

Pre-Famine Limerick: A Study in Contrasts

Pre-famine Limerick was a city of some 48,000 people according to the census of 1841, and was thus the fourth largest city in Ireland - Dublin, Belfast and Cork having larger populations. It was an important port whose evident prosperity created a very favourable impression on contemporaries, particularly those foreign visitors who sojourned in the city in the first few decades of the 19th century. It was a city that had expanded considerably in the late 18th century, particularly into the area of Newtown Pery. The commercial, merchant and professional classes who inhabited this area were the dominant social grouping in the city and their prosperity did much to contribute to the overall impression of wealth and animation so remarked on by those travellers who visited Limerick. However, there was a darker side to the social and economic life of the city as the division between rich and poor was a sharp one. A contemporary visitor, Inglis, noted: "I know of no town in Ireland in which so distinct a line is drawn between its good and bad quarters as in Limerick".⁽¹⁾ This article will explore some of the contrasting impressions Limerick created in the

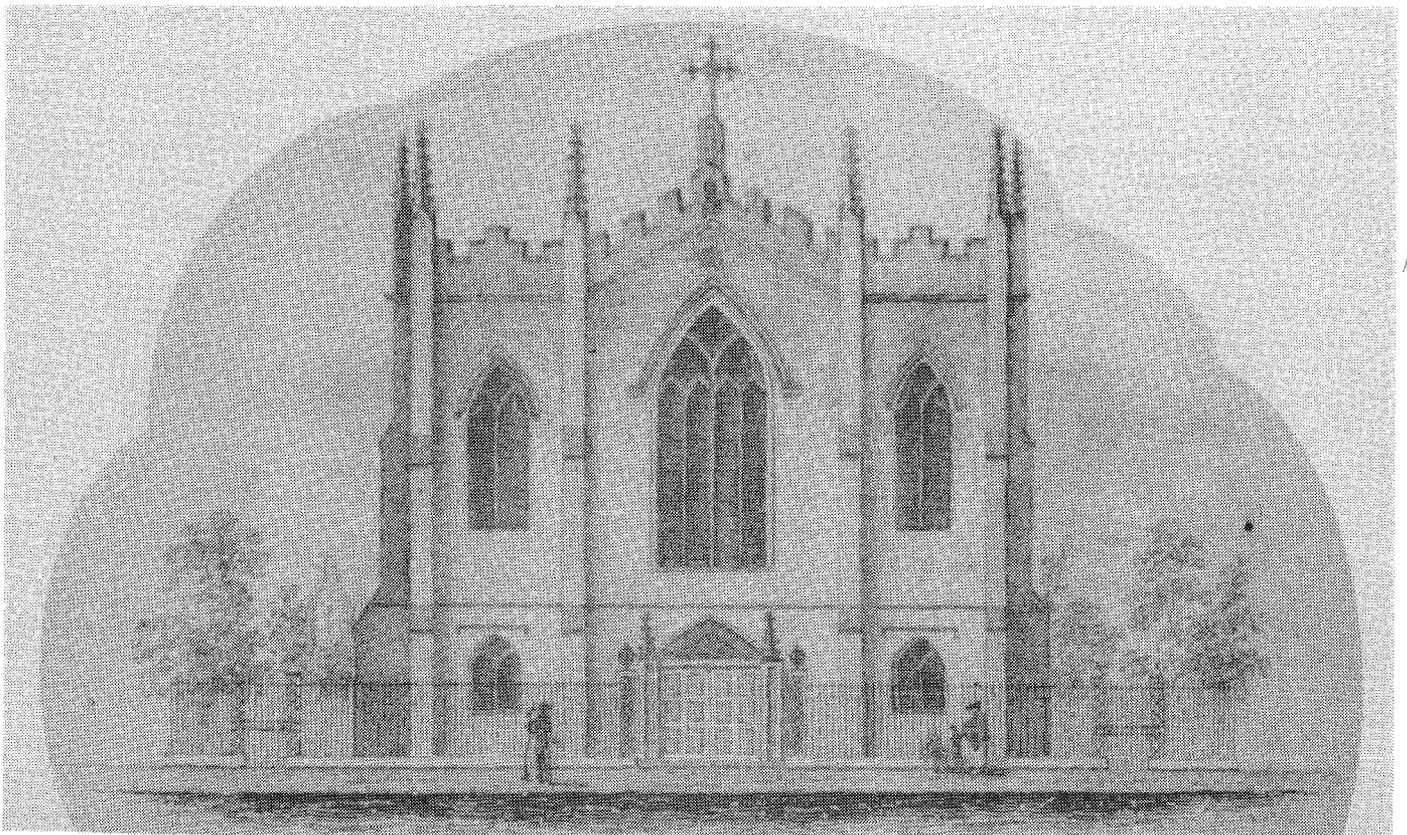
by Paula Coonerty

minds of its 19th century visitors, and seek to explain the existence of 'good and bad quarters' in the city.

