

# The Voyage of an Iowa Immigrant

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edited by **Timothy Walch**

*Immigration was a determining factor in the settlement of the United States during the nineteenth century. An important aspect of the immigrant experience that has tended to be overlooked by scholars is the Atlantic crossing itself. Few of the most recent studies of the foreign born present more than a cursory discussion of that arduous journey, in part because the source materials are scarce. Aside from testimony taken by government investigatory commissions, the principal evidence for the voyage at sea is found in immigrant letters. Unfortunately such letters are widely scattered in archives across two continents.*

*In light of the paucity of existing documents, the following passages from the diary of Benjamin Millward of Birmingham, England and Decorah, Iowa are of particular importance. Millward describes the day-to-day life on board a packet ship. He set sail on the Cornelia in March, 1854, and recorded his journey with the intention of providing his wife and relatives with a hand book for later voyages.*

*Millward was a carpenter who came to the United States with his brother William in search of a better life. He practiced his trade in New York until he could send for his family. Once reunited with his wife and children, he moved west with the railroads and settled in Decorah in the 1870s. After Millward's death in 1904, the diary passed on to surviving family members. It is through the generosity of Jacquelin F. Tenny, Millward's great-great granddaughter, that publication of these selections is made possible.*

**Saturday, March 4th, 1854**

We reached Birkenhead station [near Liverpool] and we are met by a lot of sharpers wanting to take care of our

luggage across the ferry before any agreement was made. It is well for us that we were too deep for them for I have met with persons on board who have paid eighteen shillings for no more than [I] paid seven shillings for. After we had got our luggage to the office for the night and bought our eatables, the next thing to be done was to look after our bed and here also we were well accommodated. Having chosen Mr. Ramsden's Coffee House, 22 Hunter St., Liverpool, where I must recommend you to go if you should be compelled to sleep in Liverpool, we were told at the office that we must join the ship in the morning as she would go out at two o'clock. So accordingly we joined the ship this Sunday morning.

### Sunday, March 5th

We are now on board and the passengers are very busy in getting their luggage on the vessel and up to the present time I think we shall have a respectable company in our part of the ship. I am quite satisfied with the change of vessel. I cannot see that she is inferior to the *Constitution* which is lying close by. The *Constitution* is certainly a very fine vessel and by all appearances is deserving of the good name she bears. I should very much have liked for you to have seen the ships in port. It is a very fine sight to see such a vast quantity of ships gathered together. As far as the eye can reach you behold the flags of every nation mingled one among another and you would think it almost impossible to get them out of their places. And the same features present themselves to you in the streets and docks. You see men of almost every nation, black and white, walking and hurrying about in all directions as though the fate of empires depended on their individual exertions.

We are now in the river and have had no accident yet but a very near escape of two men jumping backwards and forwards on the dock. We were rather amused this morning by two women coming into our berth and telling us they had engaged berths in with us. But I suppose they thought better of it after for we have seen nothing more of them yet. What a diversity of character we meet with on board a vessel. Here is an old man always popping about and in everyone's way. He is going to end his days with his children in America. He is all life and

spirits. In another place is a poor old Irish woman sitting in the hold and weeping bitterly. She puts me in mind of Rachel weeping for her children and would not be comforted because they were not. Whilst in other places are groups together card playing.

### **Monday, March 6th**

It is thought by most that we shall go to sea today as the men are very busy in preparations and I hope we shall as I am tired of this already. We have had a steam tug full of passengers brought to the vessel this morning, chiefly Irish and a dirty lot they are to look at. I have felt very impatient and uncomfortable the whole day. There is no sign of starting today now. I have been thinking today that if I was home and in the midst of my family again I should not break it up again in a hurry although I have no doubt but it will be for the best in the end. My mind must alter very much before I consent for you to put up with the accommodation provided in this vessel.

### **Tuesday, March 7th**

The first thing that I had to do this morning was to get our water for the day and this is a different affair to getting it out of the little well in the Wellington Road. I happened to be nearly the first and I should think that I was nearly an hour in getting served. That has been two hours since and there are lots of them that have not got served yet. We ought to have nine quarts for the three of us and I should think that six was the most we had. It is a difficult thing to get cooking done here, so many to be served at once and the Captain's cook asked us five [pounds] to cook for the voyage and of course we refused to give it. I would sooner live on biscuit and water than pay that for the cooking we shall want. I have just now finished my tea and what do you think it has been? It has been a biscuit and a drop of water so you see we are obliged to make shifts of not a very pleasing character. Most of the passengers think we shall start in the morning. I hope we may. It is mine and William's watch from twelve to three. This is a precaution we have adopted for our own protection, and I assure [you] it is by no means unnecessary.

