

Bread or Blood



hen blight struck the potato crop in 1845, the establishment was totally unprepared for what was to follow.

The Irish Poor Law was enacted on 31 July, 1838, and was only creaking into operation, even though Ireland had become relatively adept at coping with famines. Between 1816 and 1842, the country had 14 famines of varying degrees and, as far back as the years 1740-41, there was a severe famine. In addition to famines, there were periods called the 'meal months', so called because of the flaked meal eaten between the exhaustion of one year's crop and the harvesting of the following year's crop.

The effect of the Napoleonic Wars on Ireland cannot be over stressed. It has been said that "It would have been better for the Irish farmer if Bonaparte never lived or never died".⁽¹⁾ During these wars, Ireland's economy boomed, with an increased demand for food supplies. The fact that cottage industries, which supplemented farm incomes, declined in the post-war years from 1815 onwards, compounded the effect on the economy as a whole and, ironically, increased the demand for land. It was the cumulative effect of a series of famines which caused such widespread misery and destitution.

Arrival of the Blight

In early 1845, the prospects for the potato crop could not have been better. The *Limerick Chronicle* of 21 June, 1845,

by Tom Donoban

stated: "The sowing of the potato crop is fully one month in advance, an invaluable blessing to the humbler classes, who generally suffer much privation during the interval between the exhaustion of the old and the supply of the new, and staple provision of the vast majority of the population of this country. Some knowing old farm labourers express their regret at having gone to the expense of sowing potatoes this season, they promise to be so cheap and plenty".

However, the edition of 11 October, 1845, of the same newspaper had more alarming news, stating, "We are much concerned to state that the prevalent distemper in the potato crop has this week been found to extend the fearful ravages to the County Limerick. At Cahirelly the disease was first observed and subsequently at Fedamore where the labourers left off work on 12 acres finding the plant was not worth raising. The evil was also apparent at Coolyhenan and other parts of the country. The terrible epidemic due to prolonged moisture in August not only threatens the food for this season but also the loss of seed for next season". This report was not alone in identifying the cause of the blight as the *Gardeners' Chronicle* of 1846 also did but it was not until the end of the 19th century that the disease was successfully treated with copper sulphate.

Several madcap proposals were put

forward in the newspapers of the day, such as treating the potato cholera by attracting lightning with lightning rods to rid the stalks of the disease. The bewilderment was not limited to the poorer classes but extended to the very highest ranks of the establishment. In the *Limerick Chronicle* of 20 March, 1847, a proclamation from Queen Victoria for a general fast more than proves this point. To ask a nation already starving to join in a general fast must have seemed, at best, comical and, at its worst, lacking in any sense or understanding of the suffering of the people. The proclamation stated that "The Almighty God will, if we turn to Him with due contrition and penitence of heart, withdraw His afflicting hand - so a public fast and humiliation is ordered for 24 March in order to obtain pardon for our sins and may in a most devout and solemn manner send up our prayers and supplications to Our Divine Majesty for the removal of those heavy judgements which our manifold sins and transgressions have most justly deserved and under which we at this time labour. The fast should be observed to tender the favour of Almighty God and would avoid His wrath and indignation, upon pain of such punishment as may be justly inflicted on all who neglect the performance of so religious and necessary a duty".

It is difficult, however, to reconcile this edict with a report in *The Nation* newspaper of 2 January, 1847, of the difficulties experienced by a Catholic clergyman in the parish of St. John's. He



A farming family defending their home. Engraving, *Pictorial Times*, 2 January, 1847.

was called upon to minister at the deathbeds of seven people dying of starvation. They all lived in similar conditions: no beds, scarcely any clothing, the children quite naked and no food. In two households, grown-up girls had come home from service, their former employers being unable to retain them. One family had a daughter dying of fever; her father, John Holmes, began to cry and said, "there was a dimness in his sight and he was afraid he would go mad before night from hunger". His wife staggered about the floor from exhaustion. The benevolence of John Russell (merchant) gave momentary relief in each case. It was noted that in one house the clergyman could not procure a light to administer the rites of religion to a dying woman, nor could the loan of a candle be obtained in the neighbourhood. One can only deduce that the candles, being made of tallow, were long since eaten. There were several incidents of theft of candles from churches and one from a shopkeeper in Newmarket-on-Fergus, which the *Limerick Reporter* of 9 January, 1849, reported: "A Case For Punch: A woman entered the shop of Thomas Cane while he sat at the counter, took the candle deliberately from before him, blew it out, and stole it".