Such contrasting wealth and poverty was not a problem peculiar to Limerick, of course; in early 19th century Ireland there were few towns which did not have a poor decayed sector where appalling living standards and poor housing reflected the presence of poverty and unemployment. In line with this, although Limerick was an important port with considerable trade in agricultural produce, it, too, had its sectors which experienced extreme poverty. Thus could Barrow, who visited Limerick in 1836, write that: "Nothing I had yet seen equalled the streets and the houses ... For their dirty, dingy, dilapidated condition, the people ... [were] ragged, half-naked and squalid in their appearance".⁽²⁾ The impression of squalor was reinforced in the public mind by the fact that it was concentrated in certain districts as Limerick was physically divided into three sectors, "each of which, both in moral and physical character, is as distinct from the others as if a continent lay between"⁽³⁾ as a

contemporary wrote. These sectors were the English Town, Irish Town and the aforementioned Newtown Pery. The English Town was the oldest part of the city and was once inhabited by the military officers, city officials and wealthy merchants, but by the first quarter of the nineteenth century it had been deserted by these people. Their huge and formerly elegant dwellings were by then affording "retreats for the poor and depraved".⁽⁴⁾ This pattern was one which Limerick shared with other cities at that time: elites tended to move on to more salubrious neighbourhoods, leaving their former residences for the poorer classes to inhabit. The second part of the city, the Irish Town, was also very old, but its streets were wider and its houses more modern than those in the English Town. According to one traveller, this area was known for its constant bustle; for in its environs was "transacted the business of the lower classes".⁽⁵⁾ However, most of the commercial and economic life of the city was centred on Newtown Pery.

The modern Newtown Pery had been developed since the beginning of the century; what had been green fields and marches had been converted into elegant and well-laid out streets. Its appearance



St. Saviour's Church, Glentworth Street, built in 1816.



Old Thomond Bridge.

was greeted with much approbation by contemporaries: "the new town of Limerick is unquestionably superior to anything out of Dublin ... [its] principal street straight, regular, and modern looking; and contains an abundance of good private houses and of excellent shops".⁽⁶⁾ It contained the commercial heart of the city: the quays, the storehouses, the great shops and the houses of the wealthy commercial and professional classes. Samuel Lewis, writing in the 1830s, informed his readers that "Patrick Street, George St. and the Crescent (together forming the main thoroughfare) form a continuous line of elegant houses, extending about a mile".⁽⁷⁾ Doubtless, it was this vista that caused another visitor, Foster, to remark that Limerick was a "large, well-built and evidently thriving town".⁽⁸⁾

Others who spent time in the city were not so impressed. W.M. Thackeray turned his caustic tongue on the thoroughfare so admired by Lewis, and wrote that:

even this mile long street does not, in a few minutes, appear to be so wealthy and prosperous as it shows at first glance: for of the population that throng the streets, two-fifths are barefooted women, and two-fifths more ragged men: and the most part of the shops which have a grand show with them, appear, when looked into, to be no better than they should be, being empty makeshift looking places, with their best goods outside.⁽⁹⁾

Clearly then, there was a contrast in the levels of prosperity which Limerick experienced in the years before the Great Famine, a disjunction which those viewing

the city recognised. It would therefore be appropriate to analyse the state of Limerick's economy in the first four decades of the 19th century in order to explain this phenomenon.

Limerick was economically dependant, for the most part, on its agricultural trade; trade based on the produce of its agricultural hinterland. In this, it shared the experience of many Irish urban centres at the time whose economies depended on their roles as market towns rather than industrial centres. In fact, Belfast was the only Irish city to have a thriving industrial base, the other large cities, such as Cork, Limerick and indeed Dublin, relied on the activities of their ports, in the main, for their prosperity. Because of that reliance, their economies came under increasing pressure as the century progressed - Limerick proving no exception to this trend. Such potential problems lay in the future, however, evidenced by a German visitor, Kohl, remarking in 1844 that the "trade of Limerick [had] increased astonishingly during the last twenty years".⁽¹⁰⁾ Agricultural produce from the counties of Kerry, Tipperary, Clare and Limerick itself passed through the port on its way (in the main) to the cities of London, Liverpool, Bristol and Glasgow. Both the volume and value of this trade were considerable. By 1841, it was estimated that some eighty thousand tons of provisions were being shipped annually from Limerick, wheat, flour, butter, pork and bacon being the main exports. Other meat exports included beef, hams and tongues, while cereals such as barley, oats and oatmeal were also shipped out. In addition, agricultural products such as lard, butter

