

## The Lady Nelson - Shipwrecked 14<sup>th</sup> October 1809

By

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On 14<sup>th</sup> October 1809, The Lady Nelson, Captain Bernard Wade, was shipwrecked on a voyage from Oporto to Liverpool, off the Skelligs, Co. Kerry. The 200 tonne vessel contained a cargo of wine and fruit. 25 souls perished in the disaster.

The Freeman's Journal of 25<sup>th</sup> October 1809 reported the tragedy thus:

We are concerned to hear that the ship Lady Nelson, Bernard Wade, master, from Oporto to Liverpool, about 11 o'clock on the night of the 14<sup>th</sup> inst. struck on a rock between the Skellicks and the main land, and instantly went to pieces; and melancholy to add, the Captain and crew, consisting of 22 men and also 3 women a child and a gentleman passenger were lost, two of the crew only excepted.

A further report in the same newspaper of the following day gave additional details of the shipwreck:

Several casks of wine have within the last week been thrown ashore and picked up by boats on the western coast of the county Kerry – a part of the wreck of a vessel was also discovered by a boat of Mr. Rice's, and brought to Dingle; on which were found the captain, his wife and child, and maid-servant, quite dead, and two men, part of the crew, nearly in the same state; the latter, however, by proper care and attention, are now perfectly restored. From these men (one of whom is a Swede and the other an Italian) it has been learned, that the vessel was the Lady Nelson of Dublin, Captain Wade, from Oporto to Liverpool, dashed to pieces on Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> inst. on the Lecon Rocks, between the Skellix and the Main Land, and that her crew consisted of 22 sailors, one man, two women, and a child, passengers, all of whom perished except themselves, who were four days and nights exposed to hunger in the wreck before they were taken up. The cargo of the Lady Nelson consisted of 450 pipes of port wine, 12 of which were driven on shore at Valentia and secured by Mr. Berill, Surveyor of the Port.

This report differs from the first in that it listed two women as passengers instead of three. The gentleman passenger referred to in the report of 25<sup>th</sup> October was identified by the following report in the Examiner of London, dated 24<sup>th</sup> October 1809, "Lord St.

Asaph it is said has received confirmation of the loss of the Lady Nelson of Liverpool. All on board perished including his Lordship's son – an officer of the Coldstream Guards.”

This victim was Ensign the Hon. John Ashburnham, (born 3 June 1789) whose family seat was Ashburnham Palace Sussex in England. I surmise that this young man had served in the British Army, in the Napoleonic Wars and that he perished while returning home from Portugal. He was the fourth child of George, 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Ashburnham (styled Viscount St. Asaph from birth) and his first wife Thynn, daughter of 3<sup>rd</sup> Viscount Weymouth. Unfortunately for him, George Ashburnham chose to return home on the Lady Nelson. He was 20 years of age.

Lloyds marine register dated 29<sup>th</sup> October 1809, referred to the tragedy with the following entry; ‘The Lady Nelson, Wade from Oporto to Liverpool, was totally lost near the Skelligs coast of Ireland 14<sup>th</sup> inst. Only 2 of the crew saved.’

Another maritime website referred to the Lady Nelson as a full Rigger, 201 tonnes. It listed its cargo as wine, fruit and guns. The latter were 6 x 6 pounder and 4 x 12 pounder carronades. The full Rigger is a sailing vessel with three or more masts – all of them square rigged. The carronade was a short smooth bore iron cannon which was developed for the Royal Navy by the Carron Company, an iron works in Falkirk, Scotland. Used from the 1770s to 1850s, this cannon's main function was to serve as a powerful, short range, anti-ship and anti-crew weapon. It was also used in the American Civil War in the 1860s.

Earliest mention of the Lady Nelson in the Lloyd Registers is found for 1802. The ship (net tonnage 200 tonnes) was listed as being owned by Scott and Co. and the captain was named as D. Beck. Its trade route was given as plying between Greenock (Scotland) and Newfoundland (Canada). This report also stated that the ship had been captured as a prize. The Act of Union treaty of 1707 effected the union of Scotland and England under the name of Great Britain. Subsequent to this, Greenock became the main port on the west coast of Scotland. It prospered due to trade with the Americas, importing sugar from the Caribbean.

