

150 years of ‘mutations’ in the passing-on of the *Joseph Howe* story

Telephone and *Chinese whispers* are English-language names for an internationally popular children's game in which messages are whispered from person to person and then the original and final messages are compared, usually with amusing or humorous effect. (Wikipedia)

This summer, when preparing a series for Bere Island Community Radio, three of us went through the essays in the Bere Island portion of the Schools Folklore Collection in 1937. The schoolchildren gathered the folklore from their parents and grandparents. Several wrote about The Wreck of the *Joseph Howe*, which had taken place more than sixty years earlier.

There were some notable variations in their versions of the event, but the professional historian among us was not surprised, and warned us that “ ‘disagreement as to the facts’ is an occupational hazard in projects like this!”

This coming February (2026) will be 150 years since the event took place, and so now might be a good time to look at how the story has mutated over that time span. A poem was composed at the time; the story of the event was retold, by that poem and otherwise, in (i) six handwritten pieces in the Folklore Collection in 1937 (ii) Ted O Sullivan’s book in 1992 (iii) yearly postings to the Bere Island Facebook page 2018-2024; and, in 2024, via (iv) an entry in the online Bere Island Community Archive and (v) a newspaper article.

Variations in the re-tellings in the (1937-1939) Folklore Collection

Apart from some small variations, the six pieces are consistent in their reporting of the class, size and registry of the ship (brigantine, about 400 tons, England); where she was coming from (Minatitlan, on the southeast coast of Mexico); the cargo (mahogany); the date of the wreck (the night of Thursday February 17) and the rescue (the morning of Friday the 18th); the names of the rescued (Templeton, Templeton, Seymour and Grant); and the names of the rescuers (Denis Harrington and Michael Shanahan, both of Greenane).

However, there are some variations in the numbers saved (four to six) and even bigger disagreements about the numbers lost (*one* to *four*).

As to the *losses*, one version said *only the little cabin boy* was lost. Another said that the *single* loss occurred when the captain tried to launch the longboat to bring sick seamen to Castletown Hospital. Two other versions said that *two* were lost in that attempt: as the longboat was being lowered; it smashed against ship’s side, and two men were drowned. Another version of the poem stated that *four* were lost when the longboat capsized.

Instead of providing the poem, one pupil told directly of a crew of ten when leaving port, *two dying at sea* for lack of fresh food and want of medical attendance, *two drowned near Bere Island*, and six saved (two Irish, one Austrian, one Dane one English, and one Portuguese).

These variations are not that surprising: in his essay, Finbarr Murphy tells us that “There are several different versions of the wreck,” before writing down the “one which I heard from my father.” In his 1992 book, Ted O’Sullivan tells us that “local knowledge says that four were drowned and four saved” while “Lloyd’s List says that only two men were drowned.”

In 2025, with online access to newspapers of the time, we can explain some of the confusion.

The news of the loss reached Lloyd's on the Friday, and on the Saturday, under the heading

LATEST SHIPPING INTELLIGENCE

(FROM LLOYD'S, FEB 18.)

WRECKS AND CASUALTIES

the *London Times* reported

“CASTLETOWN, BEREHAVEN, Feb. 18.-The Joseph Howe, brigantine, of London, from Minatitlan, with mahogany, for Queenstown or Falmouth for orders, was lost on Bere Island last night; *two* hands drowned.”

This reporting lines up with the stories told by two of the pupils, and seems to cast doubt on the “local knowledge” that Ted cites, and on Finbarr's 1937 version of the poem. Later, Finbarr supplied a slightly different version to Ted for his book, but it too said that *four* men were drowned when the longboat capsized.

To understand the confusion, it helps to read the account of the Board of Trade Enquiry, held in Cork on March 29, 1876 at which “The master of the vessel, Wm. Templeton, was in attendance.”

“The Joseph Howe was 354 tons register, and belonged to Messrs. Samuel Hill & Co., of London. She left Minatitlan with a cargo of mahogany in the end of last year, bound for Cork for orders.

Fever had been raging at Minatitlan, and nearly all of the crew, including the captain, had suffered from the malady. On the voyage two died, including the mate; and out of a crew of eight only six remained to work the ship, of whom one was altogether incapacitated, and the others were weak from their recent illness.

