Godfrey Massy's Memoirs of the Famine Years in Bruff

Godfrey Massy (1803-1852), Church of Ireland Vicar of Bruff, was an outspoken and controversial character, indefatigable in the cause of Protestantism and hostile to the practice of Roman Catholicism; a man of strong and deep convictions and a great humanitarian. His memoirs, from which these extracts are taken, were published in 1855, edited and annotated by his brother, Rev. Dawson Massy, and a summary account of his life was published in this journal. The account of the years 1845-49 begins with a tirade against the Maynooth Endowment Act, by which the British government annual grant to the RC national seminary was increased from £8,000 to nearly £30,000, with an additional once-off building grant of £30,000, and it is implied that the famine of the following years was God's retribution for this 'national sin'.

The Queen's signature was scarcely dry on the Maynooth Endowment Act, before the Irish journals foreboded famine. An awful and mysterious blight attacked that staple crop of Ireland - the potato. Like the cholera, it left uninjured some fields, and even alternate ridges in the same field, making elsewhere 'the seed rotten under the clods', and loading the air with pestilential vapour. Many a poor farmer, while he traced its mysterious course, mournfully exclaimed, 'There is a curse upon the country, Peel's black gentlemen have brought us the black potatoes!' If the commencing famine created a panic in the drawing-rooms of London, and Paris, and all other fashionable haunts of the Irish aristocracy, we may well imagine how terrible was the condition of the resident gentry, who saw fever already amongst them; the cholera returning; the demon of rebellion flinging his broad shadow over the land; and the great mass of a people always poor, suddenly reduced to starvation. Now drew on a battle of life that required all the heroism of the bravest of the brave soldiers of Christ. The doors of the Protestant clergy were besieged morning, noon, and night, by crowds of famishing Romanists craving relief, and refusing, as usual, to go to their wealthy priests, because their money was not lucky!

On Sept., 23, 1845, every kind of potato was reported as tainted. Those appearing sound, when first washed, melting away in twenty-four hours; and on 31st Oct., 120 Relief Societies were organised in Ireland. Government sent over the eminent chemists Lindley and Playfair, to experiment on the potato, but all their remedies failed; and on Nov. 15th they reported that half the crop was lost, and that, allowing one-eighth for seed, only three-eights were available for the nine months before the new crop could come in! At public meetings in Dublin, petitions were presented to Government for prohibition of exports, but though Cabinet meetings were frequent, and deaths were multiplying fearfully, the year 1845 closed without Government aid, 'as it was not yet absolutely required!'

On the Maynooth Bill being passed, Godfrey observed, 'I am of Archbishop Sharpe's mind, "as nations and families are not immortal, they are judged here". I must collect a Church fund against the evil day at hand'. So he wrote to all his friends for aid, and, although the first cry of distress came from the County of Limerick, he had succour ready; and thus saved from the Workhouse several decayed Protestants, including Adam Bovenizer, now in his 90th year; fed 150 children in Adelaide School; and gave employment to several converts from Romanism, whom he described as trusting in the promise, that 'whosoever
leaves home and relatives for Christ's sake, shall find a home and relatives in His Church... He was instantly chosen Secretary of the Bruff Relief Committee, and said to me: 'Although I have 1,500 letters to write yearly for the Protestant Orphans, and that is only the one-third of my business in their behalf, still I take the labouring-oar of our Committee without fear, because God calls me to it, and His biddings are His enagements'.

His district extended over forty square miles. So awfully rapid was the career of the famine, that on his first inquiry, he discovered 14,783 persons — nearly all Romanists — of whom 7,000 were absolutely dying by inches, and almost naked for they had pawned or sold their little rags of clothes, to keep the breath of life in themselves! Adelaide School had been so often and so bitterly cursed by the priests, that, before this period, few bigotted Romanists passed it without an emotion of horror; 'cutting the sign of the cross', to save themselves from contamination! But now that he opened his office there, and gave a meeting-room to the Committee, it was eagerly sought as a haven of refuge. Its sheltering enclosures were daily thronged, but alas! how woefully changed was the aspect of an Irish crowd! No longer could it present the dense array of a Monster-meeting, bristling with close-cut heads, and sunburnt Celtic faces, shouting their 'wild Irish cry', and flourishing their skillellags. O'Connell's 'seven millions' were melting away, for 'God had called for a famine on the land'. They looked like living mummies — their features were attenuated — their faces greenish — their eyes glassy and hollow — their hands like birds' claws — their voices sepulchral — while their skeleton bodies exhaled 'the smell of the grave'. Their despairing silence was only broken when thrilling mournful voices that touched the heart: — 'Oh, your Reverence, the Lord is not pleased with us, and puts us under His scourge! We are only kept breathing, and our eyes are just open. We could bear anything that God sends but the sight of our starving children'.

