

The Great Famine in Murroe (1845 - 1849)

by Mark Tierney

Topographical and Biographical Note:

The parish of Murroe and Boher (prior to 1850 called the *parish of Abington*) is situated for the most part in the Barony of Owneybeg, Co. Limerick, and in the Catholic diocese of Cashel and Emlly. At the time of the famine it was in the *Limerick Union* - a Poor Law division.

Rev. Thomas O'Brien Costello, parish priest of Murroe, 1815-1850.

Rev. John Maher, Catholic curate of Murroe, 1835-1850.

Rev. Thomas Westropp, Church of Ireland rector of Abington.

C. E. Trevelyan, in charge of government relief for all Ireland, during the famine.

Sir R. Routh, in charge of relief office in Limerick district.

E. Coffin, in charge of relief operations in Limerick district.

Mr. Hewetson and *Major Simmonds*, relief officers for Co. Limerick.

Sir Matthew Barrington, who resided in Glenstal Castle, and owned a large estate in the parish of Murroe.

Lord Cloncurry, an absentee landlord, who had property in parish of Murroe.

Michael Slattery, Archbishop of Cashel and Emlly, 1832-1857.

Lord Bessborough, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, 1846-1847.

Caleb Powell, M.P. for East Limerick, who lived in Clonshavoy House, Murroe.

Murroe, like almost every other part of rural Ireland, first heard of the potato blight in the autumn of 1845. Reports came in from all sides that the crop had failed, and that the potatoes were rotting in the ground. However, as the main crop was not usually dug out until the late autumn, the alarm did not become universal until just before Christmas. By the beginning of 1846, the people knew that some great calamity had come among them. And, as in the year 1822, measures would have to be taken to help those who faced starvation.

But what measures could be taken? There was no society or charitable organisation in the locality capable of dealing with the crisis. The Poor Law system, which had been introduced into Ireland in 1838, was to meet its first real challenge during the Great Famine, and it was to be found wanting. Already by 1845, about one hundred workhouses had been built throughout the country. The Poor Law provided that all relief should be given in and through these workhouses. Each Union or district had its own workhouse, and Murroe was in the Limerick Union. And Limerick was a long distance from Murroe in the days when most people had to walk to their destination.

Thus, the first thing we have to realise is that the people of Murroe felt very isolated and alone in their misery. Although the famine was a nation-wide calamity, to the people of each district it was a personal, local, day-to-day problem. As the famine increased in its intensity, and as the years of crisis followed one after the other, different measures were taken to deal with the situation. But to begin with, the only means of relief for the



The Very Reverend T. O'Brien Costello, Parish Priest of Murroe, 1814-1850.

people of Murroe in the winter of 1845-6, was to seek admittance to the Limerick Workhouse.

There were 1,136 people in the workhouse on 1 January, 1845; the number had risen to 1,290 by 1 January, 1846.⁽¹⁾ By 25 March, 1846, the number was 2,512.⁽²⁾ The average daily number to receive relief in the Limerick workhouse for the next three years was as follows:

| | |
|-----------|----------------------|
| 1847..... | 2,204 |
| 1848..... | 2,830 |
| 1849..... | 4,550 ⁽³⁾ |

And yet, the Limerick Workhouse had been originally built to accommodate only 1,600. Additions had to be made each year, and there were three separate buildings by the end of the famine.⁽⁴⁾ Money was collected off the rates for the maintenance of these workhouses and the average amount of money spent in actual relief each year was £10,000.⁽⁵⁾ The rates for the parish of Murroe during the famine years fluctuated between 3/- and 4/- in the £1.

Nothing was done, however, to relieve the people in Murroe itself in the winter of 1845-46. And, as many were in dire want, the result was a series of disturbances. It was a sort of general protest, and it appeared very fearsome to the resident Church of Ireland rector, the Rev. Thomas Westropp. He wrote to Dublin Castle on 3 January, 1846, asking for police protection and special troops to be placed in the district during the crisis.⁽⁶⁾ Owing to the distress, it was impossible to collect rents, and therefore tithes were not forthcoming either. Incidents of robbery, especially of cattle and livestock, were becoming frequent. He maintained that soon these attacks would be made on the houses of the landlords and clergymen.⁽⁷⁾

Mr. Westropp was backed up by several of the magistrates of the district, and the government intimated that they would send troops to keep order in the

parish. Fr. Thomas O'Brien Costello, Parish Priest of Murroe, wrote to Sir Thomas Freemantle, in Dublin, on 22 January, 1846: "I beg leave to say as the Parish Priest of the barony of Owneybeg, that I do not conceive how we have merited to be subjected to the cost necessary" for the upkeep of further police. "Only one outrage of any importance has occurred in this barony, namely an attack on Michael Bayley Hayes of Mongfunne. Two brothers, of the name of Ryan, were responsible for this crime, and have been apprehended. They await trial in the county gaol. A party of the military would serve more effectively the peace of this barony than a further contingent of police..."⁽⁸⁾

Despite Fr. Costello's protest, the Lord Lieutenant, Heytesbury, issued a proclamation from Dublin on 27 January, 1846, signed by Edward Meath, R. Keatings and Edward Lucas, stating that "Whereas it hath sufficiently appeared to us, that the Baronies of Clanwilliam, Owneybeg, Small County and Coshlea, all in the County of Limerick, are in a State of disturbance, and require an additional establishment of police; We, the Lord Lieutenant, by and with the advice of her Majesty's privy council, by virtue of powers vested in us, do, by this our Proclamation, declare that the said baronies are in a state of disturbance, and require an additional establishment of Police."⁽⁹⁾

The arrival of the extra police force did little to relieve the people of Murroe. Most of the raids on cattle and livestock were made at night, and there were frequent clashes between the police and the raiding parties. On 13 March, the following notice was posted up in the district:

Notice that if any of the Police be caught out any night for the future, ye may as well make yere coffin.⁽¹⁰⁾

On 28 March, 1846, Lord Guillamore wrote from Co. Limerick to Dublin Castle, saying that famine existed in all his district (East Limerick) and "several bullocks were killed and carried off from the borders of the county".⁽¹¹⁾ At the same time a certain Mr. Griffith wrote to the Earl of Lincoln to say that "in the counties of Limerick and Clare, the distress will have reached its full height by 1 June, 1846. At this period there will be no potatoes left and the people must be fed altogether on Indian meal, oatmeal, or wheaten meal."⁽¹²⁾

