Aspects of the Great Famine in Limerick

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This article is based on the notes of a lecture delivered in the Library in Newcastle West on 14 October 1995. It has been prepared for publication by the hon. editor and is printed in this issue of the Journal as a tribute to the late Mainchín Seoighe, a Vice-President and long standing member and supporter of the Thomond Archaeological Society.*

I remember seeing a woman who lived through the Famine. She was my maternal grandmother, and she was born in 1838, in the townland of Clogher West, parish of Drumlin/Athlacca, about three miles, as the crow flies, from where I live. She was a native Irish speaker. She died in her late eighties when I was only four: so, unfortunately, I never had an opportunity of asking her for her memories of the Great Famine, or *an drochshaol*, as the old Irish speakers used call the Famine period.

In the townland in which I was born and grew up, Tankardstown North, between Bruree and Kilmallock, there was a population of 354 in 1841. By 1851 the population had fallen to 142, a drop of 60%. The number of houses in the townland in 1841 was 63; by 1851 the number had fallen to 28. That was a terrible loss of people in the space of ten years. The strange thing was that I never heard any of the old people of the district make any comment about it. It all would seem to have been part of the great reticence there was – for whatever reason – to speak in any detail about the Famine.

The potato is central to the story of the Famine. Potatoes were brought to Ireland by Sir Walter Raleigh and there is a tradition that he gave some of the curious ‘Virginia Tubers’ to Edmund Southwell, who was living in Castle Matrix near Rathkeale and Southwell conducted the first large-scale potato cultivation in the Old World by planting them in the fertile fields surrounding Castle Matrix. In 1610 the Rathkeale tubers were distributed throughout the province of Munster.1 In 1690, potatoes grown in another part of Co. Limerick were referred to in a journal kept by an Englishman named John Stevens, who was an officer in the Jacobite army stationed in Limerick during the first Williamite siege of Limerick. On the 6 October 1690, Stevens accompanied a large detachment of the Irish army that set out from Limerick for Kilmallock, where they spent five days before beginning their return journey to Limerick. They halted for a number of days in Bruff. Food for the soldiers had been scarce in Kilmallock but in Bruff:

here was corn and cattle enough, plenty of cabbages in the gardens, and what was the great support of the people and soldiers, large fields of potatoes, yielding prodigious quantities of them, for they often serve instead of bread, and the soldiers would be feeding on them all the day.2

* The hon. editor is grateful for the help of Michael and Phyllis O’Halloran.

1 According to the late Col. Seán Ó Driscoll, of Castle Matrix, near Rathkeale.

The potato that was very plentiful in Bruff in 1690 was probably of the variety called the Black Potato which had a high yield and stored well. This was being cultivated in Ireland pre-1707: the next variety of potato that we hear of was that which was being grown in 1768. This was called the Apple, and had a superb mealy taste, but a poor yield. There is reference to another variety called the Cup, which is stated to have been cultivated pre-1808. It was of poor keeping quality, and was difficult to digest. The kind that was almost universal when the Famine struck was the Lumper which had a high yield, but was not very palatable. It had been introduced as animal feed but, very likely because of its high yield, eventually became human food.  

By 1845 the potato had become the staple diet of the great masses of the people. A common saying was:

Prátaí ar maidin  Potatoes at mom,
Is prátaí um nóin  And potatoes at noon
Is dá n-Eireóinn san oíche  And if I got up in the night
Prátaí do gheobhairn  T’is potatoes I’d get

Potatoes were grown in ridges, or lazy beds. The Irish, obviously, did not follow the example of the Palatines, from the Rheinisch Palatinate of Germany, who were settled on the Southwell estate near Rathkeale in 1709, and who established a smaller colony near Kilfinane in 1759. The Palatines planted their potatoes in drills. Potatoes were raised by the spade as a subsistence crop west of a line connecting West Cork with Louth. It was east of that line that most grain was raised as a cash crop, the cultivation of the grain being by plough. Limerick was an exception, because, though west of the West Cork/Louth line, it was one of the counties where most wheat was grown. This probably accounts for the existence of so many flour mills in Co. Limerick in the last century. Much of the wheat undoubtedly was exported; whether any appreciable amount of it found its way to the famine stricken we do not know.

