

## The Economy of Limerick in the aftermath of the Great Famine

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The improvements in economic and social conditions which occurred in Limerick, as elsewhere in Ireland, in the decades that followed the Famine are discussed and analysed. The study focuses particularly on the 1850s and shows how changes in agriculture, industry and retailing were of major importance. This increased prosperity however was linked to high levels of emigration particularly among the rural poor.

### Introduction

In Limerick, as in the country as a whole, the extreme ravages of the Famine years were followed by a period of economic boom and the emergence of the modern Irish economy. The bald figures tell much of the story of the transformation in the Irish economy and society during the second half of the nineteenth century. Large-scale emigration and falling birth and marriage rates ensured a population, which had plummeted already from a high of 8½ million in 1845 to 6½ million in 1851, continued to decline, reaching a figure of just under 4½ million in 1901. The population of Limerick went from about 330,000 in 1841 to 262,000 a decade later and to 146,000 by the time of the first census of the twentieth century. The drop in the rural population was particularly brutal and the proportion of people living in towns of 1,500 or more increased from around a sixth to a third. Furthermore, the obliteration of the smallholder during and after the Famine, allied to the indebtedness of the landlords, allowed for a transformation in the pattern of landownership, in particular a grasping of position and power by wealthier farmers and the emergence of a rural middle class. The total number of farms fell by 15 per cent but average farm size increased. However, it was an era, too, of rising wages and living standards, of improved literacy, housing and longer life expectancy.

### Agriculture

Agriculture in Ireland changed dramatically between the Famine and the First World War. On the eve of the Famine tillage farming (wheat, oats, barley, potatoes and root crops) was by far the dominant sector, contributing more than three-fifths to Ireland's total agricultural output.<sup>1</sup> However, a turnabout in the fortunes of pasture farming, especially the raising of livestock, led by the turn of the century to a situation where, Cormac Ó Gráda has suggested, even 'the humble farmyard hen and duck were adding more to agricultural output' than wheat, oats and potatoes combined.<sup>2</sup> All told, between the 1850s and 1914, while cattle numbers rose by a third and the acreage under hay increased by 75 per cent that under grain fell by 50 per cent.

The great change in the orientation of Irish agriculture from tillage to pasture that characterized the second half of the nineteenth century was set in motion during the

<sup>1</sup> C. Ó Gráda, *Ireland Before and After the Famine: Explorations in Economic History, 1800-1925* (Manchester, 1988) p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in M. Turner, *After the Famine: Irish Agriculture, 1850-1914* (Cambridge, 2002) p. 15.



catastrophic years of the Famine. Between 1847 and 1852 the acreage planted with wheat fell by more than 50 per cent, from c.750,000 to c.350,000 acres.<sup>3</sup> During roughly the same period livestock numbers rose starkly.<sup>4</sup> The decimation of the grain acreage had a number of contributory factors, such as the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 and the damage caused to harvests by the desperate weather of the Famine years. However, of greater importance than any emotive or political issue was the economic reality of altering market demand, the price of butter, store cattle, mutton and other products of pasture farming rising by between 30-50 per cent in the twenty years after the Famine. This sharp increase was in large part a consequence of the great demand for such produce in the buoyant and increasingly accessible mid-Victorian British market.<sup>5</sup> Irish farmers responded logically and as the acreage under corn declined that given over to hay and pasture rose commensurately. Indeed, in contrast to the old slur that Irish farmers were inherently backward and slovenly, modern historians have quoted approvingly the 1926 conclusion of Thomas Barrington that 'there is not a scintilla of evidence ... to suggest that the Irish farmer has regulated his productive activities other than in accordance with the economic tendencies of his time.'<sup>6</sup> This trend from tillage to pasture was evident in pre-Famine Ireland but the degree is disputed and ought not to be over-emphasised.

While tillage plummeted and the livestock sector profited, dairying, the third main strand of Irish agriculture, remained fairly steadfast in its importance to the agricultural economy. The main product of dairying was butter and after a short-lived depression in prices in 1849 the value of Irish butter rose dramatically, by as much as 45 per cent between the early 1850s and early 1870s.<sup>7</sup> To help meet this growing demand the number of milch (or milking) cows in Munster alone increased by 10 per cent during the same period.<sup>8</sup>

East Limerick lies at the heart of Ireland's premier dairying terrain, the Golden Vale that encompasses also mid- and north Cork along with tracts of Kilkenny and south Tipperary. With a fertile soil, flat limestone terrain and moist climate suited perfectly to the demands of dairying the lands of the Golden Vale maintained a focus on dairying even in the midst of the widespread switch to tillage that accompanied the years of the Napoleonic Wars and their aftermath. Limerick's own butter market catered primarily for the farmers of Clare, the high-grade butter from the east of the county travelling down instead in firkins (small wooden casks) to the famous Cork Butter Market where it was inspected, branded, and shipped across the world.