and eggs, raw materials for the textile industry such as flax, linen and wool, and miscellaneous items such as feathers and salmon all comprised the export trade of Limerick. The value of such trade in 1835 was estimated to be worth over £800,000. In that same year, the cost of Limerick's imports was just over £325,000: the port clearly experienced a healthy balance of payments. Items imported included timber, deals, tar, pitch, staves, iron, hoops, bark and coals. Food provisions such as tea, sugar, coffee, salt and wine were also imported, as were sundry items like tallow, hemp and flax seeds. Significantly, a contemporary account of the trade of Limerick port also listed 'other British manufactured articles' among the imports⁽¹¹⁾ which indicates the important hold which British manufactures had on the Irish economy in general, and on the Limerick one in particular. The effect of this on Limerick in relation to employment will be discussed below.

As a result of this considerable volume of trade, in 1841 there were thirteen regular traders operating to and from London and five to and from Liverpool. Steam vessels also linked Limerick with Kilrush and Shannon Harbour and, in the other direction, with Killaloe and Athlone. There was even an extensive ship building establishment, owned by John Russell Esq. and Sons. The quays of Limerick were places whose atmosphere may be sampled by the following contemporary account:

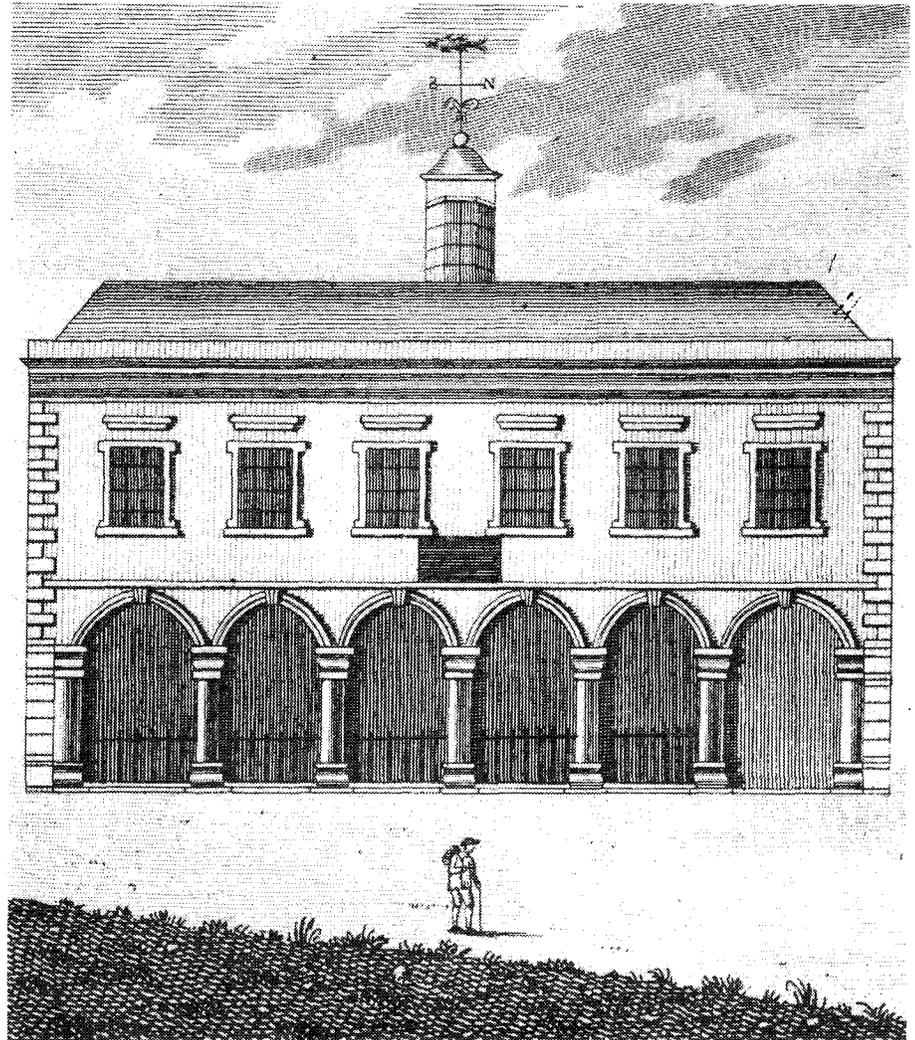
[I saw] a spacious quay with marketers bringing country produce for sale to the boats moored alongside in the rude carts of the country; with a square wattling on

the top, in which lay screaming pigs, and fowls, turf, butter, and vegetables ... The shops appeared good and well-plenished, and the street was all alive with bustle and passers to and fro.⁽¹²⁾