When the first news of the blight began to spread in the autumn of 1845 no one seemed too perturbed. Nobody knew anything about blight or its deadly effects; and so nobody could have imagined the awful catastrophe that was in store for Ireland. But as the digging out of the potatoes progressed the enormity of the disaster gradually began to be appreciated. There was then no cure for blight; but soon scientists and chemists were optimistically recommending hare-brained remedies for the disease.

Despite the news reaching England from Ireland about the potato failure, Tory politicians, resisting Prime Minister Peel’s efforts to do something about the disaster by repealing the Corn Law, denied that any failure had taken place, ‘except to the partial extent’. The Tory Mayor of Liverpool refused to call a meeting for the relief of Irish distress, the Mansion House Committee in Dublin was accused of ‘deluding the public with a false alarm’ and the blight itself was represented as the invention of agitators on the other side of the water.

The policy of laisser faire was fashionable at the time among economists, politicians and government officials in England, and it had great influence on the treatment of Ireland during the famine. According to the laissez faire policy, ‘It was not the government’s role to interfere with the free market of goods and services or to provide aid for the people’. Because of the desperate situation in Ireland state aid of some kind had eventually to be provided for the starving people.

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3 Information re. different types of potatoes from Teagasc Famine Exhibition, in RDS, Dublin, September, 1995.
In a way, it was fortunate that certain structures – even though they may not have been the most suitable – were in place when the Famine struck. Following the passing of the act ‘for the more effectual relief of the destitute poor of Ireland’, in 1833, the country was divided into administrative areas called Unions, which were to be administered by local Boards of Guardians. Limerick was divided into four Unions: Limerick, Rathkeale, Newcastle and Kilmallock. The Boards of Guardians consisted of ex-officio and elected members. The ex-officio members were drawn from the landed gentry class, and were usually magistrates. The elected members were generally what would have been described as ‘strong farmers’, or business people in local towns. A workhouse was built in each Union area.

Of the three Unions which dealt with the county – the Limerick Union dealt mainly with the city – Kilmallock was the largest. From returns made by the Unions in December 1846 we learn that Kilmallock catered for a population of 75,657; Rathkeale for a population of 68,174; and Newcastle for a population of 60,007. These figures, very likely, came from the census returns of 1841. We should remember that the Ireland of the years immediately preceding the Famine was a land teeming with people, for the great bulk of the population was not then, as now, concentrated in the cities and large towns. The countryside was alive with people, and despite their poverty, and despite the fact that the vast majority of them lived in one-roomed, mud-walled cabins, the people enjoyed themselves. They turned up in huge numbers at patterns, hurling matches, races, wakes, weddings and funerals. They loved music, singing dancing and story telling. They had songs for every occasion; for rocking the child to sleep, for milking the cows, for churning, for spinning, for weaving, for shoeing the horses, for keening the dead. Above all, the people were incredibly generous and hospitable, as numerous foreign travellers have attested. These were the people who were to suffer so dreadfully in the Famine.

The winter of 1845/46 must have been an appalling one for millions of people in Ireland. By the spring of 1846 the effects of the loss of the potato crop, the main food of the masses of the people, were becoming all too painfully evident. Reports from doctors in various parts of Co. Limerick were published in the Limerick Chronicle on 21 March, 1846. They read as follows:

Kilpeacon Dispensary: States that fever and dysentery have appeared within the last month or six weeks. Increase of dropsy cases attributed to unsound potatoes. A considerable number of unemployed poor in district. Apprehends disease to considerable extent. Dr. Westropp.

Murroe Dispensary: States that fever of a fatal character is more prevalent than usual, which is attributable to the use of unwholesome food, extreme wetness of the winter, together with bad night covering and confined air. Potato not fit food for man or beast. Two-tenths of labourers unemployed. Dreads breaking out of disease. J. Heffernan.

Kilfinane Fever Hospital: States that fever has increased; stomach complaints very prevalent, which are attributed to badness and insufficiency of food. A great many unemployed poor in the district. Apprehends the breaking out of disease to some extent. Dr. Herbert.
Kilmallock Dispensary: States that fever and small pox have lately appeared, which seem to have been generated by the use of diseased potatoes. A considerable number of persons unemployed. Apprehends the breaking out of disease. States no effectual medical relief can be afforded from dispensary unless it be supported out of Consolidated Fund, or by a rate on property. Dr. O'Connell.

Clarina Dispensary: States that a few cases of bowel affection have appeared, which have been attributed to the use of unsound potatoes. A considerable number of unemployed poor in the district. Apprehends a scarcity of food about the middle of May. Dr. Brodie.