In 1803, the Lady Nelson was listed with the same ownership as the previous year and with R. McAlister succeeding D. Beck as captain of the ship. The following year, 1804, the ship plied between Greenock and Lisbon (Portugal). For 1805, the Register detailed Crawford and Co. as the new owners with McAlister still named as captain. However, this year's entry stated that the ship had ten guns and that it journeyed between Greenock and Newfoundland. For 1806, the Lady Nelson was captained by B. Wade and ownership passed to Shaw & Co. Based in Greenock, the vessel plied between Dublin and Oporto. For this year alone, the vessel is listed as a privateer. This type of vessel was an armed ship which was privately owned and manned. It was commissioned by governments to attack and capture enemy boats. This ship's details remained unchanged for 1807. For 1808, the registers show unchanged ownership and captaincy with its trade routes being Dublin to Oporto and London to Brazil. For the fateful year of 1809, the Lady Nelson was listed as having undergone a thorough repair with the vessel being sheathed with copper over boards. As in the previous year, there was no change in

ownership or captaincy. Its trade routes were again given as Dublin to Oporto and London to Brazil.

This latter trade route suggests that it was part of the Slave Trade Triangle. The transatlantic slave trade took place between the continents of Europe, Africa and America from 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It was so-called as it comprised three different voyages which formed a triangular trade pattern.

Firstly from Europe to Africa, European slave-traders, including the British, bought enslaved Africans, which they exchanged for goods. These goods, such as cloth, guns, tools and alcohol, were shipped from European ports including London, Bristol and Liverpool.

The second leg of the slave trade was called the Middle Passage and involved the shipment of slaves from Africa to the Americas. Those who survived the brutal journey were sold as slaves to work on plantations.

The third part of the triangle involved the return from the Americas to Europe of plantation goods. These products included coffee, tobacco, rice and later cotton, which were brought to European ports, including Liverpool.

The abolition of the British slave trade took place in February 1807, two years before the loss of the Lady Nelson. However, the slave trade continued for some years afterwards. It was finally abolished throughout the British Empire by an act of Parliament in 1833. At its peak, in 1799, it is estimated that ships from Liverpool carried over 45,000 slaves from Africa to the Americas.

While researching family history some twenty years ago, the writer was shown a small table which family tradition claimed came from a ship wreck. Further enquiries in other family branch lines in the same North Kildare area revealed an inscription written on the flyleaf of an old book. It read:

He was lost 14 Oct 1812

Bernard Wade Robinson  
October 14<sup>th</sup> 1841 being  
29 years after the loss  
Of the Lady Nelson and  
His crew, which virry great loss  
Happened on that day

Bernard W Robinson  
His namesake died on 16<sup>th</sup> May 1875  
May the Lord have Mercy on their Souls



Bernard Wade Robinson (1818 – 1875)  
*"May the Lord have Mercy on Their Souls"*

The first line of entry was correct regarding the day and month, but wrong by three years (1809 instead of 1812) regarding the year of the tragedy.

The first two parts of the inscription were written by Bernard Wade Robinson (1818 – 1875) who was the nephew of Bernard Wade, Captain of the Lady Nelson. Bernard Wade's sister, Johanna (1772 – 1863), married Garret Robinson (1773 – 1849) of Kilreany, Co. Kildare. Garret was an emerging middleman/grazier who traded his farm produce in Dublin and possibly beyond. I surmise he met Bernard Wade and engaged in business with him regarding the sale of alcoholic beverages. Subsequently, Garret married Johanna Wade and their son Bernard wrote the above inscription which showed the impact of the shipwreck on the family.

The unpublished diaries of Garret Robinson record the sale of alcohol – a curious venture for a Co. Kildare farmer.