'Work not Soup'

In a commentary on the failed rebellion of 1848, William Smith O'Brien stated: "The people preferred to die of starvation at home, or flee as voluntary exiles to other lands, rather than fight for their lives and liberties".⁽²⁾ While this statement might well hold true in respect of organised rebellion, the people did resort to violence in some cases when starvation threatened their lives. The death of Daniel O'Connell in 1847, the failed rebellion in 1848 and the destitution and poverty connected with the ongoing famine seemed to reduce the violence to controllable, sporadic outrages. These outrages could be categorised under two main headings, one in which the people were driven to crime from starvation and the other where they were driven to humiliation on the public works schemes.

In March, 1847, it was decided to phase out the public works schemes in favour of outdoor relief schemes. Initially, this meant twenty percent of workers were laid off until the schemes were finally wound down. But the system of providing work for low pay, however unsatisfactory or overburdened, was more favourable to the people than the restricted relief or soup kitchen schemes.

The news of the ending of the public works was greeted with violent outbursts.⁽³⁾ In March, 1847, a number of attacks occurred. In Newmarket-on-Fergus, workers attacked Mr. Fishbourne, an inspector, and would probably have murdered him were it not for the timely interference of Sir Lucius O'Brien. In Meelick and Kilquane, the men on the works struck and came into Limerick, threatening another inspector Captain



Daniel O'Connell in old age.

O'Brien. All men on the public works in Limerick struck and marched through the streets of the city to the residence of the mayor, who appears to have appeased them, as they returned to work again.⁽⁴⁾

Several men from Ballycahane, near Croom, Co. Limerick, went on trial in March, 1847, for stoning William Townshend, Superintendent of Public Works.⁽⁵⁾ In April, 1847, Richard Mason, Inspector of Public Works at Glin, was attacked by a party of labourers for implementing a new rule compelling them to come to work at 6 o'clock instead of 8 o'clock. This rule was part of a circular issued by the Board of Works on 12 March, 1847, including the twenty percent reduction in numbers of employees.⁽⁶⁾

The men of Meelick were not satisfied after they struck in March and, in May, 1847, on being discharged from public works, they proceeded to Mr. Delmege J.P., declaring "they should get work and they would not tolerate soup, porridge, and could not or would not live on one pound of meal in 24 hours". They then went to the parish soup kitchens and destroyed the boiler, utensils and tore the books naming those to be relieved. The men were two hundred in number but, by the time they reached Ardnacrusha, the

crowd had increased to six hundred. The police arrested Pat Griffin, who was in the act of breaking the boiler with a stone hammer, whereupon the crowd, in an attempt to rescue him, broke the windows of the barrack and were demolishing the doors when the police fired forty rounds, severely wounding two men and dispersing the crowd. In mitigation, Griffin stated that neither he nor many of the people assembled had eaten any food for two or three days.⁽⁷⁾

As evidenced by the outrages outlined above, the people were not happy with the replacement of the public works schemes as the humiliating conditions set in order to claim outdoor relief under the 'Soup Kitchen' Act meant that people had to prove they were destitute before they were fed. The famous "Gregory" clause inserted by William H. Gregory meant that if a householder owned over one rood of land (a quarter of an acre), the entire family was refused relief. A lesser known clause inserted by Gregory meant that if a tenant who was rated at less than £5 gave up his land to the landlord, he and his family would be assisted to emigrate by the landlord and the board of guardians. While well meaning, it was mainly in the interest of the landlord clearing system.



The Corbally mill of John Norris Russell.

Gregory's 'quarter-acre' clause was passed in the House of Commons by 119 votes to nine, and among the nine were two West Limerickmen, William Smith O'Brien and Sir De Lacy Evans.⁽⁸⁾

'Bread or Blood'

The absolute hunger of the people led to several attacks on bakeries and flour and corn depots. It is not difficult to imagine how the smell of freshly baked bread would incite a starving mob to commit robbery. Employees of bakeries and flour mills were advised not to appear in public in their work clothes lest they be attacked by starving wretches.