Trading was not confined to the quays, of course. Hay and straw markets were held every Wednesday and Saturday in the city, and there was a large wheat market and a daily butter market as well. Both the English Town and the Irish Town had their own potato markets, where, as Lewis recorded, "vast quantities [were] daily sold".⁽¹³⁾ This is hardly surprising as the potato formed the staple element in the diet of a large proportion of the Irish population in the pre-famine period; the poorer classes of the urban as well as the rural districts depending on it as their primary source of sustenance. Two meat markets and four annual fairs completed the picture of this aspect of Limerick's commercial life. In a city so heavily dependant upon trade, it is obvious that provision merchants would be to the fore in commercial activities. The Halls, an English couple who came to Limerick at this time, commended the merchants of the city as 'active and enterprising' and cited in particular John Norris Russell, the milling magnate. Despite the fact that, in 1836, this local entrepreneur sustained serious losses in a large fire which destroyed most of his premises, the Halls inform us that by 1846 he had a turnover of some £200,000 per annum and a workforce of *circa* 250 men in his various businesses. Moreover, he traded "either directly or indirectly with nearly every part of the world".⁽¹⁴⁾

John Norris Russell is only one example of the better-off commercial classes who inhabited the world of Newtown Pery with its "good private houses and excellent shops",⁽¹⁵⁾ a world where there were "numerous individuals enjoying an income of nearly a thousand pounds a year; and ... [an] abundance of genteel equipages, good houses, and handsome women" as Ritchie phrased it.⁽¹⁶⁾ However, as evidence of the distinction already drawn between rich and poor in Limerick, there was another side to commercial life, for even as Thackeray found fault with the principal street, he noted that "after you get out of the main street, the handsome part of the town is at an end, and you suddenly find yourself in ... a labyrinth of busy swarming poverty and squalid commerce". Business transactions in these circumstances could consist of a poor, dirty woman selling a sack of meal to "people poorer and dirtier than herself".⁽¹⁷⁾ Clearly, the apparent prosperity does not tell the whole story, as we shall see.

Commerce alone was not the only source of income generation in Limerick, of course. There was a small and narrow industrial base, though in common with much of the country, in the decades before the famine it was subject to much decay. From the 1820s onwards, there was widespread distress and unemployment in



The Exchange, Nicholas Street.

Limerick as industries based on small scale handicraft gradually gave way before cheaper mass-produced articles, most of them imported from Britain, as we noted earlier. This was a phenomenon appreciated by contemporaries. William Roche, M.P. for Limerick, in his submission to the Poor Inquiry of 1835, for instance, stated that he had to "represent an almost unmitigated mass of poverty and destitution arising from the want of steady employment, of adequate remunerations when employed, and the almost total absence of trade or manufactures, except those indispensable even to the poorest community".⁽¹⁸⁾ Of those industries which were in existence, bacon-curing, flour-milling, brewing and distilling were the main ones. Let us consider these briefly.

A very extensive trade in bacon and hams was conducted in Limerick, the first Limerick hams having been cured in the 1820s by the firms of Russell and Matterson. Although as the century progressed, these hams and bacons were to lose their ascendancy on the British market to superior quality Danish and Dutch products, in the pre-famine years the curing of pigmeat was a source of considerable employment in Limerick. This is underlined by the evidence of another respondent to the 1835 Poor Inquiry who stated that none of the