Having focused previously on a trade with Portugal, by the early 1850s butter from Cork was destined for two main markets, Australia and an increasingly affluent Britain. Regarding the former prices were so spectacular, it was said, 'for a time a shipment of butter to Melbourne was better than a huge find at a gold creek.'<sup>9</sup> However, while the Australian market dried up by the early 1860s, that in Britain proved more durable.

<sup>3</sup> J.S. Donnelly, Jr., 'Production, Prices, and Exports, 1846-51', in W.E. Vaughan (ed.), *A New History of Ireland, V: Ireland under the Union, I, 1801-70* (Oxford, 1989) p. 289.

<sup>4</sup> Turner, *Irish Agriculture*, p. 232.

<sup>5</sup> R.V. Comerford, 'Ireland 1850-70, Post-Famine and Mid-Victorian', in *New History of Ireland, V*, p. 381.

<sup>6</sup> C. Ó Gráda, 'Supply Responsiveness in Irish Agriculture during the Nineteenth Century', *Economic History Review*, vol. 28 (May, 1975) pp 312-4.

<sup>7</sup> J.S. Donnelly Jr., 'Cork Market: Its Role in the Nineteenth Century Irish Butter Trade', *Studia Hibernica*, vol. 11 (1971) p. 132.

<sup>8</sup> J.S. Donnelly Jr., *The Land and People of Nineteenth Century Cork: The Rural Economy and the Land Question* (London, 1975) p. 135.

<sup>9</sup> Donnelly, 'Cork Market', p. 131.



Business at the Cork Butter Market was buoyant for most of the 1850s, receipts and exports showing a consistent upward trend, a sure sign of boon for the many dairy farmers of east Limerick who supplied it.<sup>10</sup> Such was the growth and profitability of the butter trade that a number of smaller butter markets were established in towns and villages around Munster in the mid-1850s, including Shanagolden, Co. Limerick, Charleville, Co. Cork and Killenaule, Co. Tipperary.

Another valuable source of income for Irish dairy farmers was the sale and supply of calves both for export and to the increasingly prosperous grazing and fattening districts of Ireland. Prices for these young stock were on the increase through the 1850s and numerous nineteenth-century accounts describe how 'cow-jobbers' after buying yearlings from dairy farmers in Limerick would sell them off to the graziers of, for example, Connaught or Clare who held on to them a few years before selling them in turn to the farmers of Meath or Kildare for fattening into beef.<sup>11</sup>

Mixed farming, dairying and tillage but with an emphasis on the former, was pursued widely in the central districts of Limerick. When James Caird, a Scottish agricultural expert, travelled through the county late in 1849 he met 'an East Lothian man, who came to Ireland thirty years ago' with substantial holdings around Croom and Adare, where the land was generally flat and of 'a fine deep red soil, open and friable.' This large farmer combined growing wheat, oats, barley and turnips with keeping 'a stock of forty large half-bred cows, rearing all their calves, which are crosses with the shorthorn; making besides, from each cow, three firkins of butter, worth 40s to 50s a firkin. His young stock are very good, the bull calves particularly large and fine.'<sup>12</sup>

Further west, around Rathkeale and Newcastle West – then the two most populous towns outside of Limerick city – the quality of land deteriorated and the structure of farming changed. The emphasis was on tillage and turf cutting and there was a preponderance of smaller farms. Despite being generally poorer than their eastern counterparts the farmers of west Limerick were considered to be fairer men, old poems and songs like 'The Galbally Farmer' portraying caustically the stinginess of wealthy east Limerick farmers.<sup>13</sup>

With its boggy and hilly terrain west Limerick stayed focused on tillage even after the Famine when the demand for such produce in general fell. In the mid-1850s, however, tillage in Limerick and Ireland received a considerable fillip with the coming of the Crimean War (1854-6). The subsequent disruption to the European grain trade led to a great rise in prices. Rumours of peace in early 1856 shocked the Limerick corn market and led to 'a fall in prices of fully 3d. per stone under the prices of Wednesday last!' The *Limerick Chronicle* commented: 'This sudden decline will no doubt disappoint the farmer who has been thriving for two years upon the almost total absence of foreign grain imports.' However, in a sign of just how inflated the price of wheat had become, the report continued: 'But the agriculturalist must admit that a fall of even 6d. per stone in Wheat, at the present enormous average, would leave a fair margin to cover his profit and loss upon its cultivation.'<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> P.M. Solar, 'The Irish Butter Trade in the Nineteenth Century: New Estimates and their Implications', *Studia Hibernica*, vol. 25 (1989-90) p. 159.