Patrickswell Dispensary: States that there is more sickness this year than usual; that unless public works are provided the poor will be destitute. Apprehends the breaking out of disease consequent on scarcity of food. Dr. Peal.

Newcastle West Fever Hospital: States that there are double the number of fever cases in district consequent on scarcity of food. Dr. Pierce.

It is clear from these reports that the people, left with no other food, were, in their extremity, eating the diseased potatoes, with the calamitous results stated by the doctors. Emphasis, too, was laid in the reports on the absolute necessity of providing work for the unemployed. Dr. O'Connell of Kilmallock, had already drawn attention to this matter in a report from him in January 1846, in the course of which he stated, referring to Kilmallock:

There is a great number of poor householders and labourers with large families now unemployed, and I am sure, most anxious and willing to work, particularly those who laboured hard all the summer and harvest to pay rents of bad gardens; this class, I fear will be reduced to dire distress if not soon employed.  

As part of government aid, relief works were commenced by the Office of Public Works in a number of centres. In this connection, a meeting of magistrates and cess payers for the barony of Clanwilliam, in north-east Limerick was held on 16 March 1846, to discuss works that would provide useful employment in the barony. Included in the works was a new road from Herbertstown to Caherconlish, which would cost £1,460, exclusive of £1,000 to cover the value of the land that would be required for the road. There was to be another new road from Cappamore to the New Line, costing £495 plus £500 for land. Various sections of the existing roads were to be improved. £200 was allocated to improve the cross road between O'Brien's Bridge and the Dublin mail coach road, which it was stated, "would afford a great facility for the carriage of turf in the neighbourhood."

Another meeting in connection with relief works was held in Pallaskenry at the end of March 1846. The purpose of the meeting was "to devise means for the employment of the poor to relieve the present great distress". Present at the meeting was the poet Sir Aubrey de Vere, of Curraghchase, and his brother Stephen. Sir Aubrey proposed that a

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5 Limerick Chronicle [L.C.], 10 January 1846.
6 Ibid., 4 April, 1846.
new line of road should be constructed from Pallaskenry to the main road. When somebody asked if the old road could not be improved at less cost, Sir Aubrey replied that expense was not what they should chiefly look at; for his part, he said, he would not let a person on his estate want for employment or food. This statement was greeted with cheers.7

A gentleman present, who stated that he was representing Mr. Westropp, through whose land a very small part of the proposed new road would run, said that Mr. Westropp would be seeking compensation for the land required for that part of the road. A man named Michael Lynch, through whose land the major part of the new road would go, stated that he would be asking for no compensation. There were further cheers for this declaration. Other meetings dealing with the organising of public works for the relief of the poor were held in a number of centres in the county, including Dromcollogher, Bruff, Croagh, Kilmallock, Newcastle, Kilfinane, Hospital and Shanagolden.

Presentment sessions, at which the kinds of works proposed to be carried out were discussed, were held in public. Anybody and everybody who wished to do so might attend and put forward proposals. This, in many cases, led to chaos. At a meeting held in Kilfinane on 20 September 1846, we are told ‘all was riot and confusion. Sums were named without any regard whatever to the nature or extent of the work. Everything was approved. No one dared oppose’. Eventually things became so bad that the Office of Public Works representative, the magistrates and the representatives of the cess payers had to leave the Sessions House and move to a neighbouring hotel.8

There were riots also at Hospital and Shanagolden, despite the fact that the landlord there, Lord Monteagle, was one of the best in Ireland and one of the most sympathetic to the poor. Incidentally, it was Lord Monteagle’s son, Stephen Spring Rice, who was responsible for getting Queen Victoria to increase her contribution to the Famine Relief Fund; Spring Rice was secretary of the British Relief Association, and on 1 January 1847, the British Prime Minister, Lord John Russell informed him ‘I have the Queen’s commands to place her Majesty’s name in the Subscription List for £1000.’ Stephen Spring Rice returned this letter to the Prime Minister on the day he received it, with the following memo written on its margin ‘Receiving this, I refused to place or abstained from placing the subscription on the list. I went to G. Grey, Secy. Of State, to say it wasn’t enough. It was increased to £2000. SSR’.9

