

"Sighted the coast of Brazil the 28th": John Murphy's journey to South America in 1863

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First published in the website of the Society for Irish Latin American Studies (SILAS)
on 18 July 2010.

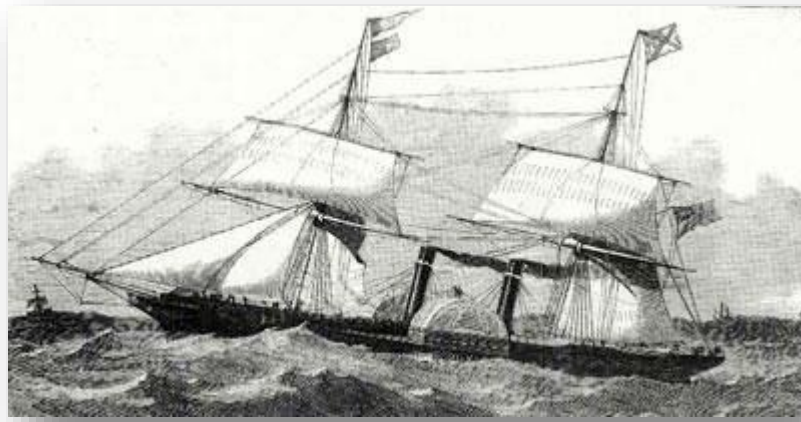


Figure 1. *La Plata* (1852), 2,402 tons, of the Royal Mail Steam Co. ran to South America for several years together with the *Paraná*.

John Murphy (1822-1909) was born in Haysland, Kilrane parish of County Wexford, the eldest son of the farmer Nicholas Murphy and his wife, Katherine, *née* Sinnott. It was a typical Catholic middle-class family of Wexford farmers. In 1844, as a member of an emigrant group organized by Kilrane merchant James Pettit, John Murphy went to Liverpool, sailed to the Río de la Plata region and settled in Buenos Aires. He first worked digging ditches in the district of Chascomús, and then as a shepherd in Chacabuco. In 1854 Murphy purchased land in Salto and established the successful sheep-farm "La Flor del Uncalito", in which many other Irish immigrants (including his brothers William and Patrick) would work as shepherds and ranch hands. When his mother died in 1861, John Murphy went to Ireland to visit the family and returned to Argentina in 1863.

The following letters were written by John Murphy during the journey from Wexford to Southampton and to Buenos Aires, and sent from three different calls in the last weeks of 1863. The *Paraná* of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Co. departed from Southampton on 9 November 1863, called at Lisbon (13 November), Cape Verde (20), Pernambuco (28 November), Bahia (30 November), and Rio de Janeiro (3 December). The passengers then boarded the *Mercy*, and arrived in Buenos Aires on 13 December

1863, though they were registered on 1 January 1864 with the port authorities (Coghlan 1982: 88, Howat 1984:135). The Royal Mail Steam Packet Co. offered "the first regular steamship service to South America" with the wooden screw steamer *Esk*, which first arrived at Buenos Aires on 12 January 1851. The *Paraná* was a much larger 2,250 tons wooden paddle steamer of 92.96 m length, with two funnels and three masts. She was built in Southampton by Wigram & Sons and made her maiden South Atlantic voyage in 1862 [Bonsor 1983: 22]. She could accommodate three hundred first class passengers and had a dining saloon about 26 yards (23.8 meters) long with ninety-six seats.



John J. Murphy
(*Witcomb*, ca. 1870)

John Murphy's journey was typical of several Irish emigrants to South America in the second half of the nineteenth century. Steamers were preferred by the emigrants to sailboats because of their higher certainty of departures and arrivals. The average sailing from British ports to Buenos Aires on a steam boat lasted between four and six weeks. However, John Murphy was an experienced traveller, and this was the second time he sailed the South Atlantic seaway. His journey was not typical in that he travelled in first class -- he paid £55 for the ticket and shared a cabin with two other passengers -- an enjoyed the luxuries and entertainment normally forbidden to steering passengers.

These letters are included in the Anastasia Joyce Collection and belong to the SILAS Manuscripts and Rare Books Collection (Max von Buch Library of Universidad de San Andrés, Buenos Aires).

John James Murphy to Martin Murphy, 13 November 1863 (Lisbon)

Dear Friends,

I take this hurried opportunity of informing you that we have arrived safe here at present in good health, but the mood of all on board having suffered much from say sickness since we left Southampton.

