

Kilkee and its Neighbourhood during the First Year of the Great Famine, 1845-1846

IGNATIUS MURPHY

During the summer of 1845 the prospects of a plentiful harvest were good until the blight which had already attacked potato crops in North America and England made its appearance in the eastern half of Ireland in early September. Nevertheless the *Clare Journal* remained optimistic about the potato crop in Clare. After having made some inquiries it announced on September 18 that an average crop was expected in the county. But it also added that a complete picture could not be got until the time for digging the general crop at the end of October.¹

Failure of the Potato Crop

As the weeks slipped by in October, it became increasingly clear that there was a general failure of the potato crop, and by the middle of the month the *Clare Journal* was predicting that an early and prolonged famine would be the consequence unless immediate measures were taken to mitigate the calamity.² Yet even at this stage some continued to be optimistic. Mr. John Fleming of Kilrush felt that the fears of many people were exaggerated. He had seen whole fields ruined by the blight. But he had also seen others which were only partially affected, while others again had emerged completely unscathed. In his opinion, if even half of the very abundant potato crop could be preserved there would be sufficient for all.³ Mr. Fleming's hopes were not to be realised. Even as he wrote his letter to the *Limerick Reporter* in early November it was only too clear that the people around him in West Clare were faced with starvation. The potatoes which had been pitted in sound condition were decaying and already many families were suffering severe illness from eating diseased potatoes. Masses were offered in the country chapels asking God to save the people from the disaster which now seemed inevitable.⁴

A relief commission appointed by the Government held its first meeting on 20 November, 1845. Its immediate task was to make preparations to receive a supply of Indian corn and meal which had already been ordered from the U.S.A., while it also collected information from all parts of the country concerning the progress of the potato disease. Among its early informants was Fr. Michael Comyn, Parish Priest of Kilkee and Doonbeg, who gave such a gloomy description of the state of the crops in his parishes that the Commissioners immediately wrote to other people to find out if the situation was as described. Jonas Studdert, a middleman resident in Kilkee, replied that although he feared a scarcity he hardly envisaged a famine. E. I. Morris, a coastguard who visited the area on the Commissioners' request, saw the dangers of the situation more clearly and noted the apprehensions of the people: "I found the people everywhere quiet and civil, but under great alarm." Dr. Griffin, the Kilkee medical officer, on the other hand was inclined to dismiss these fears and informed Assistant Commissioner John Hancock "that

¹ *Clare Journal*, 18 September 1845.

² *Clare Journal*, 16 October 1845.

³ *Limerick Reporter*, 7 November 1845.

⁴ *Limerick Chronicle*, 8 November 1845.

every rational person in the parish was laughing at the statement made by certain parties relative to the state of the parish."⁵ Shortly afterwards Fr. Comyn visited the Commissioners in person to see what prospect of relief they held out to the poor in his parishes. After the meeting he felt that he had succeeded in convincing them that unless help was given within a short time the people would have no alternative to starvation. He also got a promise that they would impress on the Government the need for providing immediate employment in the area.⁶

Back in West Clare the Kilrush Poor Law Guardians were beginning to get worried. At their meeting on 26 November they drew up a petition to Queen Victoria asking her to call a meeting of Parliament as soon as possible in December to devise measures of averting the threatened famine. Another resolution very likely had a proposed Kilrush-Kilkee railway in mind:⁷

That it is suggested to have Parliament meet thus early to expedite the passing of Railway Bills and such other measures of employment as would enable the poor and working classes to purchase food and clothing during the approaching season of want and inclemency.

Government Policy and Meetings in Kilkee

By the beginning of 1846 a four point plan for combating the threat of famine had been devised by Sir Robert Peel and his Government:

1. The Relief Commissioners were told to form local committees composed of land-owners, agents, magistrates, clergy and other residents of note. These committees would raise money locally out of which food could be bought for re-sale to distressed persons or even given free in urgent cases.
2. The Board of Works was to provide employment by making new roads—a procedure which had also been followed in previous famines.
3. Foreseeing that fever would inevitably follow destitution, it was directed that a separate fever hospital was to be got ready as soon as possible in connection with each workhouse.
4. As soon as food prices rose unreasonably some of the Indian corn in government stores was to be thrown on the market to bring prices down.