The utter desperation of the poorer people – and they formed the vast bulk of the population- as food became rapidly and increasingly scarce, is evidenced in a remarkable event that took place on Tory Hill, near Croom, early in April 1846. Notices had been posted some days in advance, calling on ‘the labouring classes and starving population to assemble at Tory Hill on Holy Thursday’. Before noon on the appointed day some 2,000 people had assembled on the top of the hill, on which they planted a large plaid banner. There may have been some significance in the choice of venue. Tory Hill had been a noted meeting place of the Whiteboys at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The Limerick Chronicle of 11 December 1802 reported that ‘incredible numbers of deluded wretches assembled on the nights of the previous Sunday, Monday and Tuesday in the neighbourhood of Tory Hill and flogged several farmers’. In May,
1803, it reported that on ‘Thursday night a number of villains assembled near Tory Hill, and broke into some houses, the owners of which they obliged to give up their horses, saddles and bridles – for that night’s excursion’. Some hundred years earlier it had been a meeting place for rapturizers – or ‘tories’ as the English authorities described them, hence the name Tory Hill. The old name of the hill was Cnoc Drom Asail, the Hill of the Ridge of Asal, Asal being a mythological figure. One of the great highways said to radiate from Tara was called Slí Asail, Asal’s highway.

On the Holy Thursday 1846, Fr. Harnett, P.P. of Croom, and his two curates, Fr. Meehan and Fr. O’Shea, made their way to the foot of the hill. At about 1 o’clock, Fr. Meehan ascended the hill, and pulled down the banner, at which the multitude seemed very displeased. He then addressed the gathering and exhorted them to disperse, but they refused. He then left the hill top, and the people again hoisted the signal flag. Fr. James O’Shea, who was held in much esteem by the people, next ascended the hill, accompanied by what were described as two ‘respectable farmers’, Mr. Robert Irwin and Mr. James Hynes, of Honeypound.

Fr. O’Shea spoke to the crowd, and asked them to take down the flag, which they did. He then appealed to them to take no rash action. He said they all knew what the people were suffering, and that they and the resident landed proprietors, and the government, were doing all they could to provide work; and he hoped that the relief works would commence in ten or twelve days. At that there were cries of ‘We’ll be starved before then.’

Fr. O’Shea advised them to hear their sufferings patiently and quietly until they knew the determination of the government. This piece of advice was greeted with murrums. ‘Do not, in God’s name, make your condition worse than it is,’ the priest pleaded. ‘We have the Indian meal now distributing to the poor,’ he said, and added, ‘It is excellent food, and I recommend it to you’. This brought cries of ‘If we eat that it will poison us’. Eventually the crowd dispersed at the request of Fr. O’Shea. It all goes to show how docile the people really were, and how willing they were to be said by a priest whom they held in esteem. It goes to show too, of course, how hunger had broken their spirit.

Blight destroyed the potato crop again in 1846. The failure of the crop for the second year in succession was the last straw. There was no choice now for the hungry but the workhouse, or poorhouse, as it was also called. Whole families now sought refuge there, and a morsel to eat. But the people hated the workhouses, principally because in them the family would be split up, the father being housed in one section, the mother in another, the children in still another. Conditions in Kilmallock could, I suppose, be taken as typical of the other workhouses in Co. Limerick, at Newcastle and Rathkeale. Kilmallock had been built to accommodate 800 inmates. During 1846 the total weekly number varied from the 400s to the 600s. That was up to about the middle of November. At that point, due most likely to the total failure of the season’s potato crop, and the coming of winter with all its attendant hardships, the number of persons in the workhouse showed a rapid increase. There were 826 inmates on the 28 November; 868 on the 5 December; 955 on the 12 December; 1,045 on the 19 December and 1,036 on

10 L.C., 7 May 1803.
11 L.C., 11 April, 1846.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
the 26 December. There were 18 deaths during that five-week period. It has to be remembered that the workhouse had accommodation for only 800 inmates.

At a meeting of the Board of Guardians on the 19 December, 1846, the Guardians had before them a letter from Dr. Morgan O'Connell, Medical Officer of the workhouse, and a cousin of the Liberator, Daniel O'Connell. In his letter, Dr. O'Connell said:

I am of the opinion that the Kilmallock Workhouse cannot accommodate more than 800 inmates without engendering disease. The overcrowded state of the house for the last month has already generated fever attended with chest affections, and, at this moment there are 37 persons in the fever hospital, on which account it is now absolutely necessary that the Infirmary additions should be given up properly furnished, in order to make provision for the fever cases daily occurring. The boys' and girls' dormitories, and also the nursery and day rooms, are excessively crowded, and the air hot and impure in these departments. The infirm wards too are overcrowded as already reported on by me.14