In January, 1847, some boys raided the bread shop of Pat Coughlan, Broad Street, Limerick, and succeeded in taking eighty loaves of bread.⁽⁹⁾ A mob then gathered but they desisted from further violence when they were addressed by some clergy. The mob followed the mayor to the courthouse asking for employment, and he promised to do all in his power to help them. When all was over, Colonel Mansell, the military magistrate, turned out troops on horse and foot as if the city was in a state of siege. Troops were stationed at Bank Place, the Potato Market and at George's Quay. At Baal's Bridge there was a party of police and the military were marching in all directions. After an hour spent waiting, when they saw they had no business to execute, the troops marched over Baal's Bridge to the jeers of small boys. As the mounted troops passed over the bridge, they met a coffin on a cart, and the people following gave ironical cheers.⁽¹⁰⁾ Colonel Mansell later tried to defend his actions and explain the

posturings of his garrison troops.⁽¹¹⁾

In March, 1847, a number of men violently attacked the mill of William Wheeler, Ballinacurra, and stole four bags of meal.⁽¹²⁾ In May, 1847, there were several attacks on bread carts and shops in Irishtown, George's Street and on Mr. Dawson's bread-cart in Henry Street. One small boy was observed ravenously eating a loaf in the midst of his flight. A large number of starving people were put in jail, which seemed preferable to them. The city was on a state of alert, as it was threatened that dismissed labourers from the public works would come into Limerick and attack the stores, as they had held a large meeting in Carrigounnell.⁽¹³⁾

At the same time, several similar attacks were made in County Limerick. Seven carts of flour belonging to David Roche, Carass, and four loads of Indian meal from Mr. Lyons' mill, Croom, were being escorted by police to Ballingarry, when 500 men and women attacked the convoy near Kilmacow. When they were told the supplies were for the Relief Committee at Ballingarry, they took only one cart-load. Twenty-six cart-loads of meal, being transported from Mr. Ryan's mill in Bruree to Rathkeale, were plundered by a mob and some police were injured.⁽¹⁴⁾ Three men were later convicted and sentenced to six months' imprisonment for the attack.⁽¹⁵⁾

On the same day as the attack, 300 people from Knockfierna Hill drove off fifty cattle and only gave up when they were promised work by the local curate. The day after, twenty-six bags of flour and meal were taken from Enright's mill in Croagh.⁽¹⁶⁾ In February, 1850, the bread-

carts of Mr. Bannatyne and Mr. Ryan of Bruree were attacked, and the police escorted these carts thereafter.⁽¹⁷⁾

Some days later, these sporadic attacks erupted into a major disturbance when a large crowd left the workhouse and crossed into the city by Thomond Bridge crying 'bread or blood'. They attacked numerous bread-shops all over the city and were chased by the police. They broke windows of shops and private houses. Some shopkeepers, fearing attack, gave bread to the rioters. There was scarcely a yard gate in the city that was not chalked in large letters with 'Bread or Blood'. At the subsequent petty sessions a number of the rioters were fined £5 each or two months' imprisonment with hard labour. It was hardly a difficult choice as the men were so driven to crime by destitution that it may be presumed they took the latter option.⁽¹⁸⁾

On 15 January 1847, the *Limerick Reporter* published this poem, signed 'J.P.L.', under the heading: 'The Starving Irish, The Irish Labourers' *Pater Noster*. In *te Domine, sperari*'.

*Give us this day our daily bread,
Father in mercy hear our prayer,
All hope in human aid is fled,
We sink in deep despair.*

*Our little ones scream out with pain,
And clamour to be fed,
Father, they cry to us in vain -
Give us our daily bread.*

*O'er the gaunt infant at the breast -
The mother bows her head,
The fount is dry, in vain 'tis prest -
Give us our daily bread.*

Our eldest born, with hollow eye,
And eager stealthy tread,
Would take the food we cannot buy -
Give us our daily bread.

We must not beg - he shall not steal,
Though stores before us spread.
But we will work with earnest zeal,
Give us our daily bread.

Famine hath laid her withering hand,
Upon each little head.
O Christ! is this a Christian land?
Give us our daily bread.