**Monday, March 13th**

I was awoke this morning by the noise of the steam tug against the side of the vessel. I arose instantly to watch progress and I can assure you it is an exciting scene to see a ship's crew preparing for sea. The commands of the officers combined with the songs of the sailors who always sing at their work, produce a noise not to be equalled easily. At six o'clock I was upon deck before many of the passengers were astir and saw the third mate go to the steerage and shout to the Irish to come up and give a help to get under weigh [sic]. Says he, "We are off to New York this morning," and you should have heard what a cheer greeted the announcement and up comes a drove of them directly like wildmen. Whilst I was writing this in my book we were moving along the river with some degree of satisfaction at the bare thought of moving. And a splendid morning it was and a few of us thought what would overtake us before the day was gone.

At two o'clock we were off the Welsh coast with her mountains in sight and England entirely lost to view. There have been two or three women sick already and one man. By this time they have got nearly the whole of the sails spread, the breeze being rather fresh as we proceed into the channel. The wind, suddenly without warning, rises from a quiet breeze into a perfect hurricane and passengers who happen to be on deck with their caps not secured have the mortification of seeing them blown into the sea and the sea, in its turn, dashed over the ship. Almost washing off those who happen to be in its reach. By this time all who are not sick and could keep their legs were hard at work in helping to take in the sails, pulling at the ropes while the greater part of the sailors were in the rigging, reefing. For myself I can say I never worked harder in my life than I did then til every bit of canvas was reefed.

A storm at sea is certainly a awful yet a grand sight. To see the waves running so high that it appears to be in a very deep gulf as you stand on the vessel and look round you on every side, it looks like looking up a steep hill on every side of you. It is worth coming on a voyage to see a storm. The waves rolling on in such majestic grandeur and the vessel tossed about as though she was a bit of cork or a feather and to see the sailors

climbing up the ropes. Sometimes there are as many as twenty on the yardarm at a time with nothing but a single rope to stand upon. Whilst this is going on above, a scene of quite a different character is to be seen below and one that lasts longer than the storm. The people are lying about in all directions, sick in scores. And I might say without exaggeration, they are in hundreds.

### **Sunday, March 19th**

How different the appearances here to what they are upon land. How different the sounds that greet the ear on the sea to the sound we hear on land. Instead of the music of the different bells and the singing of the birds, we have the roar of the ocean waves and the never ending creaking of the vessel's lumber, at no time very pleasant sounds . . . We are now making nine knots an hour and have done so since two o'clock this morning and still a very fair wind which I hope will continue. Ten o'clock, we have just had a very heavy hail storm followed by sunshine which was followed again by hail and rain. We begin to see the reality of sea voyaging now that we are fairly on the ocean. The doctor distributed a great number of tracts among us this morning of a very useful and interesting character. The three that I received were entitled "The Happy Negro," "Pious Resolutions" and "The Well Conducted Farm." The latter one I very much like as it advocates the temperance principles of which I am more than ever, if possible, convinced of their utility to the human race.

### **Tuesday, March 21st**

We are making nine knots an hour this morning which might easily be extended to twelve and thirteen if they would put sufficient sails up but the Captain is a very cautious man and not one of the go ahead sort. I am told this is the last voyage of the *Cornelia* across the ocean. She is to be used in the coasting trade when she arrives in America, not being considered sufficiently safe for ocean traffic. They told me at the agent's office in Birmingham that she was a new vessel. And I find she is fourteen or sixteen years old. I have found that they told us many falsehoods. But I shall be careful how I

believe agents again. The best way is to go and see the vessel for yourself and if you like her, engage your berth at the office where you start from. I am at a sad loss for my books. I never felt so vexed as I do now. I hope you will bring them all with you as books, I am told, are as dear in America as they [are in] England since the copyright law has been ratified between the two countries. So I hope you will take care of them and bring them when you come.

### **Wednesday, March 22nd**

I am glad to say the looks of the passengers have improved these last few days. Most of them are recovering from their sickness and very glad I am. It is a pitiful sight to see them in some cases. Mother unable to help her child and husband unable to help his wife and the wife also unable to help her husband. It is distressing to see what miserable things some of them are reduced to. One person told me that whilst he was so ill his constant wish was that the vessel would go down and end his misery. I am happy to say that I do not think there is one in the vessel who has stood it better than myself. I have not had a symptom of sickness.

