

Editorial

Blight, Starvation and Flight



hen the blight struck the potato crop in the autumn of 1845, it caught the country by surprise. There had been periodic little famines in previous decades but they made nothing like the terrible impact of the Great Famine. If the blight came by stealth, it quickly spread consternation and fear, particularly among the rural population.

The government in London took its responsibility seriously and set in motion a series of remedial responses. A Relief Commission for Ireland was established and it had its first meeting on 20 November, 1845. All the Commission's expenditure required Treasury approval: the money to be spent on famine relief, the grants for Poor Law, for public works and medical services. The head of the Treasury was Charles Edward Trevelyan, who was to remain a dominant figure in Irish affairs for the duration of the famine.

In her book, *The Great Hunger*, Cecil Woodham-Smith has written:

At the time of the famine Trevelyan was thirty-eight, at the height of his powers, immensely conscientious, and with an obsession for work. Though his integrity was absolute and he had a strong sense of justice, yet he was not the right man to undertake Ireland. He disapproved of the Irish; the cast of his mind, his good qualities, were such as to make him impatient with the Irish character, and some slight family difficulties may have intensified his feelings. His cousin, Alfred Trevelyan, married the daughter of Mr. Boyse, "a respectable solicitor of Limerick", and soon she was left a widow, with an infant son in whose welfare Trevelyan took, in his own words, a great interest. The boy was brought up in Limerick, but not, Trevelyan thought, suitably: he was not sent to a public school, and members of the Trevelyan family went over to Limerick to try to induce his mother to send him to Cambridge, "under a Church of England tutor" ... Trevelyan's mind was powerful, his character admirably scrupulous and upright, his devotion to duty praiseworthy, but he had a remarkable insensitiveness. Since he took action only after conscientiously satisfying himself that what he proposed to do was ethical and justified, he went forward impervious to other considerations, sustained, but also blinded, by his conviction of doing right.

The most substantial member of the Commission was Sir Randolph Routh, who was in charge of famine relief, including the distribution of Indian corn. He had 'more extensive experience than any other person ... of feeding large bodies of people in sudden emergencies'. Again, Cecil Woodham-Smith has written:

Routh, in fact, had been trained to cheapskate, to save a farthing wherever a farthing could be saved; nor in dealing with his superiors was he likely to make a stand for any opinion of his own, especially as he was answerable to the rigid and all-powerful department of the Treasury.

At Limerick a depot for the supply and distribution of food was established under the control of Deputy Commissioner General Edward Pine Coffin, a member of a Devon family, who was a man of intelligence, ability and higher social rank than the majority of Commissariat officers.

The three names of Trevelyan, Routh and Coffin feature prominently in any study of the famine in Limerick, although Coffin was later transferred to Scotland to deal with distress there. Despite the Commission's work, it was not adequate to deal with the dreadful starvation and illness throughout the country.

The famine struck hardest in the rural areas, where there was an extreme over-dependence on the potato as a basic food. Little or no other food was cooked. Trevelyan wrote: "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 the oven is unknown".

It has frequently been recorded that Limerick escaped the worst rigours of the famine but, as the contents of this publication will show, this is far too simplistic a conclusion. The famine caused unprecedented death, misery and emigration in Limerick as elsewhere. There was also a large influx of desperate, poverty-stricken people to the city from the surrounding counties, particularly Clare, and many of them perished in the transition.

This publication tells the story, in all its horrors, of the famine in Limerick from 1845 into the 1850s. It is an attempt to confront and explain what happened in the city and county during this dreadful period.

We are fortunate that so many writers and travellers visited the city during the famine and have left valuable accounts of their observations. The history of the Great Hunger makes harsh and painful reading but it is a chapter of Limerick and Irish life that cannot be denied or evaded.