

Garret Hugh Fitzgerald

by Kevin Hannan

In the course of an address to members of the Old Limerick Society in 1946, Rev. Fr. Minihan, C.S.S.R., referred to experiments carried out by Garret Hugh Fitzgerald, a Limerick potato grower and mayor of the city in 1838.

Many theories were advanced to explain the potato disease, among them was one that it was due to a battle among the fairies, and many remedies proposed, some of them fantastic enough. Among the more sober investigators there were few more deserving of mention than Garret Hugh Fitzgerald, one time Mayor of Limerick. In 1817 he retired from a captaincy in the British army. He was owner of 200 acres of land in Courtbrack and Corcanree, and for twelve years supplied potatoes by contract to various institutions in the city.

In 1838 he was Mayor of Limerick. Naturally he took an interest in everything connected with the potato crop, and when the blight appeared he turned his attention to the study of it. He wrote letters to the chief Secretary in Dublin and to the "Limerick Chronicle", advocating the use of bluestone and water, not, indeed, as a spray on the plant, but as a solution in which the seed should be steeped. It is a great pity he did not pursue his experiments further and press his theories, for he was on the right lines, unlike the foremost scientists of the day, Kane, Lindley and Playfair. What he had already discovered was not confirmed and completed for forty years. Perhaps he had no confidence in himself, since he was not a scientist, and the scientists had ignored what he had done. Anyway he not only did not get the benefit of his experiments, but also lost his property under the Encumbered Estates Act, and was given a post of Assistant Emigration Officer at Tarbert, at a salary of £100 a year. He retired in 1854 and according to Mr. T.P. O'Neill, to whom I am indebted for all the information I have about him, he does not figure again in Irish records.

This was indeed a shrewd judgment by Fr. Minihan. Fitzgerald was side-stepped by the scientists of the day. Even his revolutionary theory was claimed to have been first advocated by others.

Fitzgerald's nearness to a successful remedy for the blight was so sad in the light of the great number of lives that

would have been saved had his bluestone remedy been sprayed on the growing foliage instead of being applied to the skillanes. Tragically, the indifference of the scientists to the theories of laymen follows a well stereotyped pattern.

Fitzgerald's knowledge of the potato and its culture was no doubt based on his experience as the biggest grower of the crop in Co. Limerick. His letter to the Limerick Chronicle, written in the desolation of the famine, indicates the narrowness of the gap between the layman and the scientist:

Desmond Ville,
Kilkee, Co. Clare
March 9th. 1846

Sir, having devoted my anxious attention to the potato disease since its first appearance in this district, I have made several experiments on the diseased potatoes in order to ascertain their fitness for seed. As no potatoes but the late kinds were expected, all my experiments were made on the common white potatoes, grown on different farms, and taken without selection from heaps, all in as high a state of disease as any that came under my observation. By artificial heat I proved the vegetating principle uninjured by the disease, and have setts now over two feet high. As that experiment was made indoors, I next ascertained what effect atmospheric influence, combined with wet, cold, and, by no means, a favourable soil would have.

I have cuts (skillanes) in the ground over two months, and they are as sound as the day I planted them, putting forth healthy shoots, but the apprehension of a recurrence of the disease in this year's crop is so very great as people are so indisposed not only to use any of the present seed not at all affected, but even to sow in or near ground in which last year's crop was attacked. My anxious efforts were to endeavour and discover means by which the disease, if it is a parasitical fungus, or whatever else, would be destroyed without injuring the germinating properties of the tuber itself. After various unsuccessful experiments I tried a solution of bluestone in the proportion of one pound to eight gallons of water, and steeped the potatoes whole for a few minutes, stirring them about so as to get all the clay off. I then took them out and

planted them in a warm place within doors - the result was they put forth as vigorous healthy shoots as ever I saw. I have some of them now a foot high. I planted some out and they remained sound. I tried the same experiment with cut potatoes, but it did not succeed, the action of the bluestone being too powerful it corroded them. I likewise tried leaving whole potatoes for some hours in the liquid, but that, likewise, failed partially. Although at any time it is preferable to plant whole potatoes, still after being steeped whole, they may be cut in two parts only, cutting through the rose end, being that having the greatest number of eyes and farthest from the root. After they are steeped they should not be left in a heap but spread out on a dry floor. If this new disease is a parasitical fungus (and I believe it is well ascertained that it is), so is the smut in wheat, and I never had any when I steeped my wheat in bluestone, no matter whether the season turned out wet or dry.

Bluestone promotes vegetation when properly used, and its cleansing properties are well known. My experiment can be tried by any farmer, however poor - the cost being about a shilling or fourteen pence a pound for bluestone, and the potatoes need not be steeped until the ground is prepared for them. I would recommend the same process to be applied to potatoes not infected, particularly the early kinds, as it will prevent their being marked, not only by the infection, should it remain lurking in the ground, but it likewise is a sure safeguard against slugs and worms. The present very critical period, when the anxiety among farmers for seed is nearly as great as that for food, is my only excuse for trespassing on your columns.

Believe me, faithfully yours,
G.H. Fitzgerald.

Evidently, Fitzgerald had little to harvest in 1846, and nothing in 1847. Disheartened at the loss of his business and his estate, he may have given up trying to perfect a remedy for the blight. Ironically, his new job as an emigration officer put him in the front line of the tragedy of the potato blight, dealing with its frightened and sorrowful victims as they fled the country.

Though his theories were not fully developed for forty years, we should remember him as a man far ahead of his time.