To implement the first two points in this plan it was decided to call a meeting of gentlemen in each area where distress was expected. A representative of the Board of Works would attend and he would be able to ascertain what help local landlords were prepared to give, how many persons would need employment and what were the possibilities for works in the area. The first such meeting to be held anywhere was arranged for Kilkee on 10 January 1846, a choice probably suggested by Fr. Comyn's earnest representations on behalf of his parishioners in the previous month and the evident hardship in the area.

⁵ *Relief Commission Papers 1845-7, Inspecting Officers, Reports*—80, Studdert to Relief Commissioners, 9 December 1845; 141, Morriss to Relief Commissioners, 12 December 1845; 173½ (*sic*), Hancock to Relief Commissioners, 13 December 1845.

⁶ *Limerick Reporter*, 19 December 1845.

⁷ *Limerick Reporter*, 2 December 1845.

From any point of view the Kilkee meeting⁸ could hardly be described as successful. The first difficulty arose when many people could not gain admittance owing to lack of space. The local magistrates were blamed for this as they had chosen the Billiard Room in preference to the more spacious National School which had been put at their disposal by Fr. Comyn. At the meeting Henry Burton of Carrigaholt, the only resident landlord west of Kilrush, acted as Chairman, with Robert Fitzgerald of Donoughboy House, Kilkee, as Vice-Chairman, and Dr. Tuite of Kilkee as secretary. An official of the Board of Works, Mr. Russell, was also present, as was Mr. C. W. Hamilton, agent for John MacDonnell, a large landowner in the area.

The first resolution which was adopted indicated that although some potatoes were still available they were scarcely fit for human consumption:

That the potatoes having now become so unfit for human use, that even the cattle are beginning to loathe them, the people are earnestly recommended to discontinue the use of any unless the few half-sound ones in hand, and that it becomes absolutely necessary for their sustenance to have immediate recourse to the consumption of bread at least once or twice a day, henceforward.

But how could the people make bread? In its second resolution the meeting called for the establishment of a storehouse at Doonbeg and Kilkee for the purchase and preservation of the remnant of corn left in the country. However, the people would still need the means to buy the corn and so a number of suggestions were made for the provision of employment in the area. These suggestions had already been made in a memorial to the Commissioners adopted at a New Year's Day meeting in Kilkee. They included the building of the Kilrush-Kilkee Railway line; the provision of harbour facilities at Doonbeg; the building of coast roads leading from Kilkee—to Baltard Tower and Doonbeg Bay on one side and to Dunlickey Castle on the other; a few embankments against the tide on Kilkee beach and the provision of landing facilities for Kilkee fishermen. The meeting ended with the setting up of a local committee.

On the afternoon of the same day a number of people with landed interests locally, some of whom had been present at the morning meeting, met at the West End Hotel and drew up a rival memorial for presentation to the Government. Jonas Studdert, in a letter to Sir Lucius O'Brien, explained why they felt it necessary to meet again:⁹

As I apprehended, our meeting of yesterday was interrupted by Mr. Comyn, assisted by Mr. Robert FitzGerald, Doctor Tuite, and at the head of a large mob. Everything was carried by shouting from the people tutored by him. No committee formed, but at the latter part of the day he proposed a Committee not having the slightest regard for the mode of choosing one as directed by you. And in fact mostly composed of his own relations . . . Mr. Russell was treated as a menial under their orders and not even allowed to explain what his instructions were . . .

In another letter to Sir Lucius, Mr. C. V. Hamilton commented that it was only with great difficulty that Fr. Comyn had succeeded in getting Mr. Burton into the chair. He then stood by him and proposed his resolutions himself without reference to the chair. However, Mr. Hamilton also pointed out that the letter convoking the meeting had specified that all interested parties were invited. Therefore Fr. Comyn "had naturally

⁸*Parliamentary Papers* 1846 XXXVII(41), 9-13, Routh to Trevelyan, 15 January 1846; *Clare Journal*, 15 January 1846; *Tipperary Vindicator*, 14 January 1846.