<sup>11</sup> L. Kennedy, 'Regional Specialization, Railway Development, and Irish Agriculture in the Nineteenth Century' in J.A. Goldstrom, & L.A. Clarkson (eds), *Irish Population, Economy, and Society* (Oxford, 1981) pp 175-8.

<sup>12</sup> P.J. Meghen, 'Social History' in Rev. J. Newman (ed.), *The Limerick Rural Survey, 1958-1964* (Tipperary, 1964) pp 135-6.

<sup>13</sup> M. Seoighe, *Portrait of Limerick* (London, 1982) pp 17-8.

<sup>14</sup> *Limerick Chronicle*, 19 January 1856.



The amount of land under tillage in Limerick declined considerably, by between 40-60 per cent, in the three decades after the Famine.<sup>15</sup> However, despite this fall in importance of tillage those areas of the county most heavily involved in the sector, such as Rathkeale and Newcastle West, did not fall into penury. These towns survived and had their share of new shops and other appendages of the broadly increasing rural wealth. For example, in April 1856, a big store in Rathkeale, Downes, Morrissy & Co., announced a 'Further Extension of Premises' and the arrival of luxury goods such as silk handkerchiefs, cashmeres and printed muslins.<sup>16</sup>

Although pre-Famine Ireland was not bereft of significant markets and fairs the 1850s witnessed an increase in the commercialisation of agriculture, with more organised markets, often indoors, replacing the old ad-hoc style events. A sign of the agricultural success of Limerick was the emergence of the Great Munster Fair from 1853. Held in late April the fair was a boom time for Limerick generally with hotels and stables alike filling their berths and shops such as Todds tailoring their advertisements 'To Gentlemen Visiting Limerick.'<sup>17</sup> Hartigan's Horse Repository (its front still visible on Cecil Street) was particularly lively during this time. At the fair prizes were given out for the best stock and buyers came to Limerick from all over Ireland, England and even further afield in search of good-quality and good-priced cattle and sheep, as well as 'beautiful and sleek skinned horses' and 'grunting and unromantic but excellent and well fed pigs.'<sup>18</sup> In 1858 Messrs Wilmott and Colton bought twelve steeds to take back to France 'where the nobility are in need of superior steeds.' Most of the twelve horses went for between £86 and £120 but one fetched the extraordinary sum of £210.<sup>19</sup>

Another indicator of the sense of improvement and commercialisation in the agricultural sector in Limerick was the growing number of shops selling guano for use as fertilizer. The lack of this had been a facet of Irish agriculture much derided by so-called English 'improvers' before the Famine and repeated by James Caird in 1849 when he complained that there was 'no attempt at anything like high farming. Bone dust and guano, as auxiliaries to farm manure, are scarcely tried; and feeding with linseed-cake, beans, or other imported food, quite unknown.'<sup>20</sup> Ointments for use on livestock, like 'Cuff's Farmer's Friend,' were also newly available in city stores after the Famine and there was a proliferation of seed shops. Hardware stores, meanwhile, like W. Burgess & Sons, took to selling new farm machinery.

The post-Famine period has been seen as a time of unheralded wealth for many of Ireland's rural dwellers. Although the cost of living grew it did not match the steep rise in agricultural prices leading to increased prosperity for farmers 'and those who shared their wealth – especially shopkeepers and priests.' Manifestations of this new wealth included eating meat a few days a week, owning a trap for going to church, and having a piano in the parlour.<sup>21</sup> However, not all involved in agriculture in the 1850s were beneficiaries. The farm labourer, in particular, suffered greatly, for although their numbers had declined on account of the Famine the shift away from labour intensive tillage farming meant continued unemployment, underemployment, and emigration. Overall, the number of rural labourers in Ireland fell by more than 70 per cent in the sixty years between 1841

<sup>15</sup> Turner, *Irish Agriculture, 1850-1914*, p. 44.

<sup>16</sup> *Limerick Chronicle*, 12 April 1856.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 April 1856.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 April 1856.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 May 1858.

<sup>20</sup> Meghen, 'Social History', p. 136.

<sup>21</sup> Comerford, 'Ireland 1850-70', p. 381.



and 1901, from just over a million to just under 300,000.<sup>22</sup> Wages for those who located work and stayed on did improve through the course of the 1850s - '2s 6d per day, with diet!' by 1858 - and on a few occasions there were in fact labour shortages reported at harvest time.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the general picture was almost unremittingly poor for the rural labourer and added to by the great influx of new technologies and farm machinery into Irish agriculture. 1858 saw rioting and machine breaking through much the south of the country, especially Kilkenny, though not apparently in Limerick.