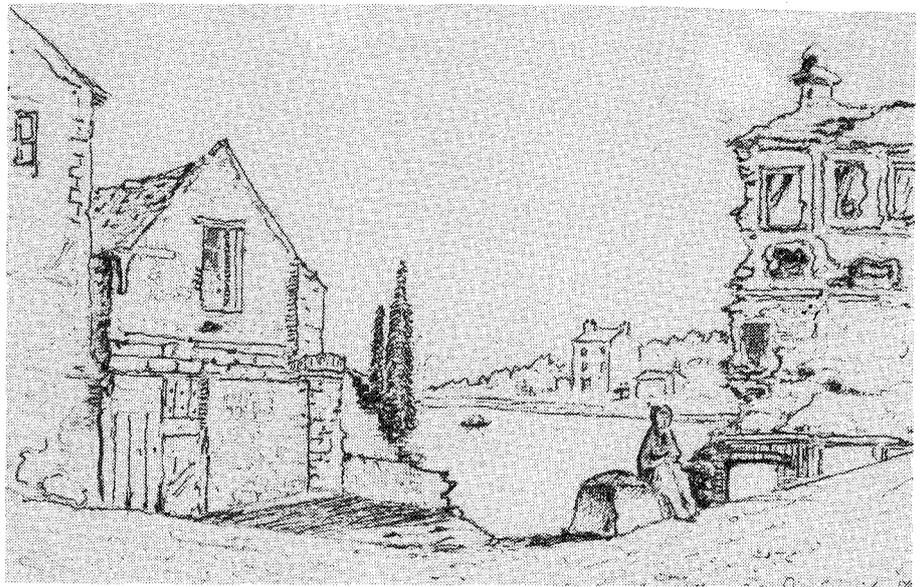
manufactures in his parish "except the bacon business" were prosperous.⁽¹⁹⁾ The name of Russell constantly crops up in the flour milling industry; the Russell mills (among others) were established in the liberties, where some 50,000 barrels of flour were produced annually. Indeed, the Halls noted that the first flour machines used in Ireland for separating bran from flour were utilised in the Lock Mills of Limerick.⁽²⁰⁾ Seven breweries each produced 5,000 barrels of porter, ale and beer annually. (This was another industry that gradually declined as the century progressed: by 1880, all the breweries had closed as it was cheaper to 'import' the alcohol from Dublin by canal, rather than brew it locally.⁽²¹⁾ Of the distilleries in existence before the famine, Messrs. Stein, Brown and Co., established in 1805 in Thomondgate, was the largest, producing 455,000 gallons of whiskey annually. This seemed to find a ready local market, as there were 350 spirit shops (pubs) in Limerick in the 1830s!

Another industry which was having some success in Limerick was lace-manufacturing. One of the most important names associated with this activity was that of Lloyd, an Englishman, who in 1837 employed 250 young females for this purpose. By 1846, he was able to employ 400, thus indicating growth in this industry. It is interesting to note that lace

manufacturing was introduced into Limerick by another Englishman, Walker, who brought 22 workers from Nottingham to begin a factory in 1829. Another innovative Scottish entrepreneur by the name of Buchanan attempted to establish a cotton industry in Limerick in 1836. He was attracted to the location by the cheap labour available there. His entire business was conducted on a handloom basis and thus the only way it could compete with British machine-made cloth was by means of low wages, combined with long working hours.⁽²²⁾ He too was forced to bring workers from Scotland to Limerick to teach the locals the trade. Despite such individual efforts, cotton, linen and other textile industries made little progress, as there was little hope of matching British competition. The decline in textile manufacture in the city was such that even the famous Limerick gloves, (so fine and delicate that a pair of them would fit into a walnut shell) were no longer made in the city.

Although there were many other small-scale industrial enterprises in Limerick at that time, such as cooperages, iron foundries, tanyards etc., perhaps rather than listing them, a more useful way of gaining an insight into the socio-economic conditions of pre-famine Limerick is to consider the occupations of the inhabitants of the city (particularly the working classes) as revealed by the 1841 census. In that way, it will be possible to discover the nature of the employment available and hence to understand the poverty, the existence of which contemporary visitors were so quick to highlight.

In the census of 1841, of the possible population aged fifteen years or more, about half are listed as having occupations. The largest category of occupations was the unclassified one, possibly indicating that those belonging to this category existed on casual or transitory work opportunities, especially the type of impermanent and unskilled employment which a port provided. Of the specified categories, clothing was by far



Drawing of the Treaty Stone, 8 April, 1842.

the largest, even though, as we have noted above, the textile industry was far from healthy. This underlines the fact that the industrial base of Limerick was quite weak.

It is also significant to note that women outnumbered men in the textile category almost two to one. This is not particularly surprising, as such industries at that time, operating as they did within the tight margins imposed by the competition from British manufactures, employed the cheapest possible source of labour, namely women, and especially young girls. Mr. Lloyd, the entrepreneur encountered earlier, employed mainly young females in his lace manufacturing business. Female workers were paid less than their male counterparts, even for comparable work, a fact which potential employers exploited. Another major source of employment for women in Limerick, according to the census, was domestic service. This again was very typical of the period, because the existing commercial and industrial employment opportunities for women were very

limited, domestic service was the only other option for many women who sought opportunities for earned income. That a city the size of Limerick should have a substantial servant population to service the needs of the wealthy commercial and professional classes follows the national trend. Many of these women would have migrated from the surrounding rural hinterland in order to take full advantage of the opportunities the city provided. Other women managed to earn a living as huxters and various types of dealers. Their standard of living would have varied enormously: some would have managed a relatively comfortable lifestyle, particularly if the money they earned was a contribution to the overall family income. For those completely dependant on their earnings to support themselves and their families, life could be very difficult. A household where the woman was the sole breadwinner was in a much more precarious position than one where that role was performed by a male. In such circumstances, child labour was common, and in Limerick in the years before the famine those children who worked were usually employed as domestic servants or as cheap labour in the clothing industry. Again, Limerick followed the national pattern in this regard.