⁹*Relief Commission Papers 1845-7, Inspecting Officers, Reports*, 343, Studdert to Sir Lucius O'Brien, 11 January 1846.

grounds for making it a mob meeting.”¹⁰

The rival meetings and the resolutions adopted at them meant that nobody was satisfied with the day's proceedings. Those who took part in the second meeting were clearly dissatisfied with what had taken place at the first—while many of the local people were indignant with those of the gentry who participated in the second gathering. This indignation was given strong expression in a resolution adopted at a meeting held in Kilkee Chapel on 18 January:¹¹

That we scout with indignation the pigmy efforts of certain gentlemen and others, who, without license (sic) or authority from the people or government, formed themselves into a self-constituted Board at a meeting stealthily got up after the regular proceedings of the day....

All of this was not a very promising start to the hoped for joint local effort to combat the distress and although on the surface harmony was soon achieved the undercurrents of tension remained, breaking out every now and again.

To the Government, too, the Kilkee meetings were a big disappointment. It had been hoped that the meeting arranged there would set a precedent for other such gatherings but, in the light of the Kilkee experience, Sir Randolph Routh, the leading member of the Relief Commission, concluded that instructions to be issued for future meetings would have to be revised. The chief cause of disappointment was the lack of any offers of local contributions. These had not even been mentioned at the first meeting, while at the second the gentry had merely made a vague reference to the repayment by instalment of loans for public works. Jonas Studdert wrote in this connection:¹² “It is clear money will not be placed at the disposal of such mad speculators,” referring to Fr. Comyn and his supporters. One feels that this was simply an excuse for not making contributions as a few days later Mr. C. W. Hamilton informed the Relief Commissioners in Dublin that under the existing difficulties the proprietors would not be able to make any contributions nor could they offer sufficient security for the future repayment of loans.¹³

Despite his disappointment with the meetings Routh admitted that the hardship in the Kilkee area was undeniable and he pointed out to Trevelyan that it was for the Government to decide, in the light of all the facts, how much employment they would be prepared to give at the public expense to meet the immediate want.¹⁴

Kilkee Relief Committee

Despite the squabbles a local relief committee soon got down to work and appointed Fr. Comyn and Rev. J. Martin, the local Protestant rector, to carry out an investigation into the condition of the people in the neighbourhood. The result of their work was put to the members at a meeting in late February at which Mr. Russell of the Board of Works was also present.¹⁵ The report stated very emphatically that 160 householders and their families were in a state of abject poverty and nearly deprived of every earthly means of

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 343, Hamilton to Sir Lucius O'Brien, 12 January 1846.

¹¹ *Limerick Reporter*, 27 January 1846.

¹² *Relief Commission Papers 1845-7, Inspecting Officers, Reports*, 343, Studdert to Sir Lucius O'Brien, 11 January, 1846.

¹³ *Parliamentary Papers 1846 XXXVII(41)*, 10, Routh to Trevelyan, 15 January 1846.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Limerick Reporter*, 6 March 1846.

subsistence. Some potatoes were still available but pigs and fowl which had been fed on them for the previous two months were now found to have diseased livers. "The stench of these potatoes when boiled is so offensive and unbearable, that the people rush out of the cabin with the iron pot in their hands, lest the effluvium should cause a fever, and they let them remain some time outside, in order that the fresh air may pass through them, for others, even those who are starving, are unable to touch them." Even when the best parts had been picked out they were still unpalatable. In the final analysis:

The actual fact is that hundreds of people here, are, what would be understood in England as 'starved' and what is understood in Ireland as 'half-starved'. Their cheeks are hollow and transparent, the mouth enlarged, the nose pinched in, the eyes glassy or else of a watery clearness. They scarcely utter any complaints; they do not beg of anyone walking about the village, but follow him silently in a crowd.

About the same time Dr. John Griffin of Kilkee submitted a report in which he pointed out that a form of fever had been prevalent in the locality for the previous three or four months and this was to be attributed, in some degree at least, to the use of unsound potatoes. Unless protective measures were taken to avert the threatened famine, an outbreak of disease could also be expected. And on 22 February he told the Relief Commissioners that a fever hospital in the area would be of very great help in checking the spread of fever.¹⁶ All this was in marked contrast to his attitude in the previous December when interviewed by Mr. Hancock.