The recovery in Irish agriculture during the 1850s was curtailed by the depression of 1859-64. This was caused by a harsh cycle of drought, deluge and then drought again. Dairy and tillage farmers alike suffered severe financial losses. A combination of factors, including the increased availability of credit and the thinning, from emigration, of the most susceptible section of society, the poor rural dwellers, held the depression back from becoming another famine. After the depression dairying enjoyed another halcyon period until 1876, due in large part to the insatiable demand for liquid milk in Britain's populous industrial cities.<sup>24</sup> For the last quarter of the century, though, increased foreign competition, especially from Denmark, threatened Ireland's prime position in the British butter market. The dairy farmers of Ireland, and Limerick especially, responded to this new competition by adapting (albeit sluggishly at first) to creameries, both private and co-operatively owned. Limerick, indeed, was home to Ireland's first creamery co-op and a centre of the co-operative movement's early years.

### Industry

Poverty, despair and destitution did not just cease with the coming of the 1850s. A letter to the *Limerick Reporter and Tipperary Vindicator* in 1852 decried - for all the talk then current of the nineteenth century being a time of 'improvement' and the 'march of intellect' - the poor state of health and housing in Limerick city. The Old Town, the area around St. Mary's Cathedral, was particularly disreputable, a place where only the prostitute, robber and ruffian could freely roam.<sup>25</sup> Later that year a meeting of the Town Council discussed the poor lighting situation in the dilapidated and densely populated Old Town, stating its sheer darkness made it a breeding ground for crime and resolving to start up a subscription to bring streetlights to the troubled wards.<sup>26</sup> The years up to and including 1854 also saw the continuance of mass emigration from Limerick, with upwards of 8-10,000 departing annually. The newspapers described the people at the harbour, 'flying as fast as sails can waft them from the shores of their fathers.' For the remainder of the decade, however, emigration figures fell to c. 3-4,000 a year.<sup>27</sup>

Unemployment was also gravely high during the early years of the decade. In January 1854, against a backdrop of rumoured attacks on city bakeries, 'a large body of young, active, healthy men, labourers out of employment, filled the hall of the City of Limerick Court-House, desirous of an interview with the Mayor, stating they were out of employment - that they had no means of living - and that they should have bread or plunder.'<sup>28</sup>

<sup>22</sup> J.W. Boyle, 'A Marginal Figure: The Irish Rural Labourer', in S. Clark, & J.S. Donnelly, Jr., (eds.), *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest, 1780-1914* (Manchester, 1983) p. 312.

<sup>23</sup> *Limerick Chronicle*, 11 August 1858.

<sup>24</sup> Donnelly, *Land and People*, p. 149.

<sup>25</sup> *Limerick Reporter and Tipperary Vindicator*, 22 October 1852.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 November 1852.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 April 1853; W.E. Vaughan & A.J. Fitzpatrick (eds), *Irish Historical Statistics: Population, 1821-1971* (Dublin, 1978) p. 304.

<sup>28</sup> *Limerick Reporter and Tipperary Vindicator*, 10 January 1854.



One element of industry the people of Limerick looked for to alleviate distress was railway building, lines to Ennis and Foynes having long been mooted. During the Famine construction of the Limerick & Waterford Railway had been 'most providentially serviceable to the labouring classes and trades of this city.'<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, it had been estimated in 1852 that 'from five to six thousand persons will get employment daily' once the Limerick to Ennis line commenced, 'thereby introducing plenty and happiness amongst our hitherto oppressed and neglected peasantry, and lightening the burden of our poor rates.'<sup>30</sup>

Limerick's first rail connection, to Tipperary town (Limerick Junction), was a part of the Limerick & Waterford Railway and opened in May 1848. In late 1854 the struggling people of Limerick at last got their wish when after much procrastination work began on a line to Foynes. William Dargan, the Dublin railway magnate, was the man behind this enterprise. A short time previously work had commenced on the Ennis line and early in that job a group of labourers found a stash of gold rings, bracelets, and armlets that they quickly sold to shops and stalls around the city.<sup>31</sup> By the early 1860s the rail network had spread substantially so that besides the already mentioned lines it stretched south from Patrickswell to Charleville and from Limerick up to Castleconnell, Birdhill and Killaloe. It was not long before even the furthest reaches of west Limerick and Kerry were connected to the major rail arteries of the country.