Dear brother, I received your letter after coming on board I am satisfied as regards the Barns purchased &c. Do as you think best in these matters. I shall defer any particulars as to the passage until I reach Buenos Aires. I am about going on shore now to post this letter and to see the town, the particulars of which I shall give you hereafter. There were about 100 first class passengers sat down to dinner the first day, but since there has been very few at table owing to the say sickness.

Dear friends, I must cut this short as all is topsy-turvy. Adieu dear friends and believe me to be your dear brother,

John Murphy

PS: I got no letter or message from you since I came here. We leave now and God be with you all.

John James Murphy to Martin Murphy, 20 November 1863 (St. Vincent, Cape Verde)

My dear and affectionate friends,

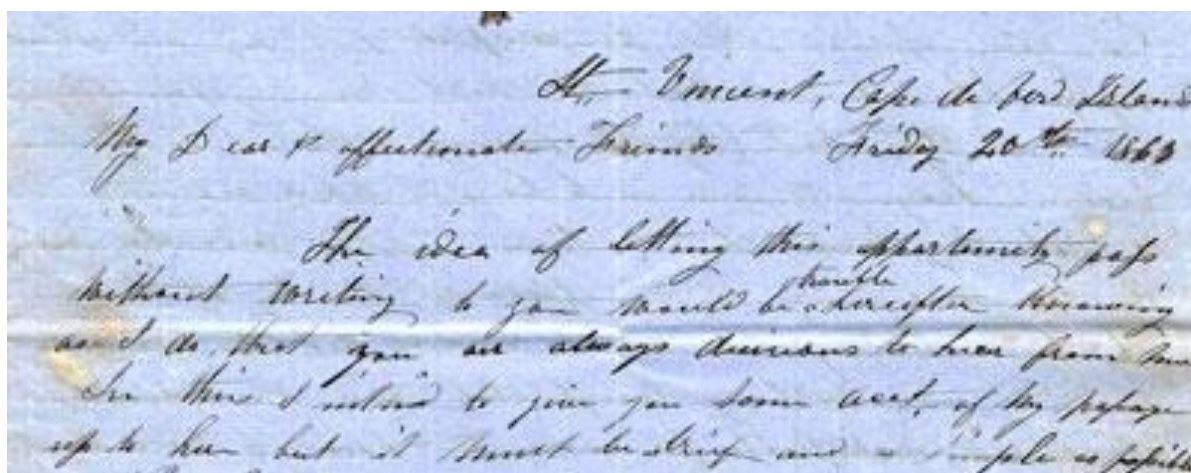


Figure 2. First lines of the letter sent on 20 November 1863 by John Murphy from Mindelo, São Vicente islands, Cape Verde.

The idea of letting this opportunity pass without writing to you would be trouble hereafter knowing as I do, that you are always desirous to hear from me. In this I intend to give you some account of my passage up to here, but it must be a brief and as simple as possible.

When I arrived in Southampton I found I could not secure my passage owing to the books being then in London and on Saturday morning the books came to Southampton and I then took a cabin with two others at £55 each, the one a German the other an Englishman residing in Pernambuco. The packet a splendid paddle steam ship that

can accommodate about 300 passengers (first class), and I expect half that number of steerage passengers left the docks on Saturday night and remained about two miles down the river until Monday. We the passengers went on board at 12 o'clock and the mails, about fifty bags, was put on board about two at which hour she started on her voyage with 118 first class and about 26 second class passengers. The dining saloon of this magnificent ship is about 26 yards long with two tables that extend the full length at which sat 96 individuals male and female to dine at 5 o'clock the first evening. The day was very fine and everyone appeared buoyant and in good spirits, with the prospect of a safe and pleasant voyage before him. But the next morning [illeg.] a great many in their bed (myself amongst the rest) as the sea became heavy and came on to her side occasioned [illeg.] her to roll very much. This continued until Wednesday morning, the sea [illeg.] as we approached the Bay of Biscay, the wind still holding to the West, which [illeg.] the sea into her side and washing completely over her, which left it almost impossible for even the hands to [illeg.] the ship. The deck which stood about 25 feet above the sea was not visited by a single passenger while passing the Bay of Biscay. On Friday morning those that were able go on deck found themselves in sight of land proceeding along the coast of Portugal with the sea much moderated. When this was announced to the passengers in bed the most of them endeavoured to get up the weather improving as we must, that by 12 October, when we reached the harbour of Lisbon, all hands were on deck and many of them already prepared to go on shore, I amongst the rest (though still weak from the sailing of the previous days) accompanied the rest to the shore to see the curiosities of this place and its people. The principal part of the city is very beautiful, the streets wide and well paved, the houses high and nicely ornamented, the squares and promenades are paved in patterns with different colour stones and set off with works of aesthetic splendour. In approaching its shores the first curiosity is the number of windmills that is to be seen on every direction with peculiar shaped sails like a half diamond and I believe every farm house has a mill attached to it. The farmers all grind their own wheat both for use and for sale. The appearance of the country from the sea is very barren and mountainous, with neither the prospect of being a tillage or grazing land. We here landed some passengers and the mails, and took on board others with about 700 tons coal and 110 passengers. The latter [illeg.] the ship so much that there has to be two rounds of breakfast and dinner with about 100 at each.