Griffith then went on to give more specific details of conditions in Co. Limerick; "In the present year, owing to the potato disease, a large portion of the cottier class are bordering on starvation, and the villages are in many cases without food. On making enquiries I find that rarely more than one-half of the usual extent of land will be planted with potatoes during the present season. As a proof of the deficiency in planting potatoes in this district (which included Murroe), the present price of manure per load is only

1/6d., whereas it is usually 3/- a load. Those purchasing it use it as top dressing for meadows, and not, as usual, for raising potatoes".⁽¹³⁾

Although the government had arranged the importation of Indian meal, and ordered local relief committees to be formed, little actual food appeared during these first three months of 1846. The food had to be purchased, but owing to lack of ready money, the people were unable to get relief. It thus became a matter of urgent necessity that some employment be given to the starving poor, to enable them to make money with which to buy food. This is the important factor to be considered all the time throughout the famine. Those in dire want could go to the workhouse for relief, but those who sought only temporary relief had to be able to pay for food, which the government was about to release.

A meeting was held in Murroe on 31 March, 1846, in which the whole situation was discussed by the Murroe Poor Relief Committee. They passed a resolution calling attention to the great destitution of the labouring population of the district, arising from want of employment. They drew up a four-pointed declaration which was sent to the Under-secretary in Dublin Castle, requesting that "works be immediately put into operation in order to prevent popular discontent at the delay which has already occurred by official forms".⁽¹⁴⁾

On 23 April, 1846, William Holland of Ballyvohreen, Murroe, wrote to Dublin Castle saying that he had been "requested by the Poor Relief Committee of Murroe to call the attention of the government to the very destitute state of the labouring population of this district. The Committee have received £200 from private sources to which they have instructed me to solicit such additions the Lord Lieutenant may have in his power to bestow from the funds placed at his disposal for the relief of the destitute of this county".⁽¹⁵⁾

On 20 April, 1846, Matthew Barrington of Glenstal Castle, wrote to Dublin, on behalf of a Daniel Buckley, of Drumalta, Murroe. The latter had given evidence in court against two Healy brothers for a crime they had committed. Buckley was now being persecuted, and he hoped to get money from the government to enable him to emigrate.⁽¹⁶⁾ All the records available point to Murroe as being very much disturbed throughout the spring of 1846. It is impossible not to connect the misery and starvation of the people with this situation. They were, indeed, desperately in need of help, but because of the government's policy, there was no help reaching them. There was food available for those who had the money to buy it, but until work was provided and money paid out for it, they could not buy any food.

In its arrangements for the selling of meal, the government, during the early months of 1846, decided to leave more to private enterprise than was really prudent. Such a scheme might work well enough in

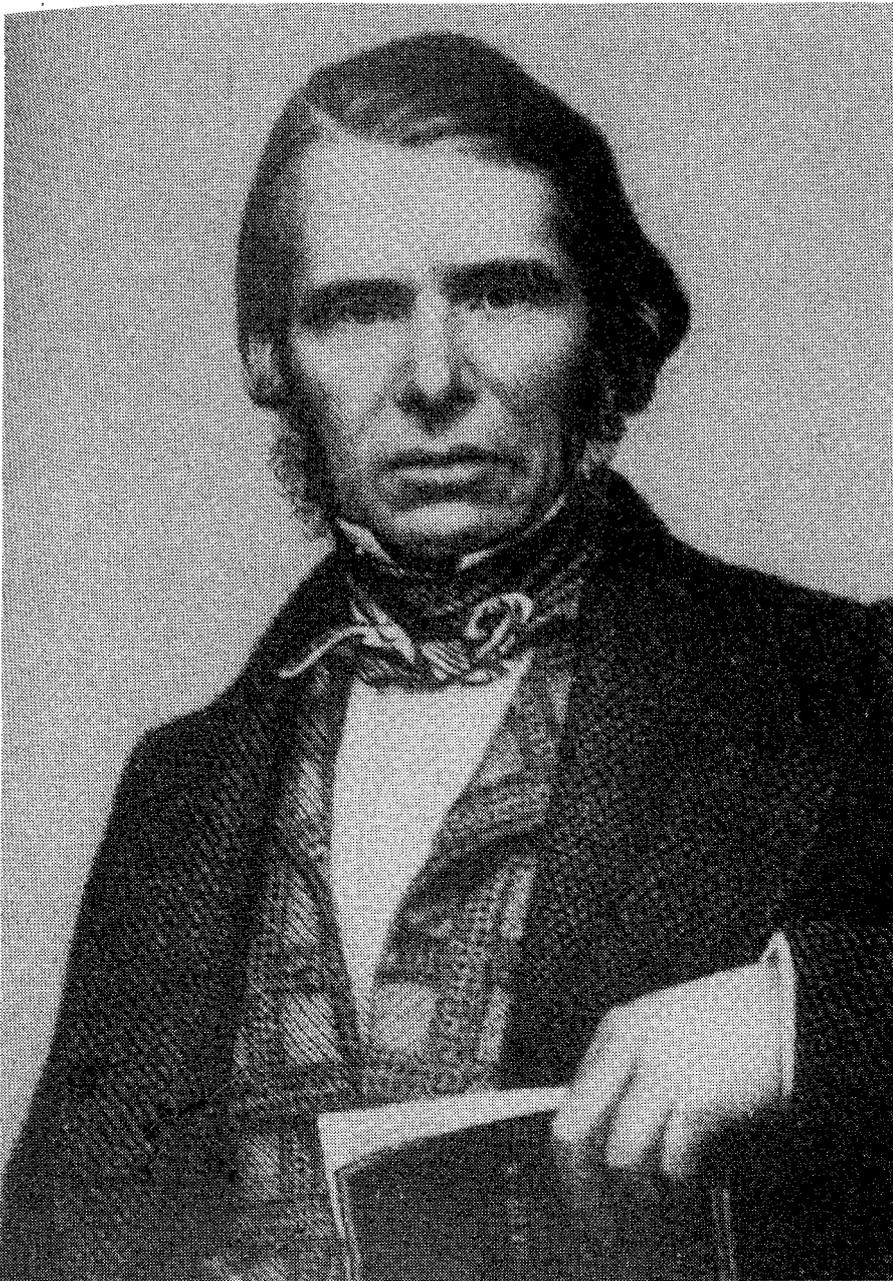
the towns, where the richer merchants could pay for such supplies as they expected to sell. There is even evidence of some merchants trying to corner the market, buying meal cheap, holding it for a few months, and then selling it at considerable profit. On 7 April, 1846, "Mr. Monsell of Tervoe, Co. Limerick, and other opulent persons of the city of Limerick, were ready to purchase large quantities of Indian meal".⁽¹⁷⁾ On 23 April, the Commissioner-General Coffin, in charge of the Limerick district, wrote to Mr. Trevelyn in Dublin, to say that "the meal selling on private account is considerable".⁽¹⁸⁾