A result of the spread of railways across Ireland was the greater ease with which foreign goods could be transported through the country. This caused a good deal of resentment from Irish manufacturers and a regular complaint of the Congregated Trades of Limerick in the early 1850s concerned the swamping of local shops with cheap imported furniture and other goods. For example, the Trades claimed there had been a significant fall in the number of cabinet-makers employed in Limerick, and a consequent fall in the number of sawyers employed, too. The mass-produced English furniture found in shops was 'purchased cheap, sold dear, and the dupes who purchase it soon find their mistake.' It was dismissed as 'merely ginger-bread work,' while that of local artisans was 'lasting, and not inferior in beauty.' Despite efforts to promote 'native produce,' particularly among furniture makers, the Trades were forced to bemoan 'the severe loss sustained by Limerick artisans [sic] in the decay of several branches of manufacture that once gave vast employment in our city, and with it health and vitality to the social system.'<sup>32</sup>

The Trades railed against the apparent prejudice of city merchants and local gentry against domestic produce and their preference for the cheap, mass-produced foreign goods. For the Trades this was nothing less than a 'suicidal policy.'<sup>33</sup> This perception of prejudice was widespread in Ireland at the time and among the factors behind the establishment of an industrial exhibition in Cork in 1852, a mimic of the famous Crystal Palace exhibition in London a year earlier. The Cork exhibition, it was hoped, would remove bias and stimulate consumer demand for Irish-made products. John Francis Maguire, founder of the *Cork Examiner* and one of the chief organisers of the exhibition, took as an example the preponderance of English-made carriages in Ireland. Though inferior in quality and more expensive than their Irish counterparts they dominated on

<sup>29</sup> M. O' Dwyer, 'Building the Limerick & Waterford Railway', *Reflections on Munster Railways* (Limerick, 1984) p. 18.

<sup>30</sup> *Limerick Reporter and Tipperary Vindicator*, 26 October 1852.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 24 March 1854.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 June 1852.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 May 1852.



account of the Irishman's bias toward his countryman's wares. The supplanting of the English by homemade carriages would have tremendous knock-on benefits for both the local and wider economy. If even fifty extra carriages were made and sold at £200 each the money given out in wages (£5,000 Maguire estimated) 'would spread contentment and happiness, and all the blessings of civilization and independence, through hundreds of families ... then would be ended, for ever, the scandal of seeing an English-built carriage flashing through our Irish cities, or rolling along our Irish roads.'<sup>34</sup>

The exhibition in Cork was followed a year later by a national exhibition held in Dublin. Both sent delegates to Limerick in search of items to put on view and Limerick Lace was among the few success stories to emerge from the brace of exhibitions. Limerick Lace, an elaborate and specialized style of hand-embroidery, was the collective name given to the merchandise of the numerous lace-makers of the city. Lace-making, indeed, had become one of the cities biggest employers but much of the work was carried out in charitable industrial establishments, a kind way of describing what were often essentially crowded workhouses for women and children. These charity and commercial enterprises, though, prospered on the back of their exhibition displays and, according to Maguire, large orders for Limerick Lace were received from Britain and the United States.<sup>35</sup> The big local stores naturally stocked Limerick Lace and an advertisement from a Glasgow firm, 'who are at present Manufacturers of Fancy Goods for the Home and Foreign Markets,' wishing to 'make an arrangement with a Limerick House for the sale of their make of Laces' showed the international demand.<sup>36</sup>

Another Limerick industry to perform well in the 1850s and adapt to the new market conditions was flour milling, particularly the mills of J. N. Russell and James Bannatyne. After the Famine, at the same time that tillage in Ireland was decreasing, cereals and bread grew in their level of importance to the national diet. This demand led to a dependence on imported corn and wheat that in turn benefited the mills, like those of Limerick, located close to major ports. Limerick, in fact, overtook Cork in terms of foreign imports of wheat by the 1890s.<sup>37</sup> To maintain their primacy the big Limerick millers adapted in good time to the newest milling technologies, Russell's building a new roller-mill at Newtown Pery that was nine storeys high and driven by a 350-hp steam engine.<sup>38</sup>

Brewing in Limerick did not perform so admirably even though the 1850s was the decade when whiskey began to be overtaken by porter and ale as the preferred drink in Ireland. Determined efforts were made by government to wean the Irish of hard liquor with huge increases in duties on whiskey and an intensified campaign against poitin. Cheaper transport costs also aided the rise in availability and popularity of porter and whereas one account from Limerick not long before the Famine described how 'beer or porter is not kept by the publicans; very little of either is drank by any class' by 1858 it was being reported 'Porter and ale is now generally drank in this City, Dublin, Cork, and elsewhere, owing to the encreased [sic] price of whiskey, which is now selling at 3d to 3½d per glass in Limerick, and punch 3½d per half glass or dandy.'<sup>39</sup>

Limerick was home to a number of breweries, at Garryowen and Newgate for example, but they did not capitalise on the new public preference and it was instead

<sup>34</sup> A.C. Davies, 'The First Irish Industrial Exhibition: Cork 1852', in *Irish Economic and Social History*, vol. 2 (1975) p. 52.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>36</sup> *Limerick Chronicle*, 16 January 1856.