The organising of food supplies for the thousand and more people in the workhouse must have created huge problems. The list of provisions estimated to be required for the week ended 19 December 1846 include the following items: 1,200 loaves best white bread, 80 lbs meat, 1,400 quarts best skimmed milk, 3,700 quarts of sweet milk, 1 cwt. salt, 2 lbs tea, 2 lbs coffee, 56 lbs sugar, 48 pints porter, 8 tons of coal, 1 load of turf, 1 cwt. soap, 6,270 lbs meal, 20 lbs dipped candles, 5 lbs mould candles, 56 lbs oatmeal. Items such as tea and coffee were of course for staff members only.

At the beginning of 1847 the number of inmates in the workhouse rose from 1,077 on 2 January to 1,207 on 6 February. At a meeting of the Guardians on 8 January, it was recommended that the adult inmates of the house should get 12 ozs of Indian meal bread every day for dinner, with one pint of gruel, and that they should get one pint of soup each on Sundays and Thursdays in lieu of the gruel. In the case of children from 9 to 15 years, they were to get 10 ozs of Indian meal bread for dinner, with one pint of gruel, and on Sundays and Thursdays they were to get one pint of soup in lieu of gruel. Children from 2 to 9 years were to get 8 ozs of white bread for dinner, and four ounces of bread for lunch at midday; and on two days a week they were to get a half pint of soup, and on the other days of the week 'the usual substitute'.

The Kilmallock workhouse authorities were undoubtedly doing their best to cope with an ever worsening situation; but they themselves would be the first to admit that the quantity of food allocated in the workhouse was not sufficient to satisfy completely the hunger pangs of the inmates. Some of the younger inmates apparently decided from time to time to forage for themselves, as we glean from the minutes of the meeting of 11 February, 1848, which state, rather awkwardly, that 'The master was directed to bring the boys before the magistrate at petty sessions who scaled over the walls for the purpose of stealing turnips.' And at their meeting of 13 July that year the Guardians directed the master to deprive a boy, Thomas Dwyer, of his milk for one day as punishment for having taken stirabout off the dining room table.

It would appear that Dr. Morgan O'Connell, the medical officer attached to the workhouse, was a man of strong character and independent thinking, a man with a social conscience, who put the welfare of those committed to his care before all other

14 Minute Book of Kilmallock Union, April 1846 to Feb. 1847.
considerations. Early in 1848, the Board of Guardians decided to close the auxiliary fever hospital, which had been opened the previous year in Garrynoe House but at a meeting of the Board on 24 February, a letter was read from Dr. O'Connell, which stated:

I beg most respectfully, but fearlessly at the same time, to decline acting on this recommendation till the order sent from His Excellency the Lord Lieutenant, through the central Board of Health, be recalled. And I am quite sure the Board of Guardians will see the necessity for upholding an institution of such unquestionable public utility as the Garrynoe Fever Hospital, when they recollect the rapid accumulation of reasons for maintaining a District Fever Hospital in Kilmallock; the fearfully increasing sickness for the last two years, and the vast influx of wretched beings who flock hither to our workhouse, and come here rather to die than live, and who, whether living or dying, diffuse the seeds of pestilence around them.\footnote{15}

An advertisement in the \textit{Limerick Chronicle} of 23 January 1847 announced the setting up of a soup kitchen for St. Michael's parish in Limerick City.\footnote{16} Soup kitchens were also established in several places in the county, one such place being Glenosheen, where Lady Ashtown of Castleoliver dispensed food to the needy irrespective of their religious affiliations. A stained glass window with appropriate texts from scripture – ‘For I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink’ – commemorates Lady Ashtown in the now disused little Church of Ireland church near Ballyorgan at Kilflynn.

1847 was ‘Black Forty Seven’ in the memories of the people, the worst year of all the famine years of hunger, fever and death. Returns for the week ended 20 March 1847 show what the position was in the three workhouses in Co. Limerick, Kilmallock, Newcastle and Rathkeale. The total number of inmates in each of the institutions was as follows, 1,397 in Kilmallock; 1,354 in Rathkeale; 951 in Newcastle. The large number of children in the institutions is indicative of a wholesale flight from hunger by whole families. There were 703 children in Rathkeale, 496 children in Kilmallock and 413 in Newcastle. Deaths during the week were 33 in Kilmallock, 14 in Rathkeale and 8 in Newcastle. Cost per week of maintaining each inmate was 2s.9d. each in Newcastle and Rathkeale, 2s. 4d. in Kilmallock.