<p>In 1800</p> <p>Mahon Dr.</p> <p>5 dozen bottles of Perry, £2 - 10 - 0</p> <p>Carriage 26 dozen bottles, 8 - 3</p> <p>5 dozen 8 bottles 14 - 5</p> <p>1qr Cask sherry 17 - 0 - 0</p> <p>Carriage ditto 1 - 1</p> <p>To cellaring and making up <u>0 - 6 ½</u></p> <p>20 - 13 - 5 ½</p>	<p>1800 Contra</p> <p>Oct 24</p> <p>By cash for 1qr cask sherry</p> <p>do £17 - 0 - 0</p> <p>do By carriage 26 dozen</p> <p>8 . 8 bottles <u>£ 3 - 5 - 2 ½</u></p> <p>£20 - 13 - 5 ½</p>
<p>5 June 1800</p> <p>Mountain Wine Adventure Cr. £9 - 0 - 0</p> <p>January 19<sup>th</sup> Denis Doyle Dr.</p> <p>To 1qr Cask Mountain</p> <p>July 3<sup>rd</sup> Joseph Smith Dr.</p> <p>To 1qr Cask Mountain £9 - 5 - 0</p> <p>June 21<sup>st</sup> Garret Reynolds Dr. £9 - 5 - 0</p> <p>To 1qr Cask Mountain £9 - 10 - 0</p> <p>July 9<sup>th</sup> This register Dr. £9 - 10 - 0</p> <p>To 1qr cask Mount. £9 - 2 - 0</p> <p>Thomas Malone Dr.</p> <p>To 1qr Cask Mountain <u>£ 9 - 2 - 2</u></p> <p>£45 - 19 - 2</p>	<p>Also 1802 William Hickey</p> <p>To carriage 2 pipes Port</p> <p>To 1 pipe Port</p> <p>1 h. head Port £31</p> <hr/> <p>1801</p> <p>May 14<sup>th</sup> By 2 pipes Port £111 - 14 - 0</p> <p>Humphrey McAusland</p> <p>To 1 pipe Port £62 - 0 - 0</p> <p>To Carriage and making up</p> <p>1801 C. Morgan Watchmaker Dr.</p> <p>To 3 dozen port £ 3 - 18 - 0</p> <p>To 3 dozen bottles 6 - 6</p> <p>Carriage 1 - 6</p> <p style="text-align: center;">&gt;</p>
<p>1803 Ralph Shaw Dr.</p> <p>To bill at 2 months 30 - 3 - 4</p> <p style="text-align: center;">/</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Settled</p> <p>1800 Alexander Robinson Dr.</p> <p>January 29<sup>th</sup> To cash for 2 dozen Clarett 4 - 11 - 0</p> <p>To cash for 1 Clarett in bottle 34 - 2 - 6</p> <p>To cash for 2 dozen Lisbon 3 - 8 - 5</p>	<p>1803 Anderson Capel St.</p> <p>December 3<sup>rd</sup> To ½ dozen port 0 - 16 - 0</p> <p>To 2 bottles 1 - 3</p> <p>To 3 dozen Port 4 - 16 - 0</p> <p>To 3 dozen bottle 0 - 7 - 6</p>

Watson's Almanac lists Alexander Robinson as a merchant at 3 Fleet St. Dublin in 1789. Also, Ralph Shaw is listed as a merchant at 9 White's Lane (now George's Lane) in 1800. These are probably the same people referred to in Garret Robinson's diaries.

Garret Robinson descended from Daniel McRobin (1690 – 1777) and his wife (née) Catherine Shaw (1696 – 1764), his grandparents and James McRobin (1734 – 1809) and his wife Ann (née) Shough (Shaw) (1744 – 1786), his parents. The family surname changed from McRobin to Robinson circa 1786. Members of this family also lived in Dublin at this time. Daniel McRobin/Robinson was a cooper and lived at 18a Thomas St. in 1789. Another possible kinsman was Daniel McRobin, who had a porter and chop-house on the corner of Dame St. and George's Lane (now George's St.) in 1778. It is noted that both were involved in the alcohol beverage industry.

Other possible maritime family connections were: in 1789 Robinson and Shaw ships brokers, 4 Bagnio Slip, Dublin; in 1772 Eleanor and James Robinson, ships brokers, 4 Bagnio Slip, Dublin and in 1782, James Robinson, ship broker, 2 Bagnio Slip. As Garret Robinson's mother and grandmother were both named Shaw, it is possible that these families were connected. The Lady Nelson's owner in 1809 was also named Shaw. The population of Dublin at this time was only about 180,000, making the probability of kinship of people of the same name far more likely.

I speculate that at some point in his business venture, Garret Robinson became involved in business with Bernard Wade, the captain of the Lady Nelson, and married his sister Johanna.

The former retailed the product (wine etc.) while the latter or his agent imported the goods. Prior to his association with the Lady Nelson, Bernard Wade was captain of a vessel named "Mary", 165 tonnes, for the years 1804/1805. This ship was owned by Shaw & Co. (the same owners of the Lady Nelson) and it plied between Dublin and Oporto. Unfortunately, Lloyd's Registers for 1802 and 1803 are missing. For 1801, the Mary's captain was given as Scallan and it journeyed between Liverpool and Dublin. In 1799 its captaincy changed from Williams to Scallan with all other details unchanged.