It was against this background that the Kilkee Relief Committee memorialled the Lords of the Treasury in mid March outlining the plight of the people in their district and pointing out that the Board of Works engineer was awaiting Treasury sanction to start relief works which would give much needed employment. To demonstrate the seriousness of the situation they remarked that the people were now beginning to eat the potatoes which they had kept for seed—a point which was also made in a memorial from the inhabitants of the townland of Kildimo (near Kilkee) to the Lord Lieutenant. The final conclusion of the Kilkee Relief Committee was that the corn purchased by the Government should be immediately distributed in the area.¹⁷ A week later a somewhat similar plea was made by Colonel Vandeleur, Chairman of the Kilrush Board of Guardians. To offset the high prices being demanded for provisions the Government should send its Indian corn to Kilrush and Kilkee and sell it to the poor who had obtained tickets authorising them to receive it¹⁸—a suggestion which was in line with the Government's policy for the control of food prices. At this period, according to Captain Mann, a coastguard officer in charge of relief at Kilrush, the portion of Kilrush Workhouse allotted to Kilkee parish was nearly full.¹⁹

Meanwhile Sir Randolph Routh was complaining that the landed gentry in the Kilrush-Kilkee area seemed to be determined to make no money contributions towards providing relief. However, on 31 March he was able to tell Trevelyan that Colonel Vandeleur had given £50—a beginning at least had been made.²⁰ But in Kilkee there were no unsolicited contributions and the Relief Committee was showing no signs of requesting any. Finally, in early May, under threat of refusal of meal supplies by Captain Mann, it appealed for

¹⁶*Parliamentary Papers* 1846 XXXVII(429), 8; *Relief Commission Papers 1845-7, Inspecting Officers, Reports*, 594.

¹⁷*Parliamentary Papers* 1846 XXXVII(429), 3, 8.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁹*Parliamentary Papers* 1846 XXXVII(41), 224.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 82, Routh to Trevelyan, 28 March 1846; *Ibid.*, 86, Routh to Trevelyan, 31 March 1846.

funds and circularised people with landed interests and wealthy lodge-owners who were living outside the parish. By 18 May only one of the absentees, John McDonnell, had responded with a contribution (£8), although it would appear that soon afterwards the Marquess Conyngham gave £10.²¹ Rev. James Martin remarked that the local farmers would willingly contribute but were unable. However, Jonas Studdert gave £8, Fr. Comyn £5 and Rev. James Martin £5. In all £38.2.0 had been gathered by 12 May. To this the Lord Lieutenant added £23.²² It was stated that the money would be used to provide food for those in extreme want and give employment to women and children during the summer season. The secretary of the committee (Hugh Hogan, proprietor of Kilkee Baths) also pointed out, with an eye to the holiday season, that arrangements would be made to prevent strolling beggars from annoying the visitors.²³

In March the Relief Committee took some steps in another direction. It was decided that an industry could do a good deal for the town and parish and Hugh Hogan, as secretary of the committee, was instructed to enter into communication with Messrs. Wallace, Sharpe & Co. of Glasgow with a view to starting the manufacture of lace and muslin in Kilkee. Mr. Hogan wrote to the firm giving details of the population etc. of the area. The reply did offer some hope that in the not too distant future the firm might extend its activities to Kilkee—but no further moves seem to have been made in the matter.²⁴

Public Works

As remarked later by Captain Mann²⁵ government policy in the spring of 1846 involved the taking of three steps:

1. The poor had to be provided with the means of earning money wages.
2. A substitute food for the potato had to be introduced.
3. Owing to the absence of small shopkeepers who would deal in Indian meal, those operating the relief scheme would have to take their place and sell it in small quantities here and there throughout the peninsula.

The wages were to be earned in the Board of Works' public relief schemes. In early February the magistrates and cesspayers of Moyarta barony met and petitioned the Government for the commencement of certain specified works. But as the meeting was arranged in a hurry, the actual descriptions of the proposed works and the estimated costs were not sufficiently accurate for immediate implementation. Mr. Russell, the Board of Works engineer, felt that as a result it would take some time to get the works under way as more exact calculations would have to be made. However, he thought that a beginning could be made with some hill-cutting and road improvements. A week later, on 25 February, the Commissioners of Public Works recommended a number of projects in Moyarta Barony to the Treasury. These included the improvement of several roads,

²¹ *Relief Commission Papers 1845-7, Inspecting Officers, Reports*, 2113, Mann to Sir James Dombrain, 6 May 1846; *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 20 May 1846.