<sup>37</sup> A. Bielenberg, 'A Survey of Irish Flour Milling, 1801-1922', in A. Bielenberg (ed.), *Irish Flour Milling: A History, 600-2000* (Dublin, 2003) p. 75.

<sup>38</sup> C. Ó Gráda, *Ireland: A New Economic History 1780-1939* (Oxford, 1994) p. 305.

<sup>39</sup> Ó Gráda, 'Supply Responsiveness', p. 315; *Limerick Chronicle*, 28 April 1858.



companies like Murphy's, established in Cork in 1856, and the already domineering Guinness that triumphed. This was despite efforts from the Congregated Trades to convince local people to drink local liquors. As well as praising the price and quality of the drink produced by Limerick breweries the Trades drew attention to how the preferment given to non-local brews was draining £30,000 out of the city annually, and that if kept in Limerick the increased trade would bring work to mechanics, coopers, carpenters, painters, farriers, labourers and others. They encouraged Limerick men to drink Limerick porter so that the £30,000 could be 'diffused among the labouring and artisan classes and through them to every portion of our community.'<sup>40</sup> Commendable though the effort the Trades was, it met with little success.

Limerick's already renowned bacon industry continued to perform excellently. Indeed, such was its quality and reputation that in 1858 Matterson's, one of the main curing firms in the city, had to issue a notice - a 'Caution to the Public' - advising of inferior hams and bacons being sold in Dublin, purporting to be Matterson's but not carrying the brand. The notice carried a picture of the legitimate Matterson's brand.<sup>41</sup>

In early 1854 the mayor of Limerick proposed to write to the commissioners of national education in an attempt to guarantee the use of local labour in the construction of a new district model national school in the city. According to the mayor: 'At this period of great distress much relief would be afforded to the tradesmen and labourers of the city, if employment on that work were given to them in preference to others.'<sup>42</sup> The school still stands on O'Connell Avenue where it functions as a *Gaelscoil*. Its construction marked the beginning of an impressive building boom that brought much-needed employment and was an indicator of the prosperity in Limerick from the mid-decade on. The pages of the local papers began to fill with notices to tender for often large building projects, including the building and re-building of five bridges in east Limerick, the removal of the stone arch of the Ballinacurra Bridge on the main road to Askeaton and erection of an iron bridge in its place, the building and rebuilding of roads and bridges in the west of the county, and the construction of stationhouses at Patrickswell and Adare for use on the Foynes railway line.<sup>43</sup>

Two of the biggest projects undertaken were the building of St. John's Cathedral (foundation stone laid on 1 May 1856) and the Redemptorist Church (foundation stone laid on 22 May 1858), both designed in a Gothic style by the English architect Philip Charles Hardwick. Regarding St. John's the original idea had been simply to build a new church in the location. However, in another sign of the increasing wealth around Limerick the response to an appeal for funds was so strong that new plans were drawn up to convert the existing chapel into the Cathedral of the Diocese.<sup>44</sup> Repairs and improvements were also carried out on a number of smaller churches in the county.

## Retail

Maurice Lenihan's *History of Limerick*, first published in 1866, makes reference to the three 'Monster Houses' of the city, Todds, Revingtons, and Cannock, Tait & Co., 'great drapery and tailoring establishments ... which employ altogether some hundreds of

<sup>40</sup> *Limerick Reporter and Tipperary Vindicator*, 25 May 1852.

<sup>41</sup> *Limerick Chronicle*, 18 December 1858.

<sup>42</sup> *Limerick Reporter and Tipperary Vindicator*, 3 February 1854.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 March, 11 July, 15 August and 8 December 1854.

<sup>44</sup> [www.limerickdiocesheritage.org/StJohns/chStJohns.htm](http://www.limerickdiocesheritage.org/StJohns/chStJohns.htm)



intelligent assistants, male and female.<sup>45</sup> By the time of Lenihan's writing these three establishments had dominated Limerick's wholesale and retail sector for a decade and more, the era of the 'Monster Houses', or department stores, having begun shortly after the Famine when an increased commercialisation was but one facet to the larger trend of almost total incorporation of Ireland into the money economy and the British capitalist system, subsistence living continuing on in ever-decreasing pockets of the country.