Under the heading ‘Census of Deaths’, the \textit{Limerick Chronicle} published the following report from the parish of Knockainy, in May 1847 from the parish priest, Rev. John Ryan:

The number of deaths from 1st October 1846 to 1st April 1847: 66 of age of 15 years and upwards. There is no doubt that the excess above the previous year is owing to disease brought on from want of sufficient food, and the cold and suffering the poor had to bear on the public works. The number of deaths during the same period of former year was 22 of age of 15 and upwards. The contribution for the relief of the poor during this and last year came principally from the resident gentry, clergy and farmers; very little in proportion to their rents from the proprietors ... Great numbers are emigrating; in fact, every poor person who can make out the means; many more would go if the small farmers could get any sum for their holdings.\footnote{17}
Famine fever, brought on by hunger, was rampant in 1847. In Kilmallock people affected by the disease sought shelter in the ruins of the old Dominican priory, so as not to spread the contagion among other members of their family. A very moving letter survives regarding this practice, from the already-mentioned Dr. O'Connell:

Gentlemen, I beg leave to call your serious attention to the spread of fever in Kilmallock electoral division, with a view to your speedily carrying out the 9th Vict. c. 10. There are at present in the main street of Kilmallock, six poor families in fever; two on Stone Road, and two more in Church Lane, and, dreadful to add, one of these, Mrs. Power, mother of eight in family, is breathing out pestilence of the most contagious kind in her numerous and truly unfortunate family, who cannot separate themselves, or procure admittance into any other house. I have been attending fever and dysenteric patients since the 13th April, when I made a report to you from the dispensary books of the cases under my care, and I stated for your information, that there were then lying sick in the Abbey cloister, and in want of bedding and nourishment, some unfortunate creatures. I am sorry to again inform you that the numbers have since increased in this abode of misery. Nine poor souls, victims of famine, and its consequences, fever and dysentery, are now located there.

It would bring heart-sickness on an Ethiopian to behold one of those poor souls, the widow Galwey, within the last week, swollen with dropsy herself, sitting on a cold stone over her daughter raging with fever, and endeavouring to soothe her troubled thoughts and quench, with river water, her parched tongue. This poor girl is since removed to a more generous and peaceful world, and her poor aunt, too, who made some struggle to attend on her, died in the undertaking. The widowed mother is still in the ruins, with the cold wind blowing in on her; and on the night of her daughter’s burial the cows of the abbey farm came in on the helpless creature, and ate the small wisp of straw from under her. The other sick patients there are going on as well as may be expected from their misery and wretchedness. It is indeed a sad sight to look on these poor people, and not have it in one’s power to supply their wants. I hope the Board will now do something decisive on this head, as they have the power by law, and that they will take a hospital, appoint sanitary police for removing them (the patients) thereto, and order the town to be lime washed, and the filth and manure removed from the dwellings of the poor, otherwise God only knows where the evil will terminate.

MORGAN DAVID O Connell, M.D.18

In another communication in which he referred to the sick lying in the priory, Dr. O'Connell told the Guardians, "this is ... peculiarly the poor man's question: you are his guardians. His health is his property - and health gone, house and land, income and credit, tools, furniture, clothing and independence and, too often, honesty, all follow and go with it. The wealthier can always take care of themselves."19

A letter from Robert Fetherston, of Burree House, to Sir William Somerville, on 14 October, 1847, gives a very clear idea of the desperation of the famine-stricken at that

18 L.C., 5 May, 1847 - this letter was a copy of one addressed in the first instance by Dr. O’Connell to the Kilmallock Board of Guardians. It is also printed in Seeigha, Story of Kilmallock, pp 195-6.
19 Minute Book of Kilmallock Union, April 1846 to Feb. 1847.
time in an area only a few miles west of Kilmallock. Fetherston informed Somerville that ‘this peaceable district was yesterday thrown in the greatest state of excitement and confusion by the assemblage of a turbulent multitude of the lower order, which, in the first place, met on the Hill of Garryfine, and not finding the Roman Catholic clergyman, came on here (to Bruree) to request, as they said, my influence to procure food. I told them of my sympathy and said that provision had been made both within and without the Poor House.’