But it was only in June, 1846, that the government depots in Limerick were open to the local committees to buy meal, and the first report we have of the country committees in action is in a letter written by Coffin to Trevelyn on 4 June, saying that "we are now sufficiently far advanced in a measure of opening the depots, and selling at the reduced price of £10 per ton. It was necessary for me to enter into lengthened explanation with upwards of 50 different committees".⁽¹⁹⁾ We can take it for granted that the Murroe Relief Committee was among these.

On 16 June, 1846, Major Simmonds wrote to Trevelyn from Limerick to report that "this depot is working well under the indefatigable exertions of Mr. Coffin and the great zeal of the storekeeper".⁽²⁰⁾ He then went on to say that "low wages and a want of sufficient employment had placed the necessaries of Life beyond the means of the poorer classes, and it would make your heart glad to hear the honest expression of praise for the considerate and humane acts of the government in preserving the poorest of the poor from famine".⁽²¹⁾

On 24 June, Coffin reported to Trevelyn that "the prejudice of the people against the use of Indian corn, may now be said to have passed away altogether. They do not eat it merely as the alternative of starvation, but I am assured that they generally prefer it to any other substitute for their accustomed food. Few of the committees now attempt to offer them anything else".⁽²²⁾ Mr. Coffin was being unduly optimistic in his judgment, for it took the people quite a long time to get accustomed to the Indian meal. It was so hard that it became known as "Peel's brimstone", and the following recipe shows the trouble involved in preparing one meal alone:

To make a breakfast of Indian Meal for each person, young or old, take a 1/4-lb. of meal. Before going to bed at night, pour as much cold water upon it as will soak it. In the morning boil a quart of water in a pan, and when it is boiling put into it the meal which you have previously soaked; keep it boiling for 1/2 hour, stirring it occasionally. Cooked in this manner, 1 lb. of meal will make a good breakfast for 4 persons. When treacle can be had, one table spoonful will flavour this quantity.⁽²³⁾



Charles Edward Trevelyan.

Once the government had released the meal and the local committees began to sell it to the people, it soon became clear that they would have to keep up their supplies. Coffin was well aware of this fact, and wrote on 25 June, 1846, to Sir R. Routh, in Dublin, saying, "I do not believe that any Committee could venture to stop the sales, for I have been repeatedly told that the attempt would be followed by immediate outbreak and plunder". But he hoped that August would see them "out of their troubles."⁽²⁴⁾

Routh wrote to Hewetson in Limerick on 27 June, stating that he did not propose continuing the grinding of corn and meal beyond the end of the month of July. "Only what is grinded by the end of July will be made available to the people."⁽²⁵⁾

On 4 July, Major Simmonds wrote to Trevelyan that "the Limerick store of Indian meal is almost run out. Allow me to suggest that we draw the relief affairs to a close; the Committees should, as soon as the harvest labour commences, begin to

withdraw their tickets gradually from the people".⁽²⁶⁾ Yet for the whole month of July, 1846, the government was forced to increase its supplies to the people. As Coffin wrote to Trevelyan on 14 July: "almost everywhere in this part of the county (including Murroe), the poorer people depend wholly upon the meal we are giving them. This depot (Limerick) alone in the last two days has issued 123 tons. I expect that the demand will continue unabated till the end of this month, and then gradually diminish; becoming very moderate towards the middle of August, and terminating altogether before the end of that month".⁽²⁷⁾ How wrong the government were to be in this matter time alone would show. They clearly made no plans for more than the present contingency, and presumed that the potato crop for the current year would not suffer from the blight. As Coffin went on to report: "this anticipation (that they would be able to close down the depots at the end of

August) does not seem likely to be much affected by the state of the new potato crop; because the people will, of course, fall in on the potatoes, good or bad, as soon as they are eatable; and if they find them not likely to last, will only be the more eager to consume them while they are at all fit for use".⁽²⁸⁾

Yet there were signs everywhere that the new potato crop was affected in some way. Why the government authorities in Limerick ignored this obvious fact we cannot say. Perhaps they had been told that their responsibilities would cease as soon as the new harvest was ready. In any case, Coffin, (now Sir E. Coffin, in recognition of his services to the Irish poor) wrote on 18 August, 1846, to say that "an arduous task is ended, at least for the present occasion, and it now only remains to make some kind of disposal of our large residue, and close the accounts. I hope in the course of this week to complete most of my final arrangements, and to be ready, if nothing new intrudes, to take my departure before the end of the next month".⁽²⁹⁾ Yet it is only fair to report that Coffin did add a note to this letter, in which he said that "the gratification which I have felt at the successful conclusion of this new and difficult duty is more than counterbalanced by the gloomy anticipation of the coming season. The prospect of the present potato crop is so uniformly and so decidedly bad, that I can scarcely enter into any details on the subject".⁽³⁰⁾

The next day, 19 August, Hewetson wrote to Dublin to say that "the late crop seems to have been struck almost everywhere (in Co. Limerick) by one sweeping blast in one and the same night".⁽³¹⁾ And the *Limerick Reporter* gave a leading article to the matter announcing that "it is now established beyond a shadow of a doubt that the potato crop is nearly all destroyed throughout the kingdom; and what remains of it is in rapid progress of decomposition".⁽³²⁾

The situation was well summed up in a poem which appeared in *The Illustrated London News* towards the end of August:

*Alas! the foul and fatal blight
 Infecting Raleigh's grateful root,
 Blasting the fields of verdure bright,
 That waves o'er Erin's favourite fruit.
 The peasant's cherished hope is gone,
 His little garden pride is o'er,
 Famine and plague now scowl upon
 Hibernia's fair and fertile shore.*⁽³³⁾

Let us now try to capture the picture of life in Murroe in the month of August, 1846. First of all it was becoming clear to everyone there that the new crop of potatoes was rotting in the ground. It followed from this that a great number of people would have to rely on government relief to keep themselves from starving in the coming months. Hence there was an increased interest in the government's plans to provide work and food. But all the evidence seemed to point to the government's stopping its relief schemes.

