

CHRISTMAS BOOK CHOICE ***

The Night of the Big Wind in Limerick; the first full account - after 152 years!

By MARTIN BYRNES

IN LIMERICK, the watchmen took refuge in terror of their lives... no living creature being able to stand in the streets, while the spirit of the tempest careening in all his might through the air, streaks of lightning at intervals illuminating the midnight darkness and a shower of slates at every angle which was exposed to the blast, strewing the ground with broken particles, and flying before the tempest, we may add, like shreds of paper.

This is the story of the greatest weather calamity which ever befell the country.

And Limerick was right in the middle of it.

The hurricane of Little Christmas of 1839 is known even yet as The Big Wind. But how did it affect the people here? What was it like?

There are stories, of course. Half remembered tales passed down through families over the generations, becoming ever more blurred as time went by.

Now there is a book, very readable and well illustrated, which brings together as many of the contemporary known facts as can be traced. We are lucky to have access to such records as the *Limerick Chronicles* of the time, and the book's detail as it applies to Limerick is quite extraordinary.

Entitled simply, *The Big Wind*, it is written by Peter Carr and would make an ideal read over Christmas (White Row Press; £4.95)

The day began ordinarily enough but in the middle of the afternoon there was a great stillness:

It was all a bit odd but not of itself alarming. In a house in Limerick it was noticed that the glass "shewed the quicksilver under the extreme lowest mark of the barometer" (Limerick Chronicle). This was an ominous sign and one of the few indications of what was to follow. But such knowledge was exceptional.

The storm came quickly. In Dublin, people had to crawl across O'Connell Bridge on their bellies.

"The one-street village of Bruff ... seemed to have been invested by two invisible armies throwing slates, pots and tiles at each other as, when the wind shifted, it would bring the slates at the opposite side against the slates at this side and they often met in the air with such violence as to shatter them all to bits" (*Kerry Evening Post*)

A spectacular aurora borealis lit the sky with streaks of red.

On the waterfront in Limerick, "when the affrighted families hurried from their beds to the vaults below for protection, they were repulsed in despair by the rush of water from the inflowing tide, raised to an unusual height by the force of its kindred element". (*Limerick Chron-*

icle)

"In the port of Limerick ... chaos prevailed as boats burst from their moorings .. though made fast by double stay of cable and chain and in a mad fit of headbanging cut themselves to pieces against Sarsfield Bridge, some 25 vessels being injured." (*Limerick Chronicle*). It was truly the most terrifying of nights, and the material damage alone would run into tens of millions of pounds at today's prices.

There were fatalities, not all of them fully recorded. Example: "There are three dead and a great loss of potatoes at Coonagh, by the inundation, whole pits being covered"

"There was not a single house in Bruff that did not suffer more or less; some houses entirely blown down, others unroofed, and most of the townspeople had to seek safety in the open street, lest their houses should fall upon them. Almost every person in the neighbourhood that had corn or hay in stack had this morning to look for it at a distance - some a mile or more."

"A family of the name of Mahony in Rathcannon had their house burnt last night. The poor creatures, I am informed, had not time to save a single article; they lost, it is reported, £35 in cash, seven firkins of butter, eight feather beds, in fact everything they possessed, with hay, straw and oats. Some say that it was malicious, others that it was caused by the high wind, which blew the sparks about. I am not sure which to credit."

But the winds eventually died down, clean-up had to be done.

And the tradesman found themselves in huge demand.

"Thatchers, slaters, carpenters, glaziers, nurserymen and masons never had it so good. In Limerick, slaters were asking a prodigious 7/6 (37.5p) per day ..."

In those days the average income was a shilling (5p) or two per week.

One of the effects of the storm was to reveal poverty and destitution on a scale unprecedented, and a meeting was held in Limerick for the immediate construction of a workhouse under the recently enacted Poor

Law. This was to become what is now St Camillus' Hospital.

It is ironic that the urgency provoked by the storm damage was to have the effect of having the workhouse in place in time for the terrible potato famine of less than a decade later.

Here in part is how the author, using our files as reference, summarises the Big Wind as it affected Limerick, city and county:

At half past eight the storm set in, blowing a rough gale from the west-north-west, which increased in fury every hour until, between eleven and twelve o'clock when it raged with all the horrors of a perfect hurricane, sweeping in violent gusts through the streets, and extinguishing all the gas lamps ...

Not a public edifice or institution in the city escaped the ravages of the storm, all suffering material damage in the fierce encounter.

The best-built houses of the New Town ... trembled in the rude embrace of their imperious visitor, and were sadly dismantled in the upper storeys.

Housetops and flues fell prostrate; the crash of window glass was general and incessant while, to crown the panic ... a whole stack of chimneys would occasionally tumble down, after struggling with the blast like a drunken man. The English and Irish towns, which constitute the abode of the less affluent and labouring classes, at every turn manifest the devastating progress of the storm by scenes of ruin and dilapidation ...

A crowd of people gladly took refuge in the hall of the Exchange [where] they remained until daylight, many of them with only a blanket or sheet for, in their anxiety to escape ... they never bethought of clothes.

Imagination will convey to the sympathising mind a better picture of the wild and dreary spectacle than description can render.

The demesnes of Adare, Curragh (Chase) Castletown, Shannon Grove, Tervoe, Doonass Hermitage, Tierana, Kilballyowen and

Ballinaguard have suffered severely, many hundreds of the oldest and finest trees torn up by the roots. The chapels of Stonehal and Cappa, complete wrecks, not a vestige of a roof on either.

The Club House roof was thrown down, Wellesley Bridge greatly injured owing to the vessels in the river being thrown against it. The old town suffered severely; some say there were £36,000 worth of property destroyed.

The mortality by the storm for the port of Limerick already comprises sixteen deaths.

There is a complete wreck of small boats in the river. Thirty sail boats left the quays on Sunday after discharging turf and oats. We fear not half of them could survive ... and already we have ascertained the loss of four down the river, three at Grass Island.

A large sail boat, named the Daniel O'Connell is also lost. John Hartigan, of the Richmond Lass, was killed ... by a stroke of the jib boom, which nearly severed his head from his body.

At the Customs House a capacious lighter, of forty tons burden, was thrown high and dry out of the water.

And finally, this offering, again from our files as researched for the book:

Sir,

Amidst the awful devastations, any suggestion for future benefit is valuable.

One great cause of loss of life and property is the height and weight of the house chimneys, and for both of which is Limerick conspicuous. If the tops of those damaged and those to be built were formed by short pipes of zinc instead of heavy brickwork ... [such] accidents could not occur.

What is here recommended [is] in London, almost universal.

Yours sincerely,

A subscriber.

The book is not only well researched and well written, but it meets the most exacting standards of academic history, having a good index, an exhaustive bibliography and 173 informative footnotes.

Recommended.