The arrival and rapid success of these large department stores in Ireland, with their abundant supplies of cheap and imported goods, particularly clothing and furniture, was a cause of much trenchant ill will among artisans and craftsmen who feared for the future of their own more specialized stores. Nevertheless, the success of the 'Monster Houses' was undeniable and helped alter the physical and mental landscape of Limerick during the decade after the Famine. Among the first such establishments in Ireland was Arnotts of Dublin and in 1850 the two Scotsmen behind Arnotts, John Arnott and George Cannock, travelled to Limerick and purchased the George's Street (now O'Connell Street) premises of the drapers Cumine and Mitchell. The store they opened in Limerick was called Cannocks. When, in 1858, Arnott sold his share of the business to a successful young entrepreneur, Peter Tait, Cannock, Tait & Co. was born.

Peter Tait is among the more mercurial figures in modern Limerick history. Born in Lerwick in the Shetland Islands he moved to Limerick in 1844, aged sixteen, to work at the aforementioned Cumine and Mitchell drapery, a post most likely arranged by his father who was also involved in the drapery trade.<sup>46</sup> On his own time the young Tait took to selling shirts to sailors down at the docks and set up a small business at 4 Bedford Row, employing one woman. By 1853, however, he had embarked on a much more significant venture, the Limerick Clothing Factory in the Boherbuoy area of the city that was soon supplying tens of thousands of uniforms to the British Army during the Crimean War, employing hundreds in the process. Later, Tait's factory supplied uniforms for the Confederate forces of the American Civil War. Tait was mayor of Limerick for three years between 1866 and 1868 but after the bankruptcy of his River Plate Steamship Company in 1869 his business career started to unravel. He left Limerick soon after, first for Scotland and then many years in Istanbul, ending his days near penniless and prospecting for oil in the Caucasus.

When he bought into Cannocks in 1858, Peter Tait immediately set about a massive programme of enlargement of premises and stock, buying up swathes of adjoining properties. However, his was not the only mind fixed on expanding at the time. Revington's was an established name in Limerick even before the Famine, the original Revington, Higginson & Co. premises found at 14, 15 and 16 George's Street. The early 1850s saw a change of name, extension of premises, and enlargement of stock in a clear bid to keep up with trends and with the competition from Cannocks, located diagonally across the street. Todds, the third main store, was around the corner from Revingtons, on William Street, and, like Cannocks, founded by an enterprising Scotsman, William Todd.

As was their style the department stores sold a wide assortment of goods including furniture, carpets, upholstery, musical instruments, perfumery, and jewellery. Tailoring and outfitting, however, were the mainstay of these stores, but even here the variety of material available would have been unfathomable in Limerick just a few years before: a rich array of straw bonnets, shawls, silks, shirts, merinos, mantles, millinery, hosiery and gloves all under the one commodious roof. Other Limerick retailers had to follow the

<sup>45</sup> M. Lenihan, *History of Limerick* (reprint, Cork, 1991) p. 752.

<sup>46</sup> J.E. Waite, *Peter Tait: A Remarkable Story* (Stoke sub Hamdon, 2005) p. 3.



example of the 'Monster Houses' even if they did not particularly wish to. Edmond S. Beveridge of the City Clothing Warerooms, 9 George's Street, was no fan of the 'ALIEN and MONSTER ESTABLISHMENTS' but was prevailed upon to expand by friends who pointed out that the 'unmerited preference' of the public for the 'Monster Houses, demanded that I should add the "Tailoring" to the Woollen Drapery Department of my Business.'<sup>47</sup>

The Limerick of the 1850s was an increasingly cosmopolitan city, too, for it was not just cheap, mass-produced goods that the department stores brought in. W. M. Burns, who promised 'Fashion, Economy, and Punctuality' and had a woollen drapery and tailoring establishment at 101 George's Street, praised the 'more varied fashionable requirements and improved taste of the present times.'<sup>48</sup> The major stores all boasted of the 'Paris Fashions' available and many advertisements were directed to the 'Ladies of Limerick.' Revingtons had for sale 'Simmons and Woodrow's Improved Felt Hat' which had won a prize medal at the Great Exhibition in London in 1851.<sup>49</sup> Another sign of the growing cosmopolitan nature was the establishment by Vanesbeck & Co., French hatters from Paris, of both a factory and shop in Limerick.<sup>50</sup>

This was all a far cry from William Makepeace Thackeray's description of lower level street trade in pre-Famine Limerick:

To return to the apple-women: legions of ladies were employed through the town upon that traffic; there were really thousands of them, clustering upon the bridges, squatting down in doorways and vacant sheds for temporary markets, marching and crying their sour goods in all the crowded lanes of the city. After you get out of the Main Street the handsome part of the town is at an end, and you suddenly find yourself in such a labyrinth of busy swarming poverty and squalid commerce as never was seen – no, not in St Giles's, where Jew and Irishman side by side exhibit their genius for dirt. Here every house almost was a half ruin, and swarming with people: in the cellars you looked down and saw a barrel of herrings, which a merchant was dispensing; or a stack of meal, which a poor dirty woman sold to people poorer and dirtier than herself: above was a tinsman, or a shoemaker, or other craftsman, his battered ensign at the door, and his small wares peering through the cracked panes of his shop.<sup>51</sup>