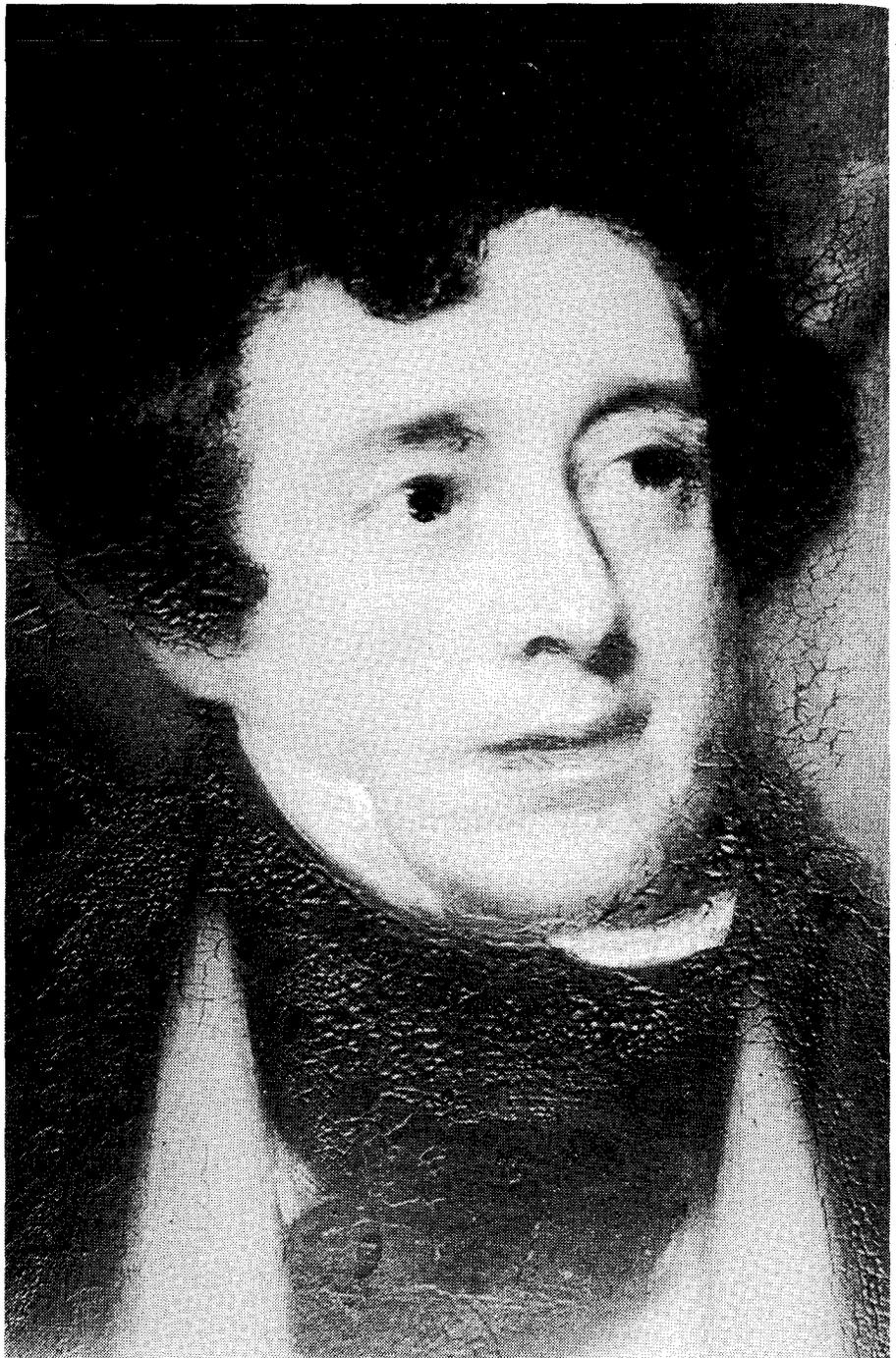
There were already visible signs that the supply of Indian meal was to be cut off. And the other form of relief, work on the roads, was also threatened. The authorities were anxious to lay off as many as possible, especially as the harvest was now ripe, and work was obtainable in saving the corn.

Here it is necessary to say a word about the public works which were undertaken in the barony of Owneybeg during the early and late summer of 1846. In July of that year, the total number of people working on the Limerick roads came to 207,811.⁽³⁴⁾ The number of men, women and boys employed on the roads from the barony of Owneybeg for the week ending 1 August, 1846, was 3,446.⁽³⁵⁾ Pay averaged 8d. to 10d. per day for each person. The work involved was the building of new roads and the improvement of old roads.⁽³⁶⁾ For the week ending 30 June, 1846, the sum of £2,739 19s. was paid in road relief for Owneybeg. Most of this money was paid to the people working on the roads, although the overseers had likewise to be paid, and the materials used had to be paid for. We can see, however, that the people of the parish of Murroe were enabled, thanks to the relief work provided for them, to get money with which to buy food. And it seems that there was little real starvation or want in the parish throughout the summer of 1846.

But the life of the people depended upon a very thin thread. Would the government continue its road relief schemes, which were proving so costly? Some of the officials did not think well of these schemes: "the system was open to a vast deal of abuse".⁽³⁷⁾ In 1846, the Grand Jury Presentments for Co. Limerick amounted to £41,170 15s. 5d. In 1847, the amount was £45,690 16s. 1½d.⁽³⁸⁾ Where was the money to come from, when neither the landlords nor the tenants could pay their rates? Certainly it looked bad, and the English government had not a very benevolent record towards Ireland in the past. Not until 1847, would money begin to flow into the country from Rome, America and elsewhere to help the famine victims. Thus the one idea uppermost in the minds of the people of the parish of Murroe in the autumn of 1846 was this: would the public works be continued and would they have the physical strength and endurance to work throughout the coming winter, to earn a few pennies to keep alive?

