Remembering the

The winter of 1947 was one of the worst on record

So far this year, we have been spared the harshest shades of winter. But 65 years ago the people of Limerick received no such mercy, writes Gerard Fitzgibbon

Frozen over: A photograph of the frozen River Shannon taken in 1963. As Limerick and the rest of Ireland was early 1947, the vista of a glacial Shannon became all too familiar.

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As THE past two years have shown us, winter is a tempestuous beast. It can swing from a mild inconvenience to a plague, and back again. However, 65 years ago, the people of Limerick and the rest of the country were left in no doubt about the ferocious, murderous power winter can wield. An unexpected cold snap caused by a slow drift of Siberian air, gripped Ireland for weeks. Temperatures fell to -15 degrees, food supplies were depleted and hundreds of people died from cold and starvation.

In a new book titled 'Ireland's Arctic Siege: The Big Freeze of 1947', author Kevin Kearns documents how from the turn of the year until almost Easter, five major blizzards stricken the island and wreaked havoc on its people.

A population which was already struggling with the legacy of wartime rationing faced severe food shortages and an outbreak of virulent influenza. Roads became blocked and there were mass blackouts. Deaths surged across the country - in Limerick between February 1 and 21, a total of 71 bodies were interred in Mount St Lawrence cemetery. Half of these deaths occurred in a single week.

The weather devastated crops and claimed the lives of tens of thousands of cattle and sheep, forcing the De Valera government to introduce emergency fuel restrictions. The country genuinely faced the threat of mass starvation for the second time in a century.

The first blizzard struck on the evening of February 1, following two successive nights when temperatures reached -14 degrees, readings which were colder than areas of Antarctica on the same date.

A cold front which originated in Siberia, which had been slowly working its way across the continent, finally reached Limerick in the early evening.

The blizzard struck suddenly, buffeting thick sheets of snow and ice down on the back of 40 mph winds. Ships lay stranded in the Irish Sea, while blows landing at Shannon Airport were tossed around in the air like toys.

One such passenger flight, piloted by a Captain Hilary, took three attempts to land after being lifted off the tarmac by gale.

The calamities of the nation which followed over the next eight weeks, as the 'arctic siege' lingered, are well documented.

National newspapers cried 'disaster' and 'cruelty' from banner headlines. In the Limerick Leader, the following wording was captured by Maichnín Seóige in his 'Oddly and Endy' column.

On February 23 he was able to make light of the unseasonal weather, as "the leprechaun in front of Hill of Knockshane was almost indistinguishable from the Master Shan or the January blizzard".

This photo of the frozen River Shannon taken in 1963 shows the glacial conditions of the time.

As part of its centenary celebrations, the Irish Press is publishing a series of articles recalling the past and present in this great country. The series is called 'Remembering the Past'.

Front page news: The Irish Press edition of February 3, 1947 captured the immediate devastation of the first blizzard
struck by five successive blizzards in a few short weeks in

shocks, and the national grid was "seriously disrupted" as a result, Kearns writes. Lights, clocks and trains were knocked off as far ahead as Athlone and Wicklow.

On the weekend of March 2, as snow drifted rose as deep as 40 feet in parts of the country, the Shannon Aero Club volunteered its craft and a few ESSI officers along the western seaboard, who surveyed blizzard damage to toppled poles and snapped cables. Their efforts also helped save the lives of groups of engineers trapped in snowdrifts in Galway and Mayo.

The human cost of the freeze was stark. Dozens of elderly and infirmed perished, living in sub-standard conditions in Limerick, Cork, and Dublin, felt the brunt of shortages and disease.

As well as the surge in burials at Mount St. Lawrence, Kearns writes that in late-February at the Clare County Home and Clare Mental Hospital "the number of deaths totalled nineteen during the previous year, nearly a fourfold increase."

Throughout February and March, state bodies such as CIE, the Post Office and Radio Eireann held crisis meetings. "The main transmission lines between Ardnamurchan and Dublin were broken near Nenagh," on February 26, Kearns wrote, "Communications are in chaos."

As imports of British coal came to a halt and turf across the country began to run out, the government was accused of abandoning ordinary people to the elements.

Call to prayer: A notice issued by Bishop Patrick O'Neill urge became seldom and unusable, the government came under stinging criticism from the public.

The Taoiseach floated ideas such as compulsory tilling, previously seen during the Second World War, and calls were made for a "national effort" to overcome the crisis. But the government was accused of abandoning ordinary people to the elements.

Limerick Leader on March 26, a woman from Foyles, writing under the monicker "Disgusted," attacked the government's handling of the fuel crisis.

"For ten days I have been burning old boots, old trunks and pieces of furniture to try and keep this house warm. I have no more out at the yard, nor fodder in the yard. I have no more fuel for my Stove, but I still have my grate and lamps are empty."

She complained that the "fuel houses" at Foyles, which were receiving regular supplies of turf, but fuel merchants ceased selling to ordinary folk because they knew there would be no money to pay them. "I have paid 35/- for one horse loaf of turf, I have paid 35/-, although I cannot afford it."

A week later, Leader editor John Creagh wrote a lengthy editorial criticising the government's handling of the crisis.

"Mr De Valera and his Ministers are not exactly blamed for the recent long spell of exceptionally severe weather... They should, if they have the wit, make special arrangements for the sickly people over that difficult period."

By April the weather had started to Improve, leaving behind scars and tough memories. Scouting, writing in the midst of the freeze, left a fitting epitaph. "1947 will pass into history as one of the most miserable years of which there is record."

- Ireland's Arctic Siege: The Big Freeze of 1947 by Kevin Kearns is published by GILL and MacMillan, and is available in bookshops now for £14.99