But for the help of his ally Mary Gammell he could scarcely have managed the multitude. 'Eisth fan go fiol mavourneen', ('Silence! wait a while my dear friend'), wrote Lord Carbery to him, just before he died, 'that you have done wonders, and done them well. Did you ever see Lord Rosse's telescope? It shows us the stars in astonishing grandeur and brilliancy — your course is amongst them'.

Sir Robert Peel (24th Jan., 1846) stated the alarming fact that 'the sudden decay of the potato, dug up in an apparently sound state, had set all calculation at defiance'. But the uproar consequent upon his repeal of the Corn-laws, and the reluctance of the poor to enter the workhouses, denounced by O'Connell as 'Poor-law Bastilles', prevented any Government explanation till March 12th. Then he informed the House of his having secretly expended £100,000 in purchasing Indian corn, in America, and that it should be kept in depots, for sale, at first cost. Another sum of £100,000 was granted for Public Works. However, when Sir R. Peel was elected chiefly by the Romish members! — he left the Relief measures in terrible confusion; but the Protestant Orphans Society proved a blessing to the county and city of Limerick; for in each of its twenty-two districts, there had already been organised a committee of benevolent gentlemen and ladies, who knew and did their duty for the relief of the hunger-bitten perishing ones. But so enormous was the pressure upon them, that the usual July meetings of the Society were postponed till September.

Massy saw the 'Orphans' Life Boat in danger of destruction by the diversion of the support of the Protestants of Limerick.
'whose time and means were then nobly engaged in feeding their famishing Romish neighbours', and launched an appeal in England for the Orphan Society 'as embracing the descendants of English colonists, of whom many had shed their life-blood in conquering or in preserving Ireland for the British Crown'. The appeal raised £635, enabling the committee to raise the allowance of each orphan by £1 per annum, establish a training school for preparing orphan girls for service, and a Model Farm for training grown orphan boys to become stewards and gardeners.

Meanwhile the potato, so luxuriant on July 1st, 1846, was revisited by the mysterious blight on the 12th; and Lord John Russell stated that the crop was more tainted than ever, but he only promised a grant of £50,000 to certain famine districts, reserved the foreign meal in Government-stores; and directed the supply of food to be left to private speculation, for fear of damaging commerce! This political economy quickly raised Indian corn from £9 to £9 per ton, and realised 'Famine-fortunes' in Liverpool, but eventually ruined the poor of the county. Deaths by starvation became frequent, so early as September; and, in many cases, verdicts of 'wilful murder' were recorded against Lord Russell! Then came the Famine Rate Act, as the mainstay of the Government at length (March, 1847) gave way, and established new Relief Committees, empowered to give or sell cheap food to the famishing population; but local contributions were always necessary in order to ensure grants.

So Godfrey recommenced his famine-relief labours. (Oct., 1846) and appealed to the landlords, stating that 5,000 starving people were already on the relief list; that £225 had been expended within the month; and that no Government grant could be obtained without payment of new subscriptions, and then only to one-half the amount of the contributions. He implored them to exercise such enlarged benevolence as would provoke the affectionate gratitude of the poor, and continued: 'it is heart-rending to witness the appalling sufferings of multitudes; sufferings only equaled by their patience; for they invariably exclaim, "We could bear anything but the woeful sight of our starving little ones." Indeed the children were the most distressing objects of all; their legs and arms were as thin as canes. Even the grace of infancy deserted them, and creatures of two years old were seen eating what they got, with the sharp cries of multitudes, of the Church of Ireland Primate considered this an opportune time, when there was...
universal praise for Irish clergy, to entreat the Prime Minister for funds for their 23,000 pensioners at school, which contained 96,815 children, of whom 35,000 were Roman Catholics, but Lord Russell rejected the application because he "considered their income able to support themselves and their Schools!"