In the beginning of September, 1846, the government took a definite step towards organising public works on a large scale. The terms on which relief work was to be given were laid down clearly and were published in all the newspapers:

- (i) No person to be employed on the relief works who could obtain work elsewhere.
- (ii) Wages to be 2d. less than that given in the district for other work.
- (iii) Persons thus employed to be paid according to the amount of work they actually performed.⁽³⁹⁾



Matthew Barrington, circa 1830.

The actual order for relief works to recommence came on 5 September from Dublin Castle.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Unfortunately it was easier to give such an order than to carry it out. As late as 20 October the *Limerick Reporter* in a leading article asked: "Are the Irish people to starve? Scarcely in any district have the works which were passed at the Presentment Sessions as yet received the sanction of the Treasury and the Board of Works'.

On 21 October, 1846, Dr. Slattery, Archbishop of Cashel, wrote to the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Bessborough, appealing to him for help. "The public works, which the government has initiated, are held up, and relief of the people's want is frustrated by this delay". And he ends his letter with an emphatic plea: "For heavens sake let there be an end to this, let the public works commence. *Salus populi, suprema*

Lex (The safety of the people is the first law)."⁽⁴¹⁾ In his reply to Dr. Slattery Lord Bessborough said that he had ordered "that the whole business be speeded up".⁽⁴²⁾

In the barony of Owneybeg, thanks to local support from the members of the Grand Jury, and also to financial backing from Lord Cloncurry (£300) and Caleb Powell (£150), the road works got under way by the middle of October. And by December there were 1,220 men employed on road works. There were still about 100 men in want of work. Wages were 1/- per day on the average. This meant that the sum of £5,580 would be needed for 3 months, plus £1,270 for horses and other expenses. The total expenditure for this period would be £6,850. The annual valuation for the barony for a whole year only came to

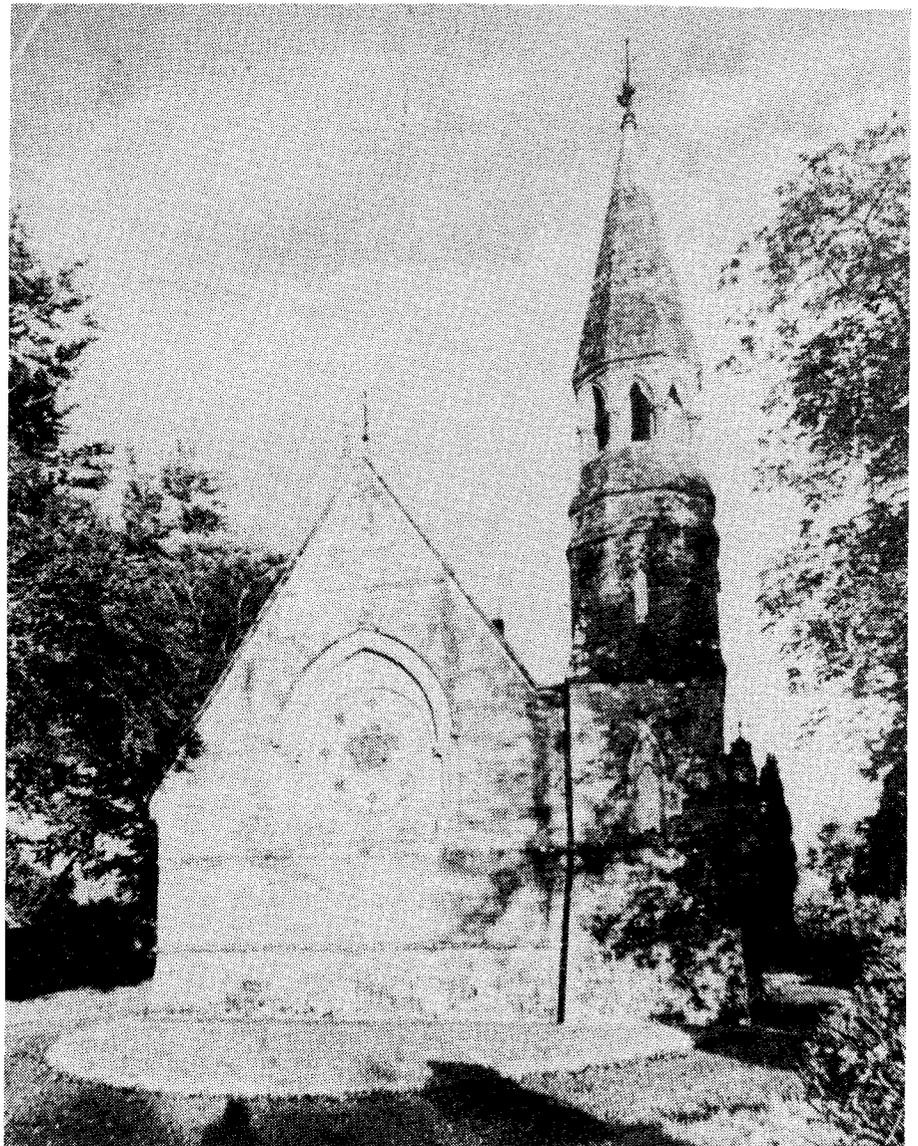
£13,093 14s., which would only last for seven months at the then rate of expenditure.⁽⁴³⁾

During the winter months of 1846-47, Matthew Barrington employed a large number of men to drain his land. Apparently there had been considerable floods in the month of November, and he had to spend more than £100 clearing the damage.⁽⁴⁴⁾ The Barringtons were also preparing to make some additions to Glenstal Castle, and work was in progress in the quarries at Moher. At the December meeting in Murroe, where all these matters were discussed, Fr. Maher attended in place of Fr. Costello, who was ill.⁽⁴⁵⁾

The month of November, 1846, was perhaps the most trying one for the government, when it was called upon to provide armed escorts for a valuable two-way traffic in grain. There was first of all the Irish corn, which was coming in from the country, and which was due for export from such cities as Limerick and Cork. "The quantity of wheat and oats coming daily into this city for exportation is very large", wrote Hewetson from Limerick.⁽⁴⁶⁾ And some time later, on 4 November, 1846, he wrote to tell Trevelyn that "the garrison of this city are harassed off their legs by the daily calls for military aid from the neighbouring towns and villages. Even the labourers on the works quit them to join in stopping the transit of grain".⁽⁴⁷⁾ The people were starving, and the sight of all this grain leaving the country was too much for them. It was only by providing armed escorts that the government could arrange for the safe transport of Irish wheat and oats to the ports. The people of Murroe had to watch these supplies leaving their parish, and the agricultural returns for the years 1846-47 show that a considerable amount of wheat and oats were grown in the barony of Owneybeg.⁽⁴⁸⁾