The letter then goes on to say that the mob became furious, broke into his lawn, drove off twenty of his milch cows, beating them severely with sticks and stones. He sent his servant after them to remonstrate with them but they drove him back. They then went to the Glebe, and took the Protestant minister’s stock, and to the P.P., the Rev. Fr. Ryan, and took his stock as well. Fr. Ryan followed them and persuaded them to abandon the cattle. The people told him that if work or food was not provided within a week they would repeat the performance. Fetherston estimated the crowd at 2,000, and said most of them were strangers, and could not be identified. He complained that he had no power to repel them. He also stated that they had wanted him to go to the mill and get them ten tons of meal instantly, adding ‘this spirit of insubordination should be checked and stopped before it arrives at the maturity to which it is hastening’. Numerous other attacks were carried out at this time on the holdings of members of the landed gentry, and on the holdings of large farmers, and corn, potatoes, turnips, sheep and cattle were seized by large bodies of raiders.

As 1847 progressed people were beginning to show signs of revolt against the system which they believed was doing nothing to alleviate their great distress. For example, a very strongly-worded Memorial was addressed to the ex-officio Guardians of the Union of Newcastle by ‘the starving poor of the parish of Ballingarry assembled at Granagh on the 3rd October 1847’. It ended with the words ‘we appeal to God, we appeal to public opinion, we appeal to the Government, to secure for us at your hands that which you justly owe us, and which, up to this hour, you have illegally and culpably, and at the expense of a frightful amount of human suffering, withheld from us’. The memorial was signed on behalf of the meeting by the chairman, James Meehan, of Ballinleena.

1848 was another year of hunger, disease and death. The numbers in Kilmallock workhouse continued to grow during the year and in twelve weeks in the final months of 1848, 230 people died there. As it was no longer possible to accommodate all those seeking shelter there, auxiliary workhouses and fever hospitals were opened in various other centres within the Kilmallock Union area – Bruff, Ballylanders, Galbally and, later, Bruree. And there was, of course, the fever hospital at Garrynane, a mile from Kilmallock, and another in Tremainlie House. And for a time a store in the main street (now Feore’s Drapery) was used as an auxiliary workhouse. With the extra accommodation now available, the total number of destitute poor and sick in the various institutions in the Union district reached 3,500 by the end of December 1848 and the number was to continue very high during the early part of 1849.

Forty-five townlands in Co. Limerick showed population falls of between 50% and 59% between 1841 and 1851; thirty-two showed falls of between 60% and 69%;

20 Seoighe, Story of Kilmallock, pp 192-3.
21 British Parliamentary Papers, FAMINE IRELAND, 2, Session 1847-1848, I am grateful to Séamus Ó Siúilleabháin for having drawn my attention to this document.
22 Seoighe, Story of Kilmallock, p. 196.
seventeen townlands showed falls of between 70% and 79%; six of between 80% and 89%; two of between 90% and 99%; and one showed a 100% loss. The effects of the Famine were fairly evenly distributed over the whole county. In the eastern part of the county—say from Kilmalloch eastward—sixteen townlands showed a loss of between 50% and 59%. In the central part of the county (Adare, Crecora, Ballingarry, Corcomohide, Bruree, etc.) eighteen townlands showed similar losses of between 50% and 59%. In the west of the county eleven townlands had losses of the same magnitude.

The number of townlands that suffered population losses of between 60% and 69% were as follows: East Limerick, 13; Central Limerick, 8; West Limerick, 11. Townlands suffering losses of from 70% to 79% numbered 5 in East Limerick; 3 in central Limerick; 9 in West Limerick. One townland in central Limerick, and five townlands in West Limerick, suffered losses of from 80% to 89%. The population in the townland of Kingsland, near Granagh (parish of Ballingarry), fell by 90% and that of Cloverfield, near Dromkeen, in East Limerick, fell by 95%. One townland, Lisamota, parish of Ballingarry, fell by 100%. One wonders what were the circumstances responsible here for the disappearance of a whole community. In 1841 Lisamota had a population of 282; in 1851 it had nil population. In 1841 it had 38 houses; in 1851 it had one uninhabited house. With 38 houses and a population of 282 in 1841, it meant that the average number of persons in each house was seven.

