

ODDS AND ENDS

AN MANGAIRE SUGACH

Knockfierna and Famine

LAST week I wrote about the Ballyhoura mountains. This week I am still on high ground but in a different part of the county, to wit, Knockfierna. Last Saturday afternoon, as part of the very successful seminar on the Famine, organised by the Limerick County Library, in the very fine Newcastle West library buildings, there was an outing to Knockfierna to view the restored pre-Famine dwellings on the heathery slopes of the hill.

For those who had not made the journey up the hillside before, the drive was quite a breath-taking experience. Two mini buses and several cars drove slowly up the steep and winding red sandstone borín, the anxiety of the visitors at times, that the vehicles would never make it, being more than compensated for by the wonderful views of the vast tract of interesting territory, extending to Mungret cement factory, Shannon Airport, and the Aughinish Alumina plant, all of which were to be seen as we climbed higher and higher in the direction of the 948-foot high peak of Knockfierna.

On our way up we passed by the Rambling House, where, in recent times, we enjoyed a night of music, song, dance and story telling, organised by the Knockfierna Heritage and Folklore Group; under their chairman, Pat O Donovan. Pat was with us on Saturday afternoon, as was John O Riordan, a musical member of the Knockfierna Group.

Arrived at our destination on the hill, we alighted from our respective vehicles and followed a path through the heather to one of the restored pre-Famine houses. Scattered about on the slopes of the hill had been the foundations of a number of houses that, according to local accounts, were abandoned because of the death or emigration of their occupiers during the Famine years, or immediately afterwards.

When it was announced officially that there would be a commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Famine during the period 1995 to 1998, the Knockfierna Heritage and Folk-

lore Group decided that they would commemorate that great tragedy of the 1840s by restoring some of the houses on the hill top.

Unlike the generality of pre-Famine houses on the lower lands, which were mud-walled structures, the houses on Knockfierna were stone built. Prior to setting out to reconstruct these Knockfierna houses, expert advice was sought as to how they should be built, and how they should be roofed. All were re-built on the existing sandstone foundations, and were roofed with thatch or scraws.

The house we inspected was a one-roomed building, as was the vast majority of the houses of the poor in the 1840s, and it resembled very closely the reconstruction of a pre-Famine one-roomed house that formed part of the outstanding Teagasc Famine Exhibition in the RDS, Dublin, last month. Pat O Donovan told us about the mechanics of building the house, and pointed out some other reconstructed houses round about. He also told us of the lore about the houses and their occupiers that had been collected from old people in the district.

A short distance from the house we were viewing were the remains of a potato plot with the ridges still intact. These ridges had never been levelled, as they would have been had the potatoes been dug out. As it was, the potatoes in the ridges rotted because of the blight, and so there was nothing to dig out. That part of the hillside where the houses had been was a commonage, known as the Ballygrennan Commons, and several tenants who had been evicted off the nearby Cox estate in Ballynoe had settled there, marking off small plots in which to grow potatoes for themselves and their families. The Famine proved disastrous for families such as these. Incidentally, there was a whole village in the Ballygrennan Commons when the Famine struck.

It was the very poorest of the people, the landless labourers, the cottiers, the small farmers, who suffered most as a result of the Famine. They formed a

very high proportion of the population, and, as a class, they were almost completely wiped out. The vast majority of them were Irish speakers, and so after the Famine very many areas that had previously Irish-speaking were no longer so.

We have a record of a woman living in the Ballygrennan Commons, on the slopes of Knockfierna, in 1848, who knew no English. She, undoubtedly, would have been only one of several people living there at that time who were monolingual Irish speakers. We know about her because of a report in the *Limerick Chronicle* of an inquest into the death of her husband, who died of starvation on the 16th November, 1848. Pat O Donovan supplied me with a copy of the *Chronicle* report, which is as follows:

"Third death from hunger in the parish of Ballingarry: On Thursday, the 16th inst., John Cox, Esq., Coroner, held an inquest at Ballygrennan/Commons, in the parish of Ballingarry, on the body of Bartholomew Roche. The jury, with the full concurrence, and, indeed, by direction of the coroner, returned their unanimous verdict: 'Died of hunger.' The widow of deceased, who lay on straw within a foot of the body of her husband (after having been within an hour disposed for death by Rev. William O Donnell, the Roman Catholic curate of the parish), in feeble and in dying accents, and in the Irish language, deposed as follows:

Margaret Roche swore — Deposed that her family consisted of her husband, herself, and two children, of the age of 12 and 15 years; that she has an elder son, Edmond Roche, aged about 22; that his young man works among the farmers at threshing and other farm labour, receiving in lieu of labour his food merely — wages being out of the question; that for the last fortnight or three weeks, her son worked for Patrick Collins, of Ballyclare, farmer; that on Sunday, October 29th, he procured for the family at home, viz. his father, mother, brother

and sister, one stone of Indian meal which lasted them for about two days; that from that time up to the death of her husband, the family lived on turnips, given by the charity of Patrick Collins, and on some cabbage leaves from their own garden, or turnips given by Mr. Collins — the last he had were of the white insubstantial kind, but she said Mr. Crimmen of Kiltatal, gave them a meal of good Swedish turnips.

On the very day on which her husband died, her son, Edmond, procured a shilling, viz sixpence of an old debt, and sixpence, the gift of Patrick Collins; this shilling he converted at once into Indian meal (about 101 lbs.); she hastened to make stirabout, but before it could be prepared her husband breathed his last. This horrid tale was corroborated by other witnesses, indeed, was well known to most of the jury, who returned a verdict accordingly."

That contemporary report from the *Limerick Chronicle* brings home to us very clearly the awful horror of the Famine. Saturday's seminar on the Famine in Newcastle West — which, I presume, is being reported in this issue of the *Leader* — was formally opened by Councillor Matt Callaghan, chairman, Limerick County Council; and during the day the following lectures were delivered: Mainchín Seoighe, "Famine in Co. Limerick"; Séamus Ó Súilleabháin, "Famine in West Limerick"; Dr. Niall Ó Cíosáin, UCG, "Popular Responses to the Famine"; Mr. Howard Dalzell, of Concern, "World Famine To-Day"; Pat O Donovan, "Famine Folklore in West Limerick"; Prof. Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, UCG, "The Great Famine in Irish History: Reflections and Recriminations."

The day's events ended with a music and song presentation, "Ceol an Ghorta," by Cairde Dúchais. County librarian, Damien Brady, and librarians Aileen Dillane, Síle de Cléir and Tony Storan, are to be congratulated on having organised such an outstanding seminar.