The shipwreck of the Lady Nelson off the Kerry coast with a cargo of wine and fruit begs the question, was business (legal or otherwise) being conducted with Maurice 'Hunting Cap' O'Connell (1728 – 1825)? Maurice was the uncle of the Irish patriot, Daniel O'Connell (1775 – 1847), who was also known as the Liberator, due to his achievement of Catholic Emancipation in Ireland in 1829. Maurice controlled vast estates in Co. Kerry and had grown rich from smuggling. He amassed great fortune and achieved power and influence through his business activities. When charged with smuggling by Revenue Officer Whitwell Butler in 1782, O'Connell was able to ensure that the case was tried in Kerry. Not surprisingly, he was acquitted by a jury most probably composed of his own customers and associates. In a land lease to one of his tenants in 1793, Maurice O'Connell included the provision that "½ of all wrecks, lagans and salvages on said lands (in this case Ballinskelligs) to go to Thomas Segerson (his agent) provided the latter or his reps. assist in procuring and performing salvage". In 1805, regarding correspondence with his uncle and benefactor, Daniel O'Connell noted, "A windfall of 40 barrels of brandy washed up from a wreck, on which the 'old gentleman' cleared £1,000...but not a

word about that". Daniel O'Connell inherited these estates on the death of his uncle in 1825.

The term 'pipe' refers to a worm-shaped volume of 92 gallons. It was designed to suit transportation of wine on the River Douro to Oporto from inland Portugal. The cargo of the ill-fated Lady Nelson consisted of 450 pipes of wine. Garret Robinson's diaries refer to his sale of similar wine volumes. The diaries also contain a page reserved for family birth and death details. This was filled in by succeeding generations of the family. A single-line entry recorded the tragedy: 'Bernard Wade and his wife died 14<sup>th</sup> Oct 1809'.

There was no further alcohol sales recorded in the diaries after this date. Garret's terse single-line entry recorded the end of a venture which must have caused great dismay, not to mention economic setback.

Garret Robinson became a substantial farmer in Co. Kildare and his will, made in 1849, contains the following, "My will and desire is that my said wife (Johanna) shall continue to reside in my dwelling house during her life with the same authority and command that she had during my life".

This suggests that Johanna brought a substantial dowry to her marriage with Garret.

The loss of not alone her brother (Bernard), but also his wife and child, must have affected her and the family greatly. The Christian name Bernard subsequently became common in many branches of the Robinson family and testifies to the strong family resonance of the name.

Some thirty years after the loss of the Lady Nelson, Lady Chatterton recalled the saga as told by the survivors:

In the winter of 18-- [sic] the Lady Nelson from Oporto to London (Liverpool?) laden with wine and fruit, struck on the large Skelligs and went to pieces. The mate had warned the captain during the evening of his proximity to this dangerous rock; but the captain, who was drunken and jealous, (his wife having seconded the representations of the mate), refused to put the vessel about and in a couple of hours she struck.

The mate and three hands saved themselves upon a part of the wreck, which was drifting about for three days, during which time they subsisted on the oranges and other fruit which, when the ships went to pieces, covered the sea around them. The mate, who was an excellent swimmer, procured these oranges by plunging off the spar and bringing them to his companions. On the third day, one man became delirious, saying that he should go ashore to dine. He threw himself off the spar and sank.

Shortly afterwards, the survivors were picked up by a fishing boat belonging to Dingle, which had come out looking for a wreck. The crew consisted of a father and his four sons, and had two pipes of wine in tow when they perceived the sufferers, finding their progress impeded by the casks and that

the tide was sweeping the seamen into the breakers, where they must have been dashed to pieces, the old man nobly cut the tow line, abandoning what must have been a fortune to his family, and by great exertion picked the men up just when the delay of a second would have caused their destruction.

The Lady Nelson port is still famous in Kerry and a glass of it is sometimes offered as a 'bon bouche'.

It is no wonder that the toast to the Lady Nelson was drunk after the tragedy, as only twelve pipes out of four hundred and fifty were recovered by customs.