And, secondly, there were the supplies of Indian meal, which were brought to the country depots from the central ones in Limerick. Escorts could only be supplied on certain week-days. Sundays and market-days were excluded, as the police and military were occupied elsewhere on these days.⁽⁴⁹⁾ And on account of the shortage of supplies, there was the danger of attack along the road from hungry people. Hewetson had to report to Trevelyn on 6 December: "As yet the arrivals of Indian corn, have not, in quantity, been anything like equal to the demand, and prices, already high, are consequently getting up. My position in the heart of the most destitute and wretched districts is a most difficult one. December, January and February will be trying months".⁽⁵⁰⁾

Fortunately for the people of Murroe, the Society of Friends, known as the Quakers, set up soup-kitchens in county Limerick in the winter of 1846.⁽⁵¹⁾ The Society of Friends in England and Ireland (and later in America) contributed to this great charity. They formed a Central Relief Committee "on the 13th of Eleventh-month, 1846"⁽⁵²⁾ and there were four



Church of Ireland Church, Abington.

special sub-committees for Munster alone.⁽⁵³⁾ The government later co-operated in setting up its own soup-kitchens throughout the country. It seems that there was one already set up in Murroe by the winter of 1846-7, at a place called "Moloney's Eating-house", not far from the village of Murroe in the townland of Liscreagh.⁽⁵⁴⁾

Moloney's Eating-house was an oasis in the heart of what was a veritable desert. The people flocked there in their hundreds and obtained whatever food was available. For the most part they only received soup, but even this was something. In the cold winter months, it kept them warm. As soup could not be taken away, they had to consume it on the premises, and the whole business took a considerable amount of organising. The hour of distribution was 12 o'clock noon, and soup was then given out to the waiting people until such time as there was none left in the pots.

Those who were responsible for making the soup soon found ways of producing it economically and in abundance. The following are two recipes which show the price of making large quantities:

HOW TO PRODUCE 12 PINTS OF EXCELLENT SOUP FOR 9½d.

Bones may be bought at a very low price from the butcher. Choose those perfectly sweet and clean.

A sufficient quantity may be obtained forOs. 1½d.
 2 pints of peas 6d.
 1 large carrot and 1 onion 1d.
 1 table spoon of bruised celery seed, 2 tablespoonfuls of salt and 1 of pepper 1d.
 10 quarts of water 0d.
 9½d.

HOW TO MAKE 14 GALLONS OF CHEAP SOUP.

½ stone of wheat, boiled very long, from the night before, to have it ready by 12 o'clock dinner hour; one-third stone oatmeal, steeped one hour and boiled to almost 4 lbs.; meat cut small and boiled from 8 a.m.

A hock-bone of bacon, or a roast meat bone, or a pickled herring, are sometimes added to Pea-soup; but nothing salt should be put into the soup till the peas are quite tender; nor should you use a drop of hard water for Pea-soup, as they never unite with hard water.

1 large head of cabbage
3 or 4 leeks
6 carrots
salt and pepper or chillies.

| | COST | |
|------------------|------|---------------------|
| Wheat | Os. | 11d. |
| Meal | Is. | Od. |
| Meat | Is. | Od. |
| Labour | Os. | 4d. |
| Vegetables | Os. | 3d. |
| | 3s. | 6d. ⁽⁵⁵⁾ |

The authorities in Dublin Castle took considerable interest in those soup-kitchens. Sir R. Routh wrote to Trevelyn on 2 January, 1847, to say that it was proposed to supply second-rate peas and beans for the soup-kitchens as "it was not necessary that they should be of first quality".⁽⁵⁶⁾ A special Assistant-Commissionary-General, by name of Inglis, was appointed to look after the Limerick soup-kitchens. In some of his reports he refers to them as "soup-shops" and he mentions the people having tickets. He also mentions that it was sometimes necessary to have a policeman present "to see that the articles purchased are put into the cauldrons, and that the distribution commences at 12 o'clock and that order is preserved".⁽⁵⁷⁾

Thus with relief work on the roads, and the possibility of earning 1/- per day by this means, the people of the parish of Murroe were able to buy sufficient quantities of Indian meal and to get daily rations of soup in the soup-kitchens. But everything depended on their being able to work, and there were inevitably the old and the weak who could not avail of the government's relief schemes in the locality. These were forced to seek admittance to the workhouse in Limerick.

Conditions in the Limerick Workhouse in January, 1847, were anything but ideal. The *Limerick Chronicle* reported on 13 January, that "many of the poor people from the country were coming into the city. The streets literally swarm with country paupers. In the Limerick workhouse the bread dietary having been reduced to 8 ounces a day for a full grown person, upwards of 80 paupers left the workhouse on Monday, after the malcontents rose against the master and officers of the house on Sunday night, and broke several frames of glass. The commotion was subdued without bringing the police".

There was considerable difficulty also in obtaining sufficient quantities of milk for the workhouse. "There thus occurred what was known as 'The Burgundy Contract'. The parties who had contracted to supply milk not being able to supply the full quantity of milk, owing to the great increase of paupers, were obliged to go into the market and purchase the milk in the morning which was skimmed on that morning. An investigation of the fraud was ordered by the guardians. It was then decided to change from new milk to skimmed milk, thus saving considerably in expense".⁽⁵⁸⁾

The mortality rate in the Limerick Workhouse was very high. The majority of deaths took place immediately after admission and the chief cause of death seems to have been cholera. The danger of contracting this disease was very great in the workhouse. It is estimated that out of some 4,000 persons who died in the Limerick Union between 1845-49, 3,000 died from cholera. Coffins were always supplied for those who died from this disease, and records were kept of the extra expense involved in burying them.⁽⁵⁹⁾

Cholera was to increase as time went on, and with what was called the famine fever, would be responsible for most of the deaths, both in and out of the workhouse. The case of Father Edward Cahill, who was a curate in Newport, Co. Tipperary, was reported in the *Limerick Chronicle* of 23 January, 1847. "Feeling fatigued, he proceeded to the house of a shopkeeper, where he had hardly entered, when dropping insensible to the floor, he died without a struggle. He was robust in health and only 42 years of age". Young and old, strong and weak, all were liable to contract the famine fever or the cholera.