²² *Relief Commission Papers (Clare) 1845-7*, Rev. J. Martin to Relief Commissioners, 12 May 1846; *Parliamentary Papers 1846 XXXVII(41)*, 224.

²³ *Limerick Chronicle*, 16 May 1846.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1 April 1846.

²⁵ *Trevelyan Papers*, Mann to Trevelyan, 15 November 1847, T64/367A(3).

including the road from Kilrush to Kilkee, and the building of a new road along the cliffs to the south-west of Kilkee.²⁶ If these works met with government approval it would advance the full cost, of which half would be in the form of a loan to be repaid by the local landowners over a period of years.

In the meantime Mr. Russell had returned to Kilkee with employment tickets. Employment on the projected public works would generally be given only to a holder of one of these tickets, which were to be distributed at meetings of the local Relief Committee to those who were considered unable to provide food for their families. In Kilkee, as final approval from the Treasury for the projects was awaited, people applied for these tickets—but, at first, not nearly as many as had been expected. In their report on the district in late February, Fr. Comyn and Rev. Mr. Martin tried to give an explanation for this. The country people, in their opinion, were under the impression that the townspeople would get first preference and therefore did not apply for employment in such numbers as their extreme want would warrant. In all there were only 40 applications from the country and 160 from the town. However, at this stage it looked as if only 50 of these would get immediate employment—at 10d a day.²⁷

By early March, when work had not yet begun, people began to get impatient—and in their memorial to the Treasury at this time the Kilkee Relief Committee reminded the Treasury officials that their sanction was being awaited. A few days later 250 men were given employment but this only whetted the appetite for more work.²⁸ On 19 March a letter-writer in the *Clare Journal* complained that in Kilkee scarcely one man in twenty was employed, notwithstanding the extraordinary exertions of its inhabitants and clergy. The main projects which were started at this time were the building of the cliff road by Look Out Cliff to Dunlickey Castle and beyond, and the levelling of hills on the Kilrush-Kilkee road. It was hoped that when the latter project was completed passenger cars would be enabled to make the journey from Kilkee to Kilrush in an hour instead of an hour and a half. The embankment of the cliff on the west side of Kilkee, which had long been in a dangerous condition, was also commenced.²⁹

After work on the various projects had begun the number of employed rose rapidly. On 28 March the Board of Works had 1,600 employed in Clare. Three days later the figure was 5,487 and on 7 April it had risen to 10,870. In Kilkee and Doonbeg parishes 620 were employed in mid May and further applications were being received.³⁰

The rate of payment on the public works was, as we have seen, 10d a day for men. Strong boys got 8d and small boys received 6d.³¹ These wages were supposed to be under the general current rate in order to encourage people to take up other employment if available. In a letter to the Relief Commissioners at the end of January, Mr. C. W. Hamilton protested at this arrangement. If a man did not get sufficient wages he would have to enter the Poorhouse to feed his family and, in Hamilton's view, this would be disastrous as it would strike at the independence of the labourer's character.³²

²⁶ *Relief Commission Papers 1845-7, Inspecting Officers, Reports*, 573, Russell to Board of Works, 18 Feb. 1846; *Parliamentary Papers 1846 XXXVII*(41), 273-4.

²⁷ *Limerick Reporter*, 6 March 1846.

²⁸ *Parliamentary Papers 1846 XXXVII*(429), 3; *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 11 March, 1846.

²⁹ *Limerick Chronicle*, 25 March, 11 April 1846; *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 20 May 1846.

³⁰ *Parliamentary Papers 1846 XXXVII*(41), 82, 86, 87; *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 20 May 1846.

³¹ *Relief Commission Papers 1846-7, Accounts etc. relative to Relief Districts 1846*, circular answered by Kilrush Relief Committee.