This vivid story rivals anything written by Robert Louis Stevenson. All the ingredients for high drama are present: sex; alcohol; jealousy; anger; dangerous seas; loss of cargo, ship and life and not least, the saving of the survivors who were nobly rescued at the expense of the salvage, thus allowing this tale to be told.

Garret and Johanna Robinson are buried in Carrig cemetery near Edenderry, Co. Offaly with their son Bernard, who wrote the book inscription recalling the tragedy. The headstone inscription reads:

Sacred  
To the memory of  
Garret Robinson Esq.  
Of  
Kilreany  
Who departed this life the 16<sup>th</sup> day of August  
1849 aged 76 years  
Also of his beloved wife  
Johanna Robinson  
Who departed this life on the 12<sup>th</sup> day of April  
1863 aged 91 years  
Also Bernard Wade Robinson  
Who Departed this life on the 16<sup>th</sup> day of May  
1875 aged 55 years

It is noted that the name Wade was incorporated into the family and it continues to this day in this branch of the Robinsons. A query to the Guildhall Library London regarding the Lady Nelson brought the response that the vessel was built in New York in 1799. The owner was Hunt and her usual voyage was between London and Brazil.

Family belief (so far unsubstantiated) is that Bernard Wade and his sister Johanna came from Liverpool. Garret Robinson's diaries contain an inscription circa 1803 which supports this belief:

For Capt. Bernard Wade  
To the care of Mssrs Jrdan (Jordan) of Liverpool  
White House Merchant

The inscription is surrounded by a mass of financial calculations. Another diary entry dated September 1806 reads, "Cash lent Mrs. Eleanor Wade paid £6 – 16 – 6".

Could this have been the wife of Bernard Wade and sister in law of Garret Robinson?

The fate of being shipwrecked almost befell Garret Robinson's brother, Father John Robinson (1767 – 1822). Father John attended the Irish College Salamanca as a seminarian. His boat journey to Bilbao, en route to Salamanca, almost resulted in tragedy, as this letter to his father in 1787 details:

I am shure there was no one breathing has ever been attended with worse luck at sea than I. thanks be to God I am yet living which certainly is a great miracle for we have been three times cast on shore by the impetuous tempests that continually prevail. The wind was so favourable at the first going off In six days after we left London we got within fifteen leagues of Bilbao but a most sudden and terrible hurricane arising we were driven in less than twenty hours to Torbay a bay of the English Channel on the coast of Devonshire where we continued about two days when a favourable breese arising we put to sea again but with no better luck than before for we no longer got Clear of the rocks which are very numerous there than a tempest arising which drove us immediately back to Ireland but to what part of I certainly cannot tell for neither the Captain nor the pilot themselves know where we were only just to guess, the wind changing we were drove to France. So that now I may say I have been in England, Ireland, Isle of Man, and france and the much wished for Spain. Now I am safely arrived In Bilbao thanks be to God in good health though in a most feeble weak and emaciated condition but I hope with God's assistance to be as strong as ever shortly for I have recovered vastly since I came onto the shore.

Father John Robinson was twenty years of age when this intrepid sea journey occurred, the same age as Ensign John Ashburnham who died on the Lady Nelson. The perilous nature of seafaring is evidenced by Edward Burke's assertion that there were fifteen thousand shipwrecks estimated to have occurred off the Irish coast between 932 and 1997. Captain Bligh of 'Bounty' fame who surveyed Dublin Bay in 1800 acknowledged that terrible weather conditions contributed to that total. He also blamed the inexperience of masters and crews in many merchant ships as well as the meanness of many ship's owners. The latter refused to pay for sufficient cable for ships anchors. He added that chain link cables would often snap due to inferior metal used in their construction.

In the case of the Lady Nelson, if Lady Chatterton is to be believed, it was marital infidelity which sealed the fate of the vessel, resulting in the loss of its cargo, including 41,400 gallons of wine. It is curious that Captain Wade had his wife and child on board the ship on this fateful business voyage. Perhaps it is fair to say that, if they had not been on board, the disaster would not have happened. Garret Robinson's diary for 1801 valued the pipe of wine at £62. This indicates that the wine cargo of the Lady Nelson was worth about £28,000. This equates to a wine cargo value of about £2.25 million in today's money. Tragically, 25 lives were lost in the disaster.

The writer is a great-great-great grandnephew of Bernard Wade. Most families have Christian names which recur in successive generations. He chose the name Bernard as his confirmation name without knowing its significance.

He does now.

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