What the census does not reveal, of course, is the number of women who chose a much less respectable way of earning a living in the pre-famine period, as these particular statistics are silent with respect to the women who worked as, for example, prostitutes in order to survive and support their families. For many women this was a strategic choice forced upon them. Having considered the options available to them (or not available as the case may have been), some women chose this only tenable possibility for income generation.

Finding work was a difficult prospect, for men as well as for women. A clerical respondent to the Poor Inquiry of 1835 told that body that only a "small proportion (of the population) actually get



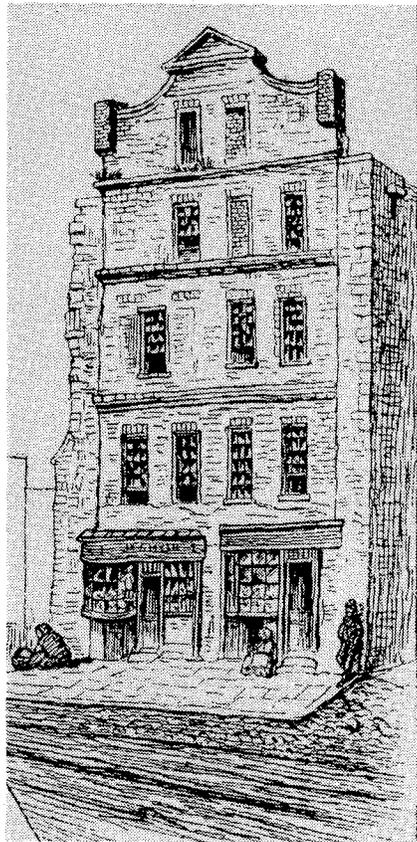
Trinity Church, Catherine Street, built in 1813.

work".⁽²³⁾ For that proportion, occupations were mostly precarious and casual, and to be found, in the main, in the corn and bacon stores, in the vessels in port and attendance on them, in breweries and distilleries and on building sites. The work was often seasonal (for example, corn and provision stores stopped work in the summer, and, in the inter, building work often ceased), therefore great misery occurred in the off-seasons, when the workers were unemployed.

As suggested above, many of the trades and occupations which were traditional sources of employment were on the decline. The *Limerick Reporter* of 7 May, 1841, listed a considerable number of distressed operatives such as slaters, millwrights, masons, stonecutters, smiths, tailors, ropemakers, broguemakers, painters, tallow-chandlers and cabinet-makers. Also mentioned were sawyers, carpenters, coachmakers, sailors, coopers, shoemakers and weavers. This latter group, in particular, were singled out as being in a very bad situation, due to the decline of the textile industry. Enterprises launched in that industry tended to employ unskilled females, as we have seen, thus making the skills of the (mainly) male weavers redundant. For those still working, life was very difficult. A weaver and boy assistant working for sixteen hours a day could earn as little as five shillings or less per week. Of the sixty weavers in the parish of St. Nicholas and St. Mary in the 1830s, only twenty were constantly employed and such people literally worked for a pittance. As one contemporary put it:

If I were not an eyewitness to the fact, I could never be persuaded that human nature would encounter or could endure, for any reward, however great, what I know multitudes of the poor to undergo with patient perseverance for what is not sufficient, after all, to clothe and feed themselves and their families.⁽²⁵⁾

If such wretchedness was the lot of those in poor employment, then the condition of the unemployed could only be described as utterly appalling. In the early 1840s, the Corporation of Limerick in a petition to the parliament at Westminster stated that it had been "the opinion of all travellers from Inglis to Kohl, that there was more wretchedness among the poor of Limerick than among those of any other town of equal population in Ireland" and that this arose from the "lack of regular employment".⁽²⁶⁾ Even the commissioners who conducted the nationwide Poor Inquiry of 1835 were forced to affirm, with regard to Limerick, that they were "unequal to the task of portraying what [the] appalling tour [of Limerick] exhibited of the misery of [their] fellow-beings". The same commissioners estimated that some 20% of the population of Limerick (that amounted to some 9,500 people) lived in pauperism. As one respondent said: "All is dreary and desolate - all is privation and destitution".



