

O’Donnell put up no resistance and he was immediately placed in irons and locked in an adjoining bathroom pending the ship’s arrival at Port Elizabeth where he was handed over to the authorities – and subsequently repatriated to England where he stood trial at The Old Bailey. Second Officer Becher was the chief witness at the trial and, having been found guilty of murder, O’Donnell was executed a few days before Christmas.

There has long been conjecture as to why O’Donnell chose to carry out the execution in the way that he did. On the long passage from England to South Africa there must have been numerous opportunities for him to have knocked Carey unconscious and thrown him overboard –perhaps after late night drinking sessions when few other passengers were around and risk of detection was extremely low. By shooting his victim in broad daylight –and remaining at the scene of the crime – O’Donnell must have known that he was virtually committing suicide. There have been many discussions about his actions and the only plausible reason given is that he wanted to be acknowledged as a “hero” of the great struggle for independence and had he chosen the easier option he would have remained unrecognised.

Mr.Becher was promoted to Master very shortly afterwards and continued to serve with the Castle Line up to, and beyond, March 8th. 1900 when the two rival companies, The Union Line and The Castle Line merged to form The Union-Castle Mail Steamship Company Limited.