³² *Relief Commission Papers 1845-7, Inspecting Officers, Reports*, 421, C. W. Hamilton to Relief Commissioners, 30 January 1846.

There could be other difficulties, too, in the practical day to day administration of the works. On 9 June 1846 Rev. James Martin wrote to the Relief Commissioners complaining of the undue amount of power exercised arbitrarily by some of the gangers. "If it suits their convenience they will take a recommendation from the committee—if it does not—they will reject it."³³ And he enclosed a petition from one labourer who felt he had been victimised. The following is James Carrig's letter:

To the Sitting Committee of Public Works of Kilkee

The Humble Petition of James Carrig of Kilfiera most humbly sheweth That your petr. having Five in family to support and not a morsel of food since Christmas last but what he earned by his daily labour, petr. got into the public works when the Cliff Road commenced, and continued until last Saturday fortnight, he petr. gave one day's work to a man that gave him a basket of black potatoes for his little children to pick, and came to work on the Monday following as usual. When about 12 o'clock on said day Sullivan the Steward dismissed him and would not allow him even that half days wages.

Then when petr. was murmuring for having been dismissed Sullivan desired him go to the Priest and that if he gave him a ticket he would take him in the work which petr. did obtain from the Priest, and got but one days work afterwards. Your petr. having pawned his coat for which he only got 2s. to buy provisions for his family. And that himself and them are living these three days back on one meal a day. Your petr. is surprised that any Committee would allow this imposter Sullivan to go on in this manner when they have a power to discontinue such infernal practice.

Your petr. will pray
James Carrig.

On the receipt of Rev. Mr. Martin's complaint the Relief Commissioners decided to inquire into the matter and get further information from the Board of Works.³⁴

Indian Meal

Through the provision of employment some money was put into circulation and thus the first step in the Government's plan had been taken. The next step was to provide an alternative to the potato which was the staple diet of the average smallholder and labourer. In areas like West Clare cooking any other food had become a lost art. Trevelyan wrote: ³⁵ "There is scarcely a woman of the peasant class in the west of Ireland whose culinary art exceeds the boiling of a potato. Bread is scarcely ever seen and an oven is unknown." But when there were no potatoes, what was to be done? In late 1845 the Government realised that famine was threatening and it obtained supplies of Indian corn from America—not to replace the potato or feed the people but to be kept in reserve and released on the market when provision prices rose unduly. In fact, however, in the early summer of 1846 this Indian meal was to stand between many people and utter starvation.

When supplies of the corn arrived in Ireland in early 1846 depots were established throughout the country in various centres including Kilrush. In March, Captain Mann began to issue it at a cheap rate in Kilrush, but as yet the distribution seems to have been confined to this central depot. During May minor depots were set up at various points in West Clare including one at the Coastguard Boathouse, Kilkee.³⁶

³³ *Ibid.*, 3084, Rev. James Martin to Relief Commissioners, 9 June 1846.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, note on summary of Martin's letter.

³⁵ C. Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger, Ireland 1845-9*, London 1962, p. 76.

³⁶ *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 13 May 1846; *Trevelyan Papers*, Mann to Trevelyan, 15 November 1847, T64/367A(3); *Relief Commission Papers (Clare) 1845-7*, letter of Rev. James Martin to unnamed recipient, 8 October 1846; *Relief Commission Papers 1845-7, Inspecting Officers, Reports*, 2113, Mann to Sir James Dombrain, 6 May 1846.

The provision of Indian meal did not, however, solve all problems, for, at first, it seemed quite likely that the people would not eat it. Previous experience had prejudiced them against it and in some places it became known as "Peel's brimstone". Captain Mann soon found that the reaction in West Clare was anything but favourable as the people feared unpleasant effects. However, Fr. Kenny, P.P. of Kilrush, decided that this prejudice would have to be combated in a practical manner and for two weeks "all but lived entirely with two curates on the meal made into bread and stirrabout."³⁷