Saturday 14th about 9 A.M. we started, being a fine day. We enjoyed the view of the harbour very much, which is indeed very beautiful. About 12 o'clock we met the French packet from Buenos Ayres and saluted her, and proceeded on our voyage with scarcely a breeze. Sunday after breakfast the officers and hands on board were [illeg.] on deck in their uniform, their names called over and then marched down to the saloon and prayers read for them by the Parson and to all others who wished to attend (being a week at sea). The rule is that plays and other amusements begin. Dancing commence every evening after tea to the music of the band belonging to the ship. Tuesday 17th we sighted the peak of Tenerife, which one would imagine that it was a point of cloud appearing through the others and beneath the mountain that support it there was a large [illeg.] ship close to the shore which we afterwards discovered to be a Spanish frigate of war, the officers and men were all surprised to think the Spaniards should have such a fine large ship in their fleet.

Wednesday 18th. There is not a ripple in the sea if you could just give a peep on board you would find in all parts of the ship some play as pastime going on. Several of the young men and women passengers has got up a theatre to act in the first part of the night. The programme is indeed very amusing and better than you would often find from professionals. They perform 4 acts every night and when that finishes the dance continues up to 12 or 1 o'clock.

Thursday and Friday. Very fine and exceedingly warm, we had some heavy thunder yesterday, and today some showers. We had sight of St. Vincent this evening. It's now 10 o'clock P.M., and we expect to meet the mail packet far from about 11 o'clock, so that I must close my letter before actually arriving at where it's dated from in order to send it by her as I shall have no other opportunity until I reach Buenos Ayres. You will be glad to know that I am getting good health much better than I expected so you must content yourself with this hurried scribble and I shall endeavour to give you a better and more satisfactorily account of the remainder of the voyage. So farewell dear friends and I remain as ever your affectionate brother,

John Murphy

I wrote from Lisbon

John James Murphy to Martin Murphy, 5 December 1863 (Rio de Janeiro)



Figure 3. Rio de Janeiro circa 1865, photo by Georges Leuzinger (Maria L. David de Sanson, *O Rio de Janeiro do fotógrafo Leuzinger: 1860-1870*, Rio de Janeiro: Sextante, 1998, p. 21).

Dear Brother and Friends,

The part of this letter dated from St. Vincent was written with a view of sending it by the packet we were to meet there. But having missed her during night I had to enclose by this although not as well as should wish it done yet far the improvement I can make in it. It's not worth while to commence writing it over again but shall commence with a few remarks of the voyage from that date.

We left St. Vincent on Saturday 4 o'clock P.M., crossed the Line Thursday 26th, sighted the coast of Brazil 28th, arrived in Pernambuco 29th, left there same evening, arrived in Bahia on 30th, left there on 1st December, and arrived here Rio de Janeiro on Friday 4th in good health and spirits, thanks be to God. I have been on shore at all the above mentioned places and I must say that they present a great of scenery and romantic curiosity to the stranger. Those countries all are very mountainous, and the difficult streets of the cities can be only traversed by means of chairs carried by negroes. There are an abundance of all kinds of fruit, and the natives are clothed with scarcely enough to cover them. The ship we arrived here in, named the Paraná, proceeds no further than here. She is met here by the Mercy, that trades between here and Bs. As. She brings the mail from Bs. As. and then they are conveyed home by the ship that brought us out. We proceeded from her for Bs. As. on Monday 7th, and expect to be in Bs. As. on Sunday 13th. I shall write from there by the first packet and let you know how all friends are. After getting on so well this voyage I shall not think so much of making one hereafter. From the hubbub that's on board it's almost impossible to write any thing, so you must content yourself with the present. I should not have written at all under such circumstances were it not that I promised to write on every opportunity.

There are six prisoners going home by this packet, to be tried by the laws of England, for having murdered the Captain, Mate, cook and some sailors on board an English ship off on the coast, or in the River Plate. They are chiefly not Englishmen as I believe none of them.

Dear friends, I must conclude by wishing this may find you all in good health which will ever be the prayers of your dear and affectionate brother,

John Murphy

References

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