This happened just as our Clergy were petitioning Parliament against the Poor Law enactment, which makes them the only owners of property who cannot charge occupiers - in this case the landlords, - with one-half the poor rate! Thus they are burdened with the whole rate, whilst all others bear but half! Indeed, but for the advocacy of Archdeacon Martin and Archbishop Whately, another poor law enactment would have consigned to prison, as insolvent debtors, most of the Clergy of the famine-districts, by making them liable for the enormous poor-rate, as if the rentcharge were "separate hereditament," instead of being deducted from the cash payments of landlords. And yet many of these Clergy were annually in the starving poor amongst whom they so kindly laboured. A scant supply of turnips and Indian meal was often their daily fare. Their delicate families were frequently unable to get abroad for want of clothing, and their sons had even to work on the roads, amidst fever-stricken crowds. It was when they were "an honest, loyal, Christian people," Lord John Russell, the new Viceroy, (May, 1847), announced his determination to confine all the Church patronage of the Crown in Ireland to those who "had given the most unequivocal support to the National Board of Education!"

Early in May, 1847, the gigantic Public Works, which supported 700,000 labourers, and 11,500 officials, were suddenly suspended, and Government Loans and Poor Rates were substituted. Archbishop Whately compared this step to feeding a famishing dog upon joints of his own tail; and Godfrey thus described:- "The potato-blight was worse than ever, and the exorbitant poor-rate pauperised the nobility, gentry, and tenantry, often absorbing more than twice the rent, for 703,762 paupers received out-door relief, besides the multitudes that swarmed in the workhouses; and the 201,427 children fed by the British Association. The formidable Incumbered Estates Court also increased the panic, by suddenly engulfing one-third of all Irish property in the vortex of litigation; so, except in Protestant Ulster, everywhere the untitled fields and ruined cabins almost realised Archbishop Whately's fearful foreboding of a pauper population in Ireland amounting not to a million and a-half or two millions, but to three, four, or five millions, with farms lying as desolate as the deserts of Arabia, the occupants preferring idleness or alms to work!"

Sir Robert Peel had engaged that his legislation would supply the nation 'a cheap loaf,' and famine mocked his infallible boast. He had placed himself upon introducing Indian corn into Ireland for the preservation of life; and lo! 'There was death in the pot!' That...
strange food, often eaten half raw, perpetuated cholera in our cities and towns during our seven years' famine, especially in 1848...

His Annual Report for 1848 was spirit-stirring. We know not how the monthly demands for maintenance are to be met. "We walk by faith, not by sight." We have hitherto experienced the truth of that promise, "as thy day, so shall thy strength be." If we would continue to experience it, there must be faith, faith in proportion to the trial; hope in proportion to the danger; and loving exertion in proportion to the crisis. There must be no slumber; no folding of the hands to sleep; no anxious glances to the exertions of others; but "the Christian, prayerful, united, continuous, loving, and laborious effort to keep our harbour of refuge open for future generations of Protestant Orphans."

This Gospel trumpet-call found an echo in noble hearts at home. The Rev. Joseph Gabbett raised a special fund of £330. Lady Dunraven's collecting-card, 18,500 feet long and containing £60, raised the Collectors to redoubled activity. The Rev. Joseph Gabbett raised a special fund of £330. Lady Dunraven's collecting-card, several

"If thy day, so shall thy strength be." - Proverbs 20:19

"As thy day, so shall thy strength be." - 1 Samuel 2:30

"I have been giving one meal to them, whilst so tender and Christian was his own rent-charge is but £45 per annum, and more for his larger advances at his own risk, to receive the £75 which his English friend, John M'Neil, as he has long been one of my best friends in the work of the Lord. The people suspect, with much reason, that the priests, when they found their cause hopeless, betrayed the very persons whom they had previously instigated to the late insane agitation..." - Footprints of a Faithful Shepherd: The Memoirs of Godfrey Massy, BA, Vicar of Bruff, 1870.