I hadn't sufficient time to do a proper study of the census figures; but from a rather cursory examination the worst hit areas would appear to have been the north Limerick area along the Shannon estuary, as far west, perhaps, as Robertstown. Here, townlands in Kildimo parish had losses of 85%, 81%, 70%, 68%, 60%, and 50%. Askeaton parish had losses of 85%, 80%, 75%, 68% and 66%. Lismakeery parish had losses of 75%, 65% and 50%. Iveruss parish had losses of 65%, 54% and 50%.

One might have expected extremely high losses of population in the most westerly part of the county, where the land was poor. However, this was not the case. The decrease in Abbeyfeale parish was only 24%—that word 'only', of course, is relative. Neither would the losses in Kilfergus, Dunmoylan or Shanagolden compare with those of Kildimo and Ballingarry.

Losses were heavy too in central Co. Limerick. Ballingarry had townlands with losses of 100% (Lisamota), 90%, 75% and 61%. In fact the population of Ballingarry parish as a whole fell by 50%, the highest loss for any parish in the county, so far as I have been able to make out. Just south of Ballingarry, in the parish of Corcomohide—the ancient Corca Muichead of the Mac Eniry, now represented by the parish of Ballygran/Castletown—losses in individual townlands were high, too: 76%, 66%, 60%, 54% and 50%. If we go a little further west we find Kilmeedy among the worst hit parishes with losses of 78%, 73%, 64%, 62% and three of 50%. In Mahoonagh losses were about equally high: 80%, 71%, 70%, and 60%, and three townlands with losses of 50%. In Croom parish, Honeypound suffered a loss of 67%, Lurraga, a loss of 59% Lisaleen with a loss of 50%.

In the far south-east of Co. Limerick losses were high in parts of the parish of Kilbeheney, on the slopes of the Galtees: 61%, 56%, 54%. Uregare, south of Bruff, suffered losses of 71% and 65%. The old civil parish of Particles—now divided between the modern ecclesiastical parishes of Ballyorgan and Ardpatrick—was the one parish that had a townland showing a large increase of population. The townland in question was Glensheen, a Palatine village, and native place of the famous brothers, P.W. Joyce and Robert Dwyer Joyce. The population of Glensheen increased from 191
to 381, an increase of 50%, and the number of houses increased from 30 to 58. The reason for the increase was that the great Oliver residence of Castleoliver was under construction during the Famine years, and many tradesmen and labourers and their families engaged in the building had settled in Glenosheen.

When food became really scarce, people who had some little supply of their own, sometimes took steps to guard it from those who had none. This may, in fact be one of the reasons for the reticence there was in later years to speak about the Famine. About twenty years ago I took down a story about the Famine in the Athlacca district from a well-known seanchai named Mollie Lynch. This is the story in Mollie’s own words:

During the Famine Johnny Connors had to mind a field of turnips for a farmer in Páirc na mBó, over Knocktwo. He used to have a gun under his head above on the bounds ditch. About two o’clock this morning he heard a rustling noise, and saw a man with a bag of turnips nearly filled. He went over to him. He found out that he was a man with about thirteen children living in an old thatched house over in Cluain Lára. He let him keep the turnips.

I was reminded of that story some years ago when on going through the files of the Limerick Leader, I came on a news item from the Rathkeale correspondent of the paper in its issue of 31 January 1931. The correspondent told of the death of a Mrs Kate Condon of Kilcolman East on the 25 January, at the age of 91. The correspondent said Mrs Condon had a clear memory of the Famine, and said he had once heard her tell how on Christmas Eve, 1847, when she went on a message to a neighbour’s house, she saw the woman of the house strain a pot of turnips and turn them out on the table. This was the only food the family had in the house. The correspondent also remarked that Mrs. Condon was a good Irish speaker.

Thousands of native Irish speakers died in Co. Limerick as a result of the Famine. Some time ago Pat O’Donovan, told me how he came across in a newspaper report an account of a man from Knockfierna who died of hunger during the Famine. The man’s wife was giving evidence about her husband’s death, but had to give it in Irish as she knew no English. In Ireland during the Famine every parish, every townland, was a disaster area; every graveyard was a Famine graveyard.

And so we remember the Famine, An Gorta Mór, Aimsir an Drochshaoil, here in Newcastle today. It is difficult to comprehend its magnitude. At least a million dead; at least another million lost through emigration. Surely, we, the descendants of the survivors, should ensure, as far as lies in our power, that no other people anywhere in the world shall ever experience the like again. ‘For I was hungry and you gave me to eat, and I was thirsty and you gave me to drink’. Is fiú cuimhneamh ar dhri na bhfocal sin.