The Terror of Lightning and Thunder

Today we know the dangers of lightning, and as a result, have buildings fitted with lightning rods and flame retardant roofs. Unfortunately, this was not always the case, and thunder and lightning came with a range of dangers. In the nineteenth century, lightning was often referred to as electric fluid. This was popularised by Benjamin Franklin following his attempts to capture electricity in the mid-eighteenth century.

One of the most violent cases of lightning that struck Limerick took place at half past seven on Sunday evening, 22 July 1827. It was described as so violent that it was never surpassed in the memory of the oldest inhabitant. The storm began with an extremely hot and sultry atmosphere, the clouds hanging low and heavy, evidently uncharged with ominous manner. Then thunder and lightning burst forth, accompanied by heavy rain.

The Limerick Chronicle reported the spectacle in the city. It began with a few straggling flashes of lightning, followed by a distant roll of thunder. Then rain fell in torrents, and a sudden noise, resembling a quick running discharge of muskets, as if from a whole line on a field day, produced a terrific effect. This was, they claimed, apparently tearing up houses from the very foundation. The flashes of lightning were so bright, they illuminated the horizon to a vast extent, exposing, at intervals, the moon and stars twinkling in curious form through the dense clouds.

The thunder, which rolled quickly after each lightning stroke, was compared to the discharge of heavy field ordnance. The destruction of this storm was felt not only in Limerick but also in the surrounding counties of Clare and Tipperary, with several individuals losing their lives and immense property damage left in the wake of the storm.

The home of Mr Fitzgerald of Roostagh, Ballyheedy, was one of those struck by lightning. Mary Fitzgerald was extinguishing the house fire when the flash, almost invisible, passed in the doorway. Mary was struck by the electric fluid, and became a living corpse in an instant. The impact was so strong that it tore her husband to the floor, where he remained motionless. The couple had five children, though luckily only one of their children was hit by lightning. It struck the young girl on the head, tearing the shirt and stockings, but failed to injure the foot. The young girl was also holding an infant, who escaped without injury. The lightning then directed its course to the fire-place and escaped through the chimney. This was after it hit and killed a pig in the house. This was not the only animal killed during the storm: a cow died on the neighbouring lands of Cottage.

The Dunlop family lived in a thatched cottage in Annaghboole, near Castleconnell. The lightning hit the roof and set it alight. Also, it caused the windows to explode. Some of the furniture and farming stock, which was stored in the cottage, was destroyed in the configuration. Fortunately, the family were not injured. The Dunlops were eating dinner in the upper story of their cottage when the storm hit. They moved to the lower story, but after a few minutes Mr Dunlop decided they would return upstairs. When ascending the stairs, the case's strong sulphurous smoke poured down against them. Mr Dunlop ran outside to find the roof in a blaze. While outside he also spotted a short distance away the maid's pretty face on the ground. In shock but relatively unharmed, with their milk pails scattered about the field. The fire in the cottage was quenched with the help of neighbours. All the while, the Dunlop's infant child lay in Mrs Dunlop's arms, apparently intact from the effect of the thunder, though the child later recovered from the shock.

Finally, George O'Callaghan of Maryfort, near Tulla, Co. Clare, had two farmhouses unroofed. In several instances, men and women were thrown to the ground by a sudden shock, and for a few moments were deprived of sight, while in other places the grass was completely burned, and the earth turned up by the lightning. It is quite probable that other accidents may have occurred in the country, where its fury was most to be dreaded.

In May 1831, at Rooska, Newport, Co. Tipperary, the house of Rev. Matthew Moore was struck by lightning, which carried away part of a stack of chimney stones and split some of the walls. The lightning penetrated the interior of the building and in its rapid course devastated whatever it passed over.

The impact was so strong that it threw her husband to the floor, where he remained motionless.

The great kitchen flags were torn up and split asunder and nearly all the window sashes were dashed to pieces or materially damaged. Several of the room doors were burst open. Mrs Moore, who was exiting the house with two decanters, was struck, causing the glass to fly from her hands. She was wearing a silk dress at the time, which was thought to attract lightning but also a cotton apron that was thought to repel it. The wire for the internal bell system was melted completely. There were about twenty people in the house at the time, all of whom escaped without injury. It was in such a state of destruction that the following day four policemen were posted to the house to prevent looters from gaining access.

On a Sunday in June 1842, the lightning at Knockbrinn burned a blacksmith by the name of Fox, while two others who were unnamed were killed during the storm in Ballinaggery and Charleville. Again, with the storm of 1827, animals were also killed and this included a calf which was the property of Gody Kilk, Esq., of Ballinakill.

Making hay was a dangerous activity during a lightning storm. In August 1898, a respectable farmer named O'Se and living a short distance from Rathkeale, was
It was in such a state of destruction that four policemen were posted to the house to prevent looters from gaining access.

Benjamin Franklin famously studied lightning.