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‘Voyage of Mercy’ Review: America’s Great Gift to Ireland

In 1847 Congress ordered that the U.S. warship *Jamestown* be outfitted to bring much-needed emergency aid from Boston to Ireland at the height of the island’s potato famine.

The *USS Jamestown* in Cork Harbor on April 12, 1847.

PHOTO: RODNEY
CHARMAN/KNIGHTS OF
COLUMBUS MUSEUM

By *Terry Golway*
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Americans have grown accustomed to seeing their fellow citizens providing food, medicine and logistical assistance

at disaster sites around the globe. It’s not by any means an exceptionally American tradition, but a tradition it surely is.

Some might argue that it began a century ago, when a brilliant engineer named Herbert Hoover organized humanitarian aid to feed millions of starving, homeless Europeans during and after World War I. But according to Stephen Puleo, the nation’s



impulse to aid the afflicted beyond its borders can be traced to the journey of a warship bound from Boston to Ireland at the height of the island's potato famine. Its mission was not conquest but relief, for in its hold were 8,000 barrels of food donated by the young republic 3,000 miles away from Ireland's misery.

VOYAGE OF MERCY

By Stephen Puleo

St. Martin's, 313 pages, \$28.99

The potato failures in Ireland in the late 1840s and early 1850s are well-known and little understood, at least on this side of the Atlantic. In "Voyage of Mercy," Mr. Puleo joins a long list of historians and writers who have sought to explain why and how so many Irish people died when the potato failed. Easy to cultivate and filled with nutrition, the potato was their staple crop, but when it turned black and putrid, they had nowhere to turn. There was plenty of food in Ireland, but much of it was designated for export, and, as Mr. Puleo notes, Victorian policy makers in London were not about to question the wisdom of laissez-faire economics. So Irish people died of disease and starvation while food was loaded aboard ships bound for other markets.

As Americans learned of the horrors in Ireland, they responded on a scale that would become familiar in the decades to come. President James K. Polk, the legendary orator Daniel Webster, and the great compromiser Henry Clay delivered impassioned appeals for action on behalf of the Irish. "It is not fervid eloquence, nor gilded words, that Ireland needs—but substantial food," Clay said.

Shortly thereafter, the U.S.S. Jamestown was pulled from active duty in order to transport food and clothing to Ireland. An armada of relief followed in its wake, becoming "the single greatest philanthropic effort by one nation on behalf of another," in Mr. Puleo's words.

There is no shortage of scholarship on the subject of Ireland's suffering from roughly 1845 to 1851. Recent books by Christine Kinealy, John Kelly and Enda Delaney, among others, have broadened our understanding of what happened in Ireland more than 150 years ago and why the failure of a single crop led to death and exile on a gigantic scale, transforming not only Ireland but the U.S. as well. **But Mr. Puleo has found a new way to tell the story with this well-researched and splendidly written chronicle of the Jamestown, its captain, and an Irish priest who ministered to the starving in Cork city.**

Robert Bennet Forbes had no family connection to Ireland, but after hearing of the distress in Ireland during a mass meeting in Boston in 1847, he offered a daring proposal: The U.S. should make a warship available to bring aid to Ireland as quickly as possible, and he—a veteran sea captain—would command it. It took an act of Congress to achieve, but it was done, thanks in large part to the advocacy of Sen. John Crittenden of Kentucky.

The Jamestown was retrofitted for its new mission and set sail for County Cork in March 1847. Waiting there was the Rev. Theobald Mathew, renowned then and now as Ireland's apostle of temperance. The priest put aside his crusade against drink to minister to the starving and the dying as they poured into Cork city in search of something to eat. He saw horrors similar to those that a British administrator witnessed when he stumbled upon, as he put it, "six famished and ghastly skeletons, to all appearances dead . . . huddled in a corner on some filthy straw." They were not dead but perhaps wished they were, for they were in the final throes of hunger-related disease.

The arrival of the Jamestown and the ensuing partnership between the American sea captain and the famous Irish priest is the dramatic high point of Mr. Puleo's book. But other narrative threads are equally vivid. As the Jamestown's cargo is unloaded, for instance, Mr. Puleo shifts to a scene that would not surprise even casual students of Irish history: There was a split among the Irish over whether the Jamestown's relief

should be distributed in rural areas throughout County Cork, one of the hardest-hit regions, or restricted to Cork city. Capt. Forbes was forced to intercede, and he decided that the supplies were intended for the whole county. Thus started another American tradition—mediating Ireland’s disputes—upheld, to take one prominent example, by former Maine Sen. George Mitchell, who helped broker Northern Ireland’s Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

Mr. Puleo correctly sees the voyage of the Jamestown as a seminal moment in the history of American-Irish relations. While British authorities worried that the starving Irish would become dependent on charity, Capt. Forbes and other Americans delivered relief, no questions asked. “An Irishman looks on America as the refuge of his race,” wrote novelist Thomas Colley Grattan, a Dubliner.

But it wasn’t quite so simple, as Mr. Puleo points out. American benevolence shriveled up when the starving Irish landed in New York, Boston and other U.S. cities. Few would have predicted that two of those wretched exiles would start a family in Boston that would one day produce a president and two U.S. senators. Yes, those Kennedys.

Mr. Puleo’s tale, despite the hardship to come, surely is a tribute to the better angels of America’s nature, and in that sense, it couldn’t be more timely.

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