A Dutch-gabled house in the English Town.

When contemporaries used the word 'destitution' they meant an abject condition: "By destitution I mean that they [the poor] don't know where they will get their breakfast or their dinner", or again: "they are fed by accident, depending upon chance for their subsistence".⁽²⁷⁾ Their staple food, when they could afford to buy it, was the potato; often dry, sometimes with water or milk. During the month of May, the poor sometimes managed to supplement their daily diet with eel fry fished from the river Shannon,⁽²⁸⁾ and sometimes, through necessity, they resorted to the consumption of food which was injurious to health, for example, bad potatoes and fish, sour milk and offal.⁽²⁹⁾ For many there was no choice of course: it was either eat what was available and affordable, or starve.

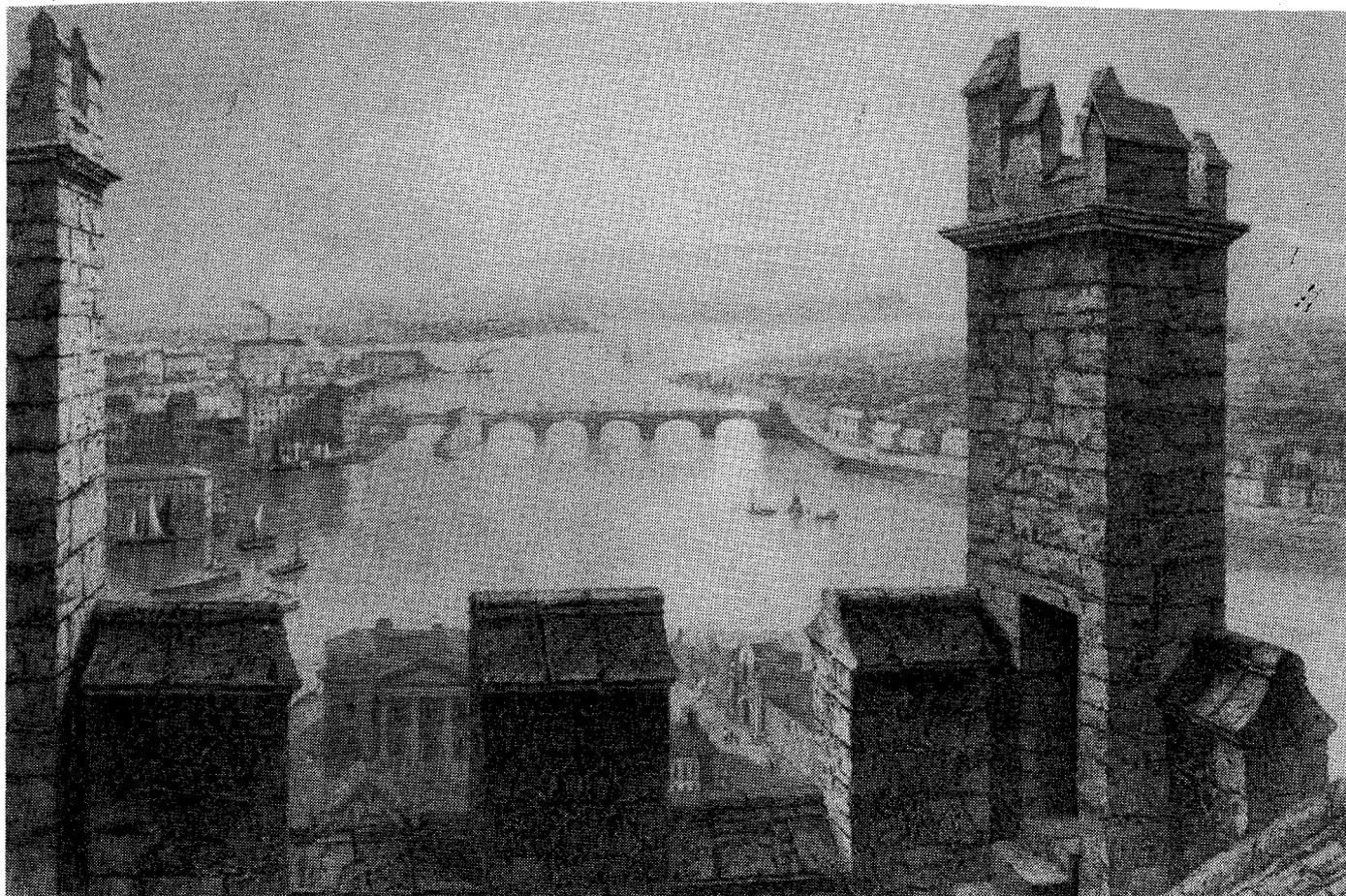
In addition to the ever-present danger of starvation, lack of proper food often caused illness or at least predisposed the poorer inhabitants of Limerick to disease. The city in the decades before the famine was highly vulnerable to infectious diseases, as was any urban area. In fact, mortality was far higher in urban civic districts than in rural areas in the period before the Great Famine. The proximity of larger groups of people who endured very poor living conditions clearly facilitated the spread of contagion. During the ten years from 1831 to 1841, even excluding cholera (of which there was a major outbreak in 1831/2) epidemic and contagious diseases such as small pox, measles, whooping cough, croup, diarrhoea, influenza and fever were the main causes of fatalities in Limerick,