### **Thursday, March 23rd**

This has been a day to remember for there has been a whale seen by the Captain and some of the passengers. I did not see it myself being too late. They have also discovered a young man hid away in some part of the vessel and not found out until this morning. He said he had not had anything to eat for two days. They gave him a good thrashing for his pains. They will send him back to Liverpool if they meet a vessel homeward bound. Five o'clock, we have just come in sight of a vessel going the same way. Directly after, we saw another one coming towards us and a sad sight it proved to be. It had evidently been in a very severe storm. The whole of her rigging was entirely destroyed. What canvas was hanging about her was blown to ribbons. All of her masts were either blown or cut away and not a soul on board. She was an American vessel supposed to be the *Kate Hunter*. The sight of the wreck made

us feel sad on account of the crew and passengers, whether they have been saved by any means. I sincerely hope they have.

### **Sunday, March 26th**

The first thing I have to mention this morning is the death and burial of child six months old. It is sewn in a piece of canvas and dropped into the ocean without any ceremony . . . What I would give to be once more in a home of our own again with the little ones playing about us again in all the joy and gladness of their years. I hope in the land I am going to be able to attain the proud position of a man sitting under his vine and fig tree, no one making him afraid. Thus [it is] with most anxious feelings that I calculate the time when it will be advisable for you to come. When I think of my dear little ones at play, and I not present to see and enjoy their play, I feel as though I could weep my spirit from mine eyes.

### **Tuesday, March 28th**

As the day has advanced, we have had laughable scenes although they might have been serious to the parties concerned at the time. William was sitting on one side of the main cabin on some boxes when the vessel gave a tremendous lurch and to save himself from falling to his face, he takes hold of the boxes when bang, he comes boxes and all to the other side of the cabin, happily unhurt. No sooner had the laugh at this subsided than it became someone else's turn to add to the general mirth and as luck would have it, it was me. I was just returned from the cooking stove with my large can of water. I saw she was going to play another freak [and] I took hold of the nearest object. But [I] was obliged soon to let go and bang I went from one side to the other four or five times, knocking down the little boy the first pitch. But I managed to pick him up in my arms and carried him with me so preventing him [from] being hurt. You must not suppose that I was the only one that was pitched about in that manner. There were eight or ten [others], pitching backwards, and forwards against one another, knocking each other down, and the one that happened to be undermost soon had two or three on top of him before he had time to right himself. To make the matter

worse, the vessel was shipping such tremendous seas that some of the people outside almost drowned.

### **Wednesday, April 12th**

Another child dead and buried today making the fifth death since leaving the docks. I hope we shall not have anymore.

### **Thursday, April 13th**

No wind today. We are now in the most perfect calm that we have had yet. The vessel is at a perfect standstill and the ocean is as smooth as a sheet of glass, not a ruffle is to be seen on its surface as far as we can see, which by the way is not very far on the sea, not more than three miles in the most perfect calm and when the sea is anything disturbed, not more than half that distance. I have been watching the setting sun this evening and a glorious sight it is. To see the same on land is not to be compared to this. It looks like a globe of fire sinking into the water at a short distance from us. Almost as soon as the sun is lost to our view, the moon rises on the opposite side and at first it looks like a small body of fire but in a few minutes, the whole of her comes in sight and really I can say I never saw anything with which I was more enraptured in my life. I assure you I was never more impressed with the sublimity of the works of the Omnipotent than I was this evening.

### **Wednesday, April 19th**

We have Long Island in sight this morning which extends to New York within  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile but the part we can now see is about 70 miles from N. Y. but we shall soon make that with a good wind. The [harbor] pilot has brought newspapers on board up to the ninth of April which I have been favored with a look into. And I find by them that vessels that we left behind in Liverpool have sailed and arrived in N. Y. at the date referred to. The *Henry Clay* sailed after us and made the voyage in twenty-four days and we have been already thirty days sailing and forty-five on board. Other vessels have made very short voyages but have had a good deal of sickness and



one of them has had fifty deaths on the voyage. So that if they have been fortunate in a short voyage, we have been so in the general good health of the passengers. This is a very fine day but very cold at present.

### Friday, April 21st

Certainly the change from wet to dry and cold to warmth is very sudden and we have now a tug to our assistance. The approach to N.Y. is beautiful in the extreme. I could not have thought there was such a fairy scene on the whole earth. We are now in the harbour and the medical inspector is now here. I have now the unbounded satisfaction to tell you I am once more on land and I assure you there is not a single passenger but what was glad to get away from the *Cornelia* after a long and tedious voyage of forty days [under sail] and forty-eight days on board.

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