There remained, of course, in 1850s Limerick, downtrodden premises and streets, particularly in Old Town. However, efforts were afoot to ensure unsavoury aspects of trade did not encroach upon the main city streets, the mayor, in 1854, issuing 'an order to the vegetable and fish criers of the city to provide themselves with shoes for the future.'<sup>52</sup>

Further signs of success and prosperity included instances of workers from Todds setting up businesses of their own. This occurred at least twice in the mid-1850s. In January 1856, James W. Peattie, formerly a principal cutter at Todds, set up his own tailoring and clothing store at 56 William Street.<sup>53</sup> Just a few months later a Mrs. Dickson followed suit. Her advertisement 'most respectfully' informed 'the Ladies of Limerick and its

<sup>47</sup> *Limerick Reporter and Tipperary Vindicator*, 2 June 1854.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 May 1854.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 April 1852.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 27 April 1852.

<sup>51</sup> Ó Gráda, *Ireland: A New Economic History*, p. 265.

<sup>52</sup> *Limerick Reporter and Tipperary Vindicator*, 18 August 1854.

<sup>53</sup> *Limerick Chronicle*, 19 January 1856.



vicinity, that she has commenced business for herself, at 42, William Street.<sup>54</sup> Also, another significant retailer, W. M. Burns, had occasion in late 1854 to seek a number of new employees, tailors and drapers assistants. He wanted 'A few first class Journeymen. None but men of good character and first rate abilities required. Wages Liberal.'<sup>55</sup>

The department stores could not have performed so well were it not for the general prosperity and rise in living standards and wages that characterised the post-Famine decades in Ireland. The new disposable income was often spent on hitherto luxury items like tea, tobacco and 'fancy biscuits', the pages of the local press in Limerick filled with advertisements for shops ready to cater for these needs. A growth in bookshops also evidenced the changing nature of Irish society, Easons the most notable beneficiary. Furthermore, the 1850s witnessed the appearance in Limerick of those seasonal retail events that have since become so all consuming, 'Christmas Toys' for sale at Todds and 'Valentines Cards' available at Guy's book and stationary store.<sup>56</sup>

### Conclusion

According to the Limerick historian Maurice Lenihan an average of 9.65 people lived in every house in the city in 1851. This figure dropped to 7.85 persons per house by 1861 indicating a definite improvement in living standards.<sup>57</sup> But there was also a fresh dynamism in Limerick through the 1850s, a less accurately quantifiable but vital factor to any city's sense of confidence. It was evidenced, for instance, in the opening of the Limerick School of Ornamental Art (now the School of Art and Design) in late 1852 and, a few years later, the Limerick Athenaeum. The 1850s also saw the emergence in Limerick of a number of names in retail and industry, such as Cannocks, Todds, and Tait's, still so resonant and emblematic of the city, even if they have recently ceased trading under the old familiar names, Cannocks having been sold to Penneys in 1980 and Todds, after taking over the premises of Thomas Revington in 1899 and trading there until 2001, now standing as Brown Thomas. A Tait Business Centre is located in the same part of town as the old Limerick Clothing Factory, the Tait clock tower, erected in 1868, not far away on Baker Place.

The new wealth in Limerick in the 1850s allowed for 'Pleasure Sailing' on the *Koh-i-Noor* from Limerick to Kilrush and the renting of summer holiday homes in Kilkee, Lahinch or Miltown Malbay.<sup>58</sup> However, not everyone benefited from the rising prosperity. The shift to pasture farming that brought gain to many and enabled the remarkable recovery in Irish agriculture came at a harsh human cost, the landless rural labourers taking necessarily to the emigration ships in their droves. This continued population decline was an important facet to the general post-Famine rise in living standards in Limerick and Ireland and it has been fairly posited that 'an economy whose development is accompanied by massive emigration has in some sense failed.'<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 16 April 1856

<sup>55</sup> *Limerick Reporter and Tipperary Vindicator*, 18 August and 14 November 1854.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 10 December 1852 and 7 February 1854.

<sup>57</sup> Lenihan, *History of Limerick*, p. 752.

<sup>58</sup> *Limerick Reporter and Tipperary Vindicator*, 27 June 1854.

<sup>59</sup> J. Haughton, 'The Historical Background', in J.W. O'Hagan (ed.), *The Economy of Ireland: Policy and Performance of a European Region* (Dublin, 2000) p. 3.