Thy will be done - Father receive
Our souls when we are dead,
In Heaven we shall not pine and grieve,
Or want our daily bread.⁽¹⁹⁾

The Act of Union has been cited as a reason why Ireland was neglected during the famine period. A government in Dublin would almost certainly have been more in touch with the people and the problems they faced. Whether it could have coped any better with the breakdown of the social system caused by hunger and destitution is questionable. It certainly would have looked at the problems more sympathetically but it would still have had to face up to the same merchants and landholders who resisted paying for relief to the distressed.

The reaction of the British government was, at its best, inept but, while pointing a finger at 'perfidious Albion', one should also reflect on the fingers pointing back home. There are several recorded instances of people profiteering at the expense of the impoverished and, indeed, it may be part of the reason that memories of the famine period seem to be almost erased in the last 150 years, in contrast to the rebellion of 1798, which occurred fifty years earlier. With this in mind, it is worth reflecting on some of the following occurrences.

In March, 1847, the editor of the *Limerick Reporter* stated: "Markets are being reduced everywhere but in Limerick. Bread stuffs are arriving and though the Shannon is literally black with corn vessels, the prices are as high as ever".⁽²⁰⁾ In January of that year, the price of whiskey and beer had risen because of the cost of raw materials. The price of coal had risen because the lack of a regular supply of corn meant transport costs increased because coal ships returned empty from Limerick. This resulted in fever breaking out in Thomondgate due to imperfect cooking of food due to want of fuel.⁽²¹⁾

In March, 1847, a fire destroyed Russell's Mill at Askeaton, with the resultant loss of milling power for the area.⁽²²⁾ The following week, John Donovan, a miller from nearby Shanagolden, was murdered and one of the reasons cited was "the country people thought he charged too much for grinding corn".⁽²³⁾

In May, 1847, the Reverend Quaid, P.P. for Broadford and O'Callaghans Mills,



The provision of relief at Kilrush. Engraving, *Illustrated London News*, 22 December, 1849.

complained that the Finance Committee of the city of Limerick supplied sub-standard corn to his parish's Relief Committee. After meeting the Finance Committee, Reverend Quaid stated that they had agreed to cease dealing with the firm of Stein, the suppliers of the corn⁽²⁴⁾ and owners of a distillery in Thomondgate. In June of that year, a further twist in the tale occurred when at the petty sessions the Mayor of Limerick, Thomas Walnutt, of the Stein Company, was charged with substituting sub-standard corn of his own, based on information from Messrs. Stein, the two other partners in the firm. Mr. Walnutt had left town the previous day.⁽²⁵⁾

On Wednesday, 27 December, 1848, thirteen families, numbering 93 people, were evicted at Broadford, Co. Clare, by John Westropp, agent for Sir Hugh Massy. It was said to be a painful sight to see the little fires of different families on either side of the road.⁽²⁶⁾ A week later the same Fr. Quaid who had exposed the firm of Stein and Mayor Walnutt wrote to the *Limerick Reporter* to defend the evictions stating "the ejections were resorted to with greatest reluctance and the tenants treated with the greatest leniency owing three and a half years' rent".⁽²⁷⁾ This appears to have been a very harsh judgement by Fr. Quaid, as most tenants could not afford the rent during the famine. However, it must be said that Fr. Quaid, a native of Ballingarry in west Limerick, was in the main a champion of tenants' rights.⁽²⁸⁾ Another priest, Reverend John Clifford, of Effin, only eleven months ordained, died of a fever contracted in the discharge of his duties.⁽²⁹⁾

At the same time as these evictions, the Limerick Board of Guardians were investigating abuses in the supply of milk to the workhouse, which was not uncommon in the period. Finally, in July, 1849, Denis Corbett, who robbed corn from the warehouse of Messrs. John

Norris Russell and Sons, absconded to Canada. Russell had him followed by a special messenger to Grosse Isle, near Quebec, where he was arrested.⁽³⁰⁾ The fact that Russell, one of the wealthiest merchants in Limerick at the time, found it necessary to have a poor man who stole some corn from him followed half way around the world is surely a reflection of the kind of thinking that prevailed during the famine period.

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