

Philanthropy in Ireland In the late 1800's and early 1900's.

In the late 1800's and early 1900's Irish middle class and upper class women played a major role in charity work, developing institutes and societies on a local and national scale providing aid for the poor and destitute. These women led limited lives, with men and women taking up completely different roles, both at home and in society in general and "although the world of work was extremely limited for middle class and upper class women, their activities in the philanthropic sphere brought these women into the public world without any great tensions"¹ As a result of their charity work women came to understand "the economic and social causes of poverty"² this in turn led to them becoming active in seeking legislation to improve the life of those they served. They lobbied politicians for changes, especially for the welfare of women and children. These women understood that the only way to be heard by politicians of the time was by having the vote and from the 1870's many of these women actively began to campaign for the vote for women.³

Limerick Women involved in philanthropy 1895 – 1905.

In Limerick between 1895 and 1905 a number of women from prominent business families were active in reformist philanthropy. They "attempted to improve the plight of the poor and outcast generally through public and political action"⁴ These women included

¹ Luddy M. *Women and philanthropy in nineteenth-century Ireland* pp.2 361 74082/600.

² *ibid* pp.3.

³ *ibid* pp.3

⁴ *ibid* pp.5

members of the Cleeve, Barrington and Masterson families as well as numerous others from upper and middle class protestant business families.

The cleeve family

The Cleeve family ran a substantial business from their premises on the north strand of limerick. Their main business was the condensed milk factory; they also had a sweet factory and a box factory. The factory's employed "1000 contented employees"⁵ of which the majority were women. They were considered fair employers and according to a report in the Limerick Cronical of 7th April 1901 the Cleeves organised a train journey to Dublin in honour of Queen Victoria's visit to Ireland.

Agnes Cleeve,

Titled Lady Cleeve because her Canadian born husband⁶ who she married on Feb 14th 1874,⁷ had received a title for his business achievements in Ireland. She was involved in many charitable events between 1895 and 1905.

One such event was the organisation of a carnival in Limerick in 1895 to raise funds for the restoration of Barrington house, which was formally the home of the Barrington family who donated it for the use as a hospital. The Barrington family

⁵ Old Limerick Journal 1981. 941-945.

⁶ Limerick Cronical Dec 14th 1993

⁷ Montegu-Massingberg H. (ed.) *Burkes Irish Family Records*. Burkes Peerage. London 1976 929 209415.

moved to a new home in Glenstal. The carnival was called the Garryowen carnival and it was held between 11th and 15th June. The event was a huge success and was referred to many times in the Limerick Cronical of the time.

In 1905 another carnival was organized by Lady Cleeve and her friends, this was called the Shannon carnival and the beneficiaries were the Temperance Society of Limerick. Lady Agnes Cleeve continued her charity work for many more years until her death on Nov 10th 1933 at the age 70 years ⁸

Original Source Documents.

I have chosen an original source documents from the Limerick Cronical March 16th 1901, in which the Countess of Limerick thanks the Limerick public for their help with the Shamrock League Trust. Little evidence of this League can be found in the national history books, the only references I were by local historian the late Dick Naughton and newspaper cuttings of the 16th March 1901.

⁸ Montegu-Massingberg H. (ed.) *Burkes Irish Family Records*. Burkes Peerage. London 1976

The Shamrock League Trust.

By far the most interesting of the charitable deeds of Lady Cleeve was her work in what was then called The Shamrock League, this was originally set up in Limerick in 1901 by ~~May~~ the countess of Limerick. This was a charitable association made up of the middle class public of the city and county to financially help the poor and destitute of the area by selling Shamrock in Ireland and through out Europe, this practice did not exist prior to the setting up of the league.

The first meeting of the Shamrock League was held in Limerick on February 9th 1901, with the countess being elected its first President. The purpose of the meeting was "to popularise the wearing of the shamrock throughout the world on the feast of the National Apostle, and to devote any money gained in the furtherance of this object to the relief of distressed families in Limerick and districts"⁹ The aspirations of the League were small, they only expected to collect a few pounds for their efforts, however the scheme took off very quickly with women and men giving up their time to help the cause.

Many people from the Limerick business community wholeheartedly supported the scheme, including Sir Thomas and Lady Cleeve, who gave over their factory premises throughout the country for the collection and sorting of shamrock. The factory in Howleys Quay in Limerick was given over entirely to the sorting and packaging of shamrock rather than the production of sweets for a few days.

⁹ Hannan K. and O' Donnell P.P. (ed.) *Patrick's People*, p 223.

R
Leonard/05/02.
Special collection.

Women from all walks of life were involved in the scheme, the poorest people gathered the shamrock and though they should have been the recipients of the charity many of them would not take any payment for their labours. Women who worked in the factories worked long into the night packaging the product and women of the upper classes arranged the distribution throughout Ireland and many other parts of the world.

The shamrock was sold for 2/6 for a small box and 4/- for a large box. Orders came in from many corners of the world with the first substantial order from the Emperor of Germany, who bought several boxes. Queen Alexandria also placed a large order to decorate her dining table with it on the feast of Saint Patrick.

The shamrock arrived to the factory in boxes, crates, and bags of all sizes to be prepared for distribution all over the world. The work was laborious and tedious with young girls washing the shamrock before transferring it to be boxed in finely decorated boxes that were hand painted by other women. Male clerks did the final job of addressing the packages before railway carts took the emblem on the first leg of its journey to numerous destinations around the world. One result of the League was that Irelands emblem was distributed worldwide for the first time to be enjoyed by emigrants who may never have returned to Ireland again, another result, which was probably considered more important at the time, was the financial aid that it gave to poor people of Limerick to help with relief of their everyday burdens of life.¹⁰

¹⁰ Ibid p. 225

Brian Cleeve.

The broadcaster and commentator Brian Cleeve who worked in R.T.E. was a direct decent ant of Sir Thomas and Lady Cleeve, he was the son of Charles who was the nephew of Sir Thomas. Brian Cleeve died in March 2003 and according to Mr Frank Prendergast former TD and mayor of Limerick. "The world is a poorer place without him. Limerick will fondly remember him"¹¹ This is also true of his grand- aunt Lady Cleeve; let us remember her work by the wearing of shamrock on our National day and by sending it to our families and friends in far and distant lands.

*There's a dear little plant that grows in our Isle,
T' was St. Patrick himself, sure that set;
And the sun on his labour with pleasure did smile,
And the dew from eyes oft' did wet it.*

¹¹ Barry Duggan *World is a poorer place as Brian dies*. Limerick Leader March 24th 2003