Medical service was inadequate in the parish of Murroe in the 1840s. The first Murroe Dispensary had been established, thanks to the united efforts of Matthew Barrington and the Rev. Thomas P. Le Fanu. Plans were first drawn up in 1828, for on 24 June of that year, Matthew Barrington wrote to Mr. Le Fanu to say that "every gentleman who has any interest in your neighbourhood must feel indebted to you for the trouble you have taken in establishing a Dispensary in your neighbourhood. I am sure you will not have much difficulty in getting a regular surgeon to attend at least some days of the week, and I think Murroe would be the most central situation".⁽⁶⁰⁾ And the first mention we get of a dispensary in Murroe in the Grand Jury Records for Co. Limerick is in the summer assizes of 1828:

To the Rev. Thomas P. Lefanu, treasurer to Murroe Dispensary, £60 10s. Od. being a sum equal to the voluntary subscriptions towards the support of that charity.⁽⁶¹⁾

Every summer assizes after that the Grand Jury voted a sum of money for the Murroe Dispensary equal to the money collected by private subscription. The highest sum noted was £86 6s. Od. in 1830 and the lowest was £39 4s. Od. in 1848. Lord Cloncurry contributed £10 every year.⁽⁶²⁾ But in fact the Murroe Dispensary was always in debt. The Report of the Medical Charities of Ireland for 1841, prints the following table for the Murroe Dispensary District, whose population is given as 8,192.⁽⁶³⁾

INCOME

Subscriptions ... £57 7s.
Parliament and
County Grant .. £57 7s.

EXPENDITURE

Salaries of Medical
Officers £70 0s.
Cost of
Medicines..... £40 5s.
Contingencies .. £12 5s.
£114 14s. £122 10s.

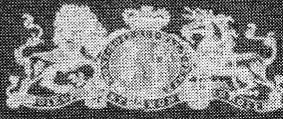
Both subscriptions and grants were hopelessly inadequate to deal with the emergency brought on by the famine. Those who contracted cholera or the famine fever received whatever attention the local doctors could give, but the disease was believed to be incurable, and the priest was more often called than the doctor. Fr. Costello was already an old man by 1845, and he died in 1850. His curate, Fr. Maher, though a young man, wore himself out during these years, and died a comparatively early death in 1859.

In 1847, a hospital was set up in the barony of Ownybeg, in the townland of Drumsally, which is part of the neighbouring parish of Cappamore. It was officially known as "The Cappamore Temporary Fever Hospital", and it is mentioned several times in the *minute book of the Limerick Union*, 1847-48. The people of Murroe were allowed to use it, but we have no record of the actual numbers who did so. For many years afterwards the building was referred to as "The Old Hospital".

But from all the available evidence it seems that the people of Murroe had the same suspicions as others about hospitals. They feared such institutions, mainly because so many people died in them. They could, of course, go to some of the Limerick hospitals, but in most cases it was impossible to obtain transport for a sick person. In any case, the city hospitals were hopelessly overcrowded, and the Master of the Limerick Workhouse found great difficulty in getting his more serious cases attended to. Hence it is clear that the majority of those who were struck down by the famine fever had to be nursed at home. We seldom give credit to the people of those days for their heroism in nursing and caring for the sick, especially as the disease was known to be contagious. It took courage and faith to face the grim reality of a cholera epidemic.

In the month of January, 1847, word came from Rome that the Pope intended extending the Jubilee to Ireland for that year. Archbishop Slattery wrote to the Holy See "soliciting a postponement of the jubilee, in consequence of the inability of his clergy to attend to their onerous duties, engaged as they are at present in attending to the wants of the poor and destitute".⁽⁶⁴⁾ On hearing of the situation in Ireland, Pope Pius the IX ordered a collection to be held in Rome for the Irish poor, and a triduum of prayers.⁽⁶⁵⁾ Throughout the whole of 1847, large sums were sent to Ireland from the Propaganda Fide in Rome, as well as from other Roman charities. The four Irish archbishops divided the money which reached them, and they sent it to the most deserving parishes.⁽⁶⁶⁾

The Roman authorities also recommended public prayers to God to ask for deliverance from the great evils of the famine. Dr. Ryan, of Limerick, ordered the following prayer to be recited in his diocese throughout Lent of 1847:



BY THE LORD LIEUTENANT AND COUNCIL
OF IRELAND.

A PROCLAMATION.

HEYTESBURY.

WHEREAS by an Act passed in the Sixth Year of the Reign of His late Majesty King William the Fourth, entitled "An Act to consolidate the Laws relating to the Constabulary Force in Ireland," it is, amongst other things enacted, that it shall and may be lawful to and for the Lord Lieutenant, or other Chief Governor or Governors of Ireland, by the Advice of the Privy Council in Ireland, to declare by Proclamation, that any County, County of a City, or County of a Town in Ireland, or any Barony or Baronies, Half Barony or Half Baronies, in any County of Large, or any District of less extent than any Barony or Half Barony to be therein specified, is or are in a State of Disturbance, and requires or require an additional Establishment of Police:

AND WHEREAS it hath sufficiently appeared to Us, that the Baronies of *Clanwilliam, Owenduff, Small County, and Coshlea*, all in the County of *Limerick*, are in a State of Disturbance, and require an additional Establishment of Police:

NOW WE, the Lord Lieutenant, by and with the Advice of Her Majesty's Privy Council, by virtue of the said Act, and the Powers thereby vested in Us, Do, by this Our Proclamation, declare that the said Baronies of *Clanwilliam, Owenduff, Small County, and Coshlea*, all in the County of *Limerick* aforesaid, are in a State of Disturbance, and require an additional Establishment of Police.

Given at the Council Chamber in *Dublin*, this 27th Day of *January*, 1846.

Edward Meath.

R. Keatinge.

Edw. Lucas.

GOD save the QUEEN.

DUBLIN.—Printed by GEORGE and JOHN GRIERSON, Printers to the Queen's Most Excellent Majesty.

