Limerick and the Night of the Big Wind

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Limerick has been struck not once, but twice, by storms in the previous weeks. Buildings have been damaged, homes flooded, and across the country, five people have lost their lives. Storm Ophelia was considered a once-in-a-lifetime meteorological event, the likes of which we’re unlikely to see again. It was not, however, the worst storm in modern Irish history – that occurred some 178 years ago and became known as Oiche na Gaoithe Móire, or the Night of the Big Wind.

The 6 January 1839 was a Sunday. Most of Limerick’s inhabitants would have risen early to attend mass, to celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany. The morning was still, forcing many ships to anchor in port, waiting for a wind to buffet their sails. The weather was dull, cold, and a light dusting of snow had settled across thatched roofs, cobbled streets and church spires.

After mass, many would have enjoyed a day of rest: the men might have popped into the local pub for a pint of porter, despite the best efforts of the burgeoning Temperance Movement. As it was Nollaig na mBan (Women’s Christmas), it’s possible that some women were given a small reprieve from their household duties, but for most, it would be business as usual, tending to infants or peeling potatoes for dinner. The older children were probably bundled up, in whatever clothes their parents could afford, and sent into the streets for some fresh air. By three o’clock in the afternoon they may have begun to peer off their scarves and mittens, finding it unseasonably warm.

The snow melted quickly, leaving pools of dirty brown water in the gutters along George’s Street. As dusk fell, the sky filled with heavy, ominous clouds.
releasing the first cold droplets of rain. A light breeze sprang up, whistling through the bare branches of the trees on Military Avenue. The Limerick Chronicle reported that "one glass, a faithful index of the weather, early that evening showed the quicksilver under the extreme lowest mark of the barometer."

By six o'clock, the wind had strengthened, rattling panes of glass and slamming doors. Flames flickered in tallow candles, rush lights and gas lamps. Two hours later a volley of hail fell, beating against roofs and windows, driving live stock to seek cover from the assault. Families huddled down in their homes, huddling around the fires for warmth, waiting out what was ostensibly another winter storm.

As each hour ticked by, the ferocity of the wind grew. The Chronicle reports that "at 8.30pm the storm set in, blowing a rough gale, which increased in fury every hour, until midnight, when it raged as a perfect Hurricane."

In Limerick city, "all of the gas lamps were extinguished. The watchmen took refuge, in terror of their lives, under hall-door porticos, no living creature being able to stand the streets. Streaks of lightning, at intervals, illuminated the midnight darkness, as showers of slates at every angle, strewed the ground, in pieces."

Many of the residents of English and Irish Town rushed out of their poorly-built houses and made their way to the Exchange, which promised some safety, with its arcade of arches and sturdy Ionic columns. They took refuge there "with only a blanket or sheet", no doubt fearful of what would await them on their return home.

The hurricane was blind to status or station, as the Chronicle notes: "the best built houses of the New Town were sadly dismantled in the upper stories...house tops and flues fell prostrate." Chimneys in particular posed a serious threat to city inhabitants, as they would "crumble down, after struggling with the blast like a drunken man to hold his equilibrium." Contemporary reports estimate that some 5,000 stacks crumbled during the storm, unleashing a deadly barrage of bricks as they fell. The streets became lethal corridors, as timber, masonry and lead tore through the city, cutting down all those with misfortune to be caught outside.

The noise must have been deafening, as the wind roared, the rain lashed and "the crack of window glass was general and incessant".

At Arthur's Quay, where the tall modern houses had been built to command a superb view across the river, the buildings "roiled like a cask of water in the falling tide, raised to an unusual height by the force of its kindred element."

The terrified citizens watched in horror as the Shannon charmed, the wind barrelled up the Eutaxia, shredding sails, splintering bows and wrenching heavy ships from their moorings.

Again, and again the halls of these vessels were thrust against the banks and bridges of the river, with the newly-built Wellesley (now Sarsfield) Bridge bearing much of the brunt, its pillars broken and stonework damaged by the battering of some two dozen ships. Newspapers of the day carried a somber tally of the destruction on the water the John Wexford capsized and sank, while many others, including the Marquis of Lorne, Ards, Jane, Triton, Hatop and the Harmony lost their masts, had their bows stove in, their cabins flooded, their booms, halfs and rigging damaged. Four ships were completely destroyed, while sixteen lives were lost in Limerick Port.

Then, as now, there were those who put themselves in fatal peril to protect others. The Galway Patriot reported that twelve members of the Roundstone Coastguard drowned that night.

One ship in particular was selected for a cruel fate: the Undine, a schooner belonging to the Limerick Shipping Company. It had followed other ships to shelter on Scattery Island, where it lost its sails, but managed to ride out the worst of the tempest. It appears that sometime near midnight, a large ship named the John of Leith, came into sight. She was effectively a runaway brig, torn free of her moorings, dragging her anchors behind her.

Based on newspaper accounts of the day, historian Tom Donovan deduces that on seeing the larger ship barrelling towards them, the
Those in the countryside fared no better

A schooner similar to the Urlande

Thousands of cattle were destroyed, their thatched roofs collapsed from the weight of the rain or ripped off by the wind. In a particularly cruel twist, it was common in that time to hide what enslaved money one had in the roofs, tucking it safely into the tightly-thatched straw or reeds. Many families' life savings were lost to the sky that night. Wealthy land and property owners were not left untouched, and the historian Liam Hogan writes that “in Castletroy, Milford House was dismantled and Plassey House damaged.” Acres of trees were felled or uprooted, even the most elegant and aged oak trees, some more than 200 years old. Lord Castlemaine of Maydrum Castle is said to have attempted to close his bedroom window, where he was set upon by a gust of wind and blown across the room, where he “instantly expired.”

Abercrombie stories survive from that time, some of which may be true, others embellished over the years. It was said that in the days following the storm, herrings were found six miles from the sea shore, and trees 12 miles inland were covered in sea salt, with some crops and vegetation in the midlands bearing a briny flavor for months to come. Figs were found suspended in tree branches, many miles from their owners’ houses.

On that January night, waves are said to have broken over the top of the Cliffs of Moher, which stand at some 400 - 700 feet above sea level. In his book, ‘The Night of the Big Wind,’ Peter Corr estimates gusts to have reached in excess of 110 mph in the worst affected areas. Contrast this with average speeds of 40 mph during Storm Ophelia two weeks ago.

The effects of the storm in 1839 ranged from the personal – families destitute, homeless and mourning – to the public – the price of timber fell dramatically and roodiers, carpenters and the like entered a period of prosperity. On 12 January, a correspondent to the Limerick Chronicle wrote that “sisters and...