As a result of Fr. Kenny's example the problem soon was not one of disposal but of ensuring a sufficient supply of meal. The corn was received unground and so had to be brought to a mill before sale. In Kilrush while Mr. Paterson's mill had a plentiful supply of water and remained working all was well. However, there was at least one occasion on which it was out of action for three days. And when it did break down there was nobody at hand who had an expert knowledge of its workings.³⁸ One possible solution to the problem was offered by a part-time coastguard in Kilkee. He began manufacturing querns which he sold for ten and twelve shillings each. Others followed his example and by early November 1846 they were doing a brisk trade. Examples of their craft can still be seen in the area.³⁹

When discussing the importation of Indian corn a few obvious questions must be answered—Why Indian corn at all? What happened to the corn and other food produced locally? Perhaps the best answer to these questions is contained in a letter written by Routh to Trevelyan on 1 January 1846. Routh pointed out that the Irish people did not regard wheat, oats and barley as food—these were grown to pay the rent and to pay the rent was the first necessity of life in Ireland. It would be a desperate man who ate up his rent, with the certainty before him of eviction and death by slow torture.⁴⁰ And this is exactly what happened in the neighbourhood of Kilkee in 1846. Even though the people had corn and other produce, these had to be sold to pay the rent. As a result, despite the fact that the situation was desperate in early March before relief employment had begun, Kilrush port was busy exporting food. Captain Mann commented:⁴¹ "We were literally stopped by carts laden with grain, butter, bacon, etc., being taken to the vessels loading from the quay. It was a strange anomaly, and well might be said, could not be matched but in this country." In the final week of April 1846 the *Clare Journal* reported that 3,500 quarters of grain had been exported from Kilrush to London and Glasgow.⁴² Yet, despite this anomalous situation, the people survived, mainly because of the Indian meal, and looked forward with hope and fear to the next harvest.

Conclusion

It was not unusual in West Clare and elsewhere to find many people "half starved" in the summer months as they awaited the arrival of the new potato crop. The failure of much of

³⁷ *Trevelyan Papers*, Mann to Trevelyan, 15 November 1847, T64/367A(3).

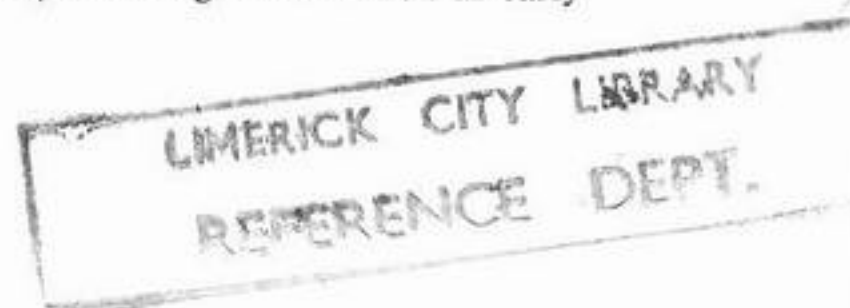
³⁸ *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 13 May 1846; *Trevelyan Papers*, Mann to Routh, 14 December 1847, T64/369B(1).

³⁹ See Jerry Cahir and Tom McGahon, "Hand Milling", in *The Other Clare*, 4 (1980), 14-15. Also Ignatius Murphy, "Further Information on Hand Milling" in same magazine, p. 46.

⁴⁰ Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, p. 76.

⁴¹ *Parliamentary Papers* 1847 LI, 152, Mann to Crafer, 11 October 1846 (describing the situation in early March 1846).

⁴² *Clare Journal*, 30 April 1846.



the 1845 crop resulted in this situation coming about up to six months earlier than usual and the number of people affected was very large. Yet during the first year of the famine there were no deaths from starvation in the Kilkee area and no appreciable increase in the number of deaths from disease. Although more people than previously went to the workhouse in Kilrush, the numbers were still small in comparison with figures a few years later. The landlords were either still getting their rents or, where they were not, they were usually prepared to wait a little longer. Kilkee as a holiday resort was not affected in the summer of 1846, and normality seemed to be around the corner once again if everything went well with the new harvest.

LOCATION OF MANUSCRIPT SOURCES

Public Record Office, Dublin

Relief Commission Papers (Clare) 1845-7.

Relief Commission Papers 1845-7, Inspecting Officers, Reports.

Relief Commission Papers 1846-7, Accounts etc. relative to Relief Districts 1846.

Public Record Office, London

Trevelyan Papers.