according to the census of 1841. Other illnesses which contributed to high mortality figures included convulsions, consumption and marmasmus. Only 7% of all deaths which occurred in this period were actually attributed to old age. To live to old age was indeed a rarity, and most often the preserve of the richer elements of society. Of course, at the opposite end of the spectrum, the chances of surviving as a new-born infant were extremely poor. One in five children died before reaching their first birthday and two in five before five years of age. Despite this, there was still an abundance of children in Limerick; one quarter of the population in 1841 was under ten years of age. This is a reflection of the tendency at that period for couples to have large families, partially in compensation for the high levels of infant mortality. This tendency also contributed to the continuance of poverty among the lower classes, as is clearly evident from Thackeray's comment on Limerick that "Children are everywhere - look out of the nasty streets into the still more nasty back lanes. There they are, sprawling at every door and court, paddling in every puddle ..."⁽³⁰⁾

The standard of housing and accommodation endured by the poorer classes was extremely low also. The majority of families lived in what the census termed 'second class accommodation', with an average of three to four families per house. Such statistics do not, of course, reflect the reality which many families experienced, for as a contemporary reported: "[It was] common to find six to ten families crammed together in the same house and often three or four in one room",⁽³¹⁾ or again: "There may be sometimes as many as 70 persons living in an old falling house and I myself know as many as four families residing in a single room".⁽³²⁾ Adding to the horrors of overcrowding were inadequate sanitation and water supply but at least public works to supply the city with water began in 1834. Moreover, filth, poor bedding, lack of furniture, lack of adequate ventilation, even a dearth of clothing, all combined to accentuate the distress of the poor. We may do no better than to quote some contemporaries on the subject of this misery. Firstly, a Rev. O'Grady to the Poor Inquiry of 1835:

I have seen whole families with no other covering than an old broken blanket and a torn rush mat to lie on, and the children perfectly naked ... the rain coming in through the roof, not a spark of fire, nor any article of food in the room. The windows were without glass, and the wind kept out by old mat - every indication of the most abject poverty ... The smell and filth ... is so shocking that I think not only a human being but ... a pig could not endure it.⁽³³⁾

As we have seen, travellers were not too reticent when it came to recounting the poverty they had encountered in Limerick. "I can never forget the scenes of utter and



Newtown Pery and the Shannon, from St. Mary's Cathedral.

hopeless wretchedness that presented themselves", Inglis avowed in 1834. His account of his visit to Limerick's slums is worth recording for its evocation of the conditions then existing:

Some of the abodes I visited were garrets, some were cellars, some were hovels on the ground floor, situated in the narrow yards or alleys. I will not speak of the filth of the places; ... In at least three-quarters of the hovels which I entered, there was no furniture of any description save an iron pot ... two, three or four little bundles of straw, with, perhaps, one or two scanty and ragged mats ... rolled up in the corners ... In a cellar which I entered, and which was almost quite dark and slippery with damp, I found a man sitting on a little sawdust. He was naked ... this man was a living skeleton; the bones all but protruded through the skin ...⁽³⁴⁾

From even this brief recounting of some contemporary descriptions, it can be seen that misery and deprivation were widespread and acute problems in Limerick in the years before the Great Famine. Much of the poverty stemmed from the lack of employment for those who comprised the city's working classes. The urban industrial base, already small, was shrinking and traditional trades (such as weaving) were no longer viable employment options. Even for those who were in employment, the casual or seasonal nature of the occupations a port

city such as Limerick provided, meant that their ability to enjoy a decent standard of living was very limited. This affected both men and women but was specific to the working classes and the districts they inhabited. Thus could travellers to Limerick marvel at its Georgian splendour and the evident commercial prosperity it enjoyed, while recoiling in horror from the distress and misery which characterised the experiences of so many of the city's population. Moreover, with the outbreak of famine in 1845, that contrast was to become even more stark and pronounced.

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