On the 29th January a violent gale was experienced, and the foreyard was carried away, in consequence of which the vessel was deprived of the service of two important sails.

In this way the Joseph Howe reached the Irish coast on the 17th February, and the weather was thick. An effort was made to weather land without success, with insufficient wind and sail, and with a heavy sea setting in on land. The vessel drifted on the rocks and became a total wreck.

Previous to the accident the captain directed the lifeboat to be got out. The boat was swamped and two men were drowned. The other two were rescued in an exhausted condition. Left with only one man, the captain was unable to put out the anchors or so anything to save the ship.”

So, indeed, it would appear that *a total of four were indeed lost – two early on in the voyage, and two near Bere Island -- and that four were saved.*

Re-tellings in the Internet Era

In 2024, on the 148th anniversary of the event, the online Bere Island Community Archive added an extensive entry under its “Topics” category. In addition to describing the wreck and the

rescue, and including a version of the poem by Dennis Harrington (giving a rescue date of February 17), it also includes a contemporary colour image of the cliffs at Faill na dTadgh, and some other not-well-known post-voyage ‘developments.’ It tells how ‘her crew were suffering from scurvy and were too weak and exhausted to handle the vessel’. The longboat losses are not mentioned, but the story of the cabin-boy lost at sea (by a cause to be explored some other time) is told.

The story of the death of the galley boy was the focus of the later-in-2024 item in an EchoLIVE.ie article. That item also included a digital image from the Duchas website: the very first handwritten page in the Bere Island contributions in 1937-1939! Interestingly, that page shows a ‘slip of the pen,’ an early in-black-and-white instance of a mutation in the transmission of the story. The second line in the text shown in the image tells us that the Joseph Howe “was wrecked on the eighteenth of February, but the first line of the poem, lower down the page, says that “It was on the fifteenth of February” that the rescue took place.

Retrospect

The many variations of the 1937-1939 re-tellings suggest that the original poem or song may not have been written down, or, if it was, that the written version was not widely ‘accessible’ to the pupils. Each of the six tellings seems to be based on the recall of that pupil’s parents and grandparents, or, in the last of the six essays, of a Greenane-reared person who says he “remembers the incident even though only 4 years at the time.”

Today, one hundred and fifty years on from the event, text is easily copied and pasted, and mutations are transmitted quickly and widely. The internet-era mutation rate is likely to be just as high as it was ninety years ago, when the pupils relied on an ‘oral+digital+ink+paper’ medium.

The six contributors

Patrick Sullivan, Ballinakilla, informant not identified. *Finbarr Murphy*, Derrycreeveen, from his father Jim (born 1880). *Cornelius Harrington*, Greenane, from his father Cornelius, aged 60 years (born around 1877). *Julia Harrington*, Greenane, from her father “John (Jack) Harrington, age about 50, and his father, who died about 26 years ago.” *Sheila Sidley*, Cloughland, from her father Tim Sidley, “age 55, and information from his father who died about 30 years ago.” *Mr M Martin O’Sullivan*, Castletownbere, “Age 67, reared and spent his early manhood in Greenane and who remembers the incident even though only 4 years at the time. I have seen parchment which was presented to the composer Denis Harrington who with Michael Shanahan effected the rescue.”

To read these and the other Bere Island contributions

Both the original handwritten, and the recently transcribed, versions from all 50,000 pupils are available on the national website duchas.ie. To make the ones from the three Bere Island national schools a little more reader-friendly, we have ‘re-packaged’ them and put them on this website:

<https://jhanley.biostat.mcgill.ca/SchoolsCollectionBereIsland/>

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THE TIMES, SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 1876.

LATEST SHIPPING INTELLIGENCE.

(FROM LLOYD'S, FEB. 18.)
WRECKS AND CASUALTIES.

out of port, damaging cutwater, losing jibboom, and other damage ; also doing damage to other vessels.

CASTLETOWN, BEREHAVEN, Feb. 18.—The Joseph Howe, brigantine, of London, from Minatitlan, with mahogany, for Queenstown or Falmouth for orders, was lost on Bere Island last night ; two hands drowned.

QUEENSTOWN, Feb. 18.—The Quito, from Liverpool, with general cargo for Jamaica, put in here with mainmast settled down and rigging slack.

The Turkestan is stranded between Portmadoo and Harlech ; makes no water, and is likely to come off.