Proclamation by the Lord Lieutenant and Council of Ireland declaring the 'Baronies of Clanwilliam, Owenduff, Small County, and Coshlea' to be in a 'State of Disturbance', 27 January, 1846.

recently subscribed £50 to the Relief Committee, and besides has given 100 guineas to his local agent, Mr. Duhig, for the purchase of seed potatoes.⁽⁷⁴⁾

Murroe, therefore, did not witness any eviction scenes during the famine. It should be mentioned that the Lord Cloncurry of the famine years was a patriotic lord and quite different in temperament from his grandson, the 4th Lord Cloncurry, who was responsible for the Murroe evictions of the 1880s.

The month of March, 1847, saw the arrival of large sums of money from America for the relief of the Irish famine victims. Dr. Crolley, the archbishop of Armagh, wrote to Dr. Slattery on 18 March to say that he had received over £3,000 from Dr. Fitzpatrick, Bishop of Boston.⁽⁷⁵⁾ Dr. Slattery was to receive considerable sums of money throughout the coming year. On 20 and 25 April, he received cheques from Dr. McHale, "being his share of the money sent from Dr. Portier, bishop of Mobile, U.S.A."⁽⁷⁶⁾ All these monies were divided by Dr. Slattery and sent to the parish priests. It is clear from Dr. Slattery's correspondence with the other Irish bishops, that they were well aware of their responsibilities in organising financial help for the victims of the famine. Dr. Cullen, in Rome, exerted

himself in the same cause, and in a letter dated 8 June, 1847, after relating the scenes in Rome at O'Connell's funeral service, he says that "Cardinal Fransoni now sends another cheque for the poor of the diocese".⁽⁷⁷⁾

Dr. Slattery came to Murroe on 14 and 15 July, 1847, on visitation and confirmed 259 people. This was a very low figure, and when compared with the 1852 one, which was 495, and with the 1855 which was 764, we can only surmise that the famine had kept the children from school and they were not instructed sufficiently during the years 1846-47.⁽⁷⁸⁾ Another reason why the 1847 figure was low may have been the difficulty parents had in obtaining suitable clothing for their children. With all available money being spent on food, there was nothing left over to buy clothes with, and no-one would send a child in rags or in old clothes to be confirmed. But the fact that the archbishop could come to Murroe and go through with the ceremony of confirming even 259 shows that conditions were fairly normal there at the time.

The late summer and autumn of 1847 brought an improvement in many things, especially in the weather. *The Nation* reported on 30 October that "throughout this last month, as in the summer, the weather has been on the whole favourable

for the farm. The grain crop of the early and late season have all been secured, while the potatoes are turning out of the soil in much greater abundance and in much better condition of health than was generally expected". But, even so, many of the country people found it hard to get work, apart from that provided on the roads, once the harvest had been saved.

The *minute book of the Limerick Poor Law Union* provides us with the numbers of people in the Limerick Workhouse, week by week. The following table will show how few from the parish of Murroe were forced to seek relief there during the month of November, 1847. And it must be remembered that the Limerick workhouse had about 2,000 inmates from other districts all this time:⁽⁷⁹⁾

| 1847 | Murroe | Abington |
|------------|--------|----------|
| 6 November | none | none |
| 13 " | 2 | none |
| 20 " | 3 | 3 |
| 27 " | none | 8 |

All the available evidence points to the fact that Murroe was not so badly hit by the famine as elsewhere. However, there must have been a certain amount of emigration, because the following are the population figures and also the number of houses in the parish of Murroe, for the years 1841 and 1851:

| | 1841 | 1851 |
|---------------|-------|----------------------|
| Population | 7,964 | 5,683 |
| No. of Houses | 1,224 | 880. ⁽⁸⁰⁾ |

The figures for baptisms and marriages for the years 1845-49 show how the famine affected the domestic life of the people.⁽⁸¹⁾

| | 1845 | 1846 | 1847 | 1848 | 1849 |
|-----------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Baptisms | 285 | 315 | 243 | 230 | 184 |
| Marriages | 69 | 71 | 43 | 28 | 28 |

Life seems to have returned very much to a normal state early in 1848, although there was still a great shortage of food and money. Lord Cloncurry offered prizes to his tenants who should have the greatest quantity of land cultivated by the spade "not less than nine inches deep, and sown before 20 March, 1848".⁽⁸²⁾ After the fairly good summer of 1847, the farmers set about digging and sowing with more enthusiasm than they had in the last two years. There was considerable difficulty in getting seed-potatoes, but most people succeeded in getting some, through the government's special organisation, through their landlord, or through the Society of Friends.⁽⁸³⁾

Unfortunately, records for the famine in Murroe are not so abundant for 1848-49 as for the earlier period. However, it is clear that the public works continued all this time, and the soup-kitchens still operated. The newspapers of the time give considerable space to details of evictions elsewhere, but Murroe does not seem to have suffered much in this regard. Some of the townlands in Clanwilliam, formerly belonging to Caherconlish, were subjected

to minor evictions; but otherwise the landlords acted with benevolence and understanding. Many died from the famine fever or cholera; others emigrated either to England or America; some few sought refuge in the Limerick Workhouse.

But taken all in all, the famine in Murroe has not left memories of any excessive misery or universal suffering. Memories of the Cloncurry evictions of the 1880s are far more bitter than those of the years 1845-49. The famine years were ones of mere survival. The people held on in grim determination, knowing that it could not last forever. They valued their lands and their homesteads almost more than life itself. And since their landlords did not exact any rent during these famine years, the majority of the people stayed where they were and hoped that the future would bring them better days.

REFERENCES

1. P.L.C., 12th Ann. Report, 1846, p. 223.
2. P.L.C., 13th Ann. Report, 1847, p. 304.
3. P.L.I.S.C., nos. 663305. Cf. also rough minute book of the Limerick Union, 1847-48. (Henceforth referred to as M.B.L.U.) Murroe was registered as District No. 7 in Limk. Union.
4. P.L.I.S.C., no. 6661.
5. P.L.C., 12th and 13th Reports.
6. P.L.I.S.C., no. 6691.
7. C.S.O., Outrage Papers, Co. Limk., 1846, 17/181. National Archives.
8. *Ibid.*, 17/1483.
9. *Ibid.*, 17/1475, A printed proclamation.
10. *Ibid.*, 17/7173.
11. Parl. Papers, Vol. 37 "Scarcity in Ireland Jan.-Aug., 1846", p. 225.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
13. *Ibid.*
14. P.R.O.I., Famine Papers, 1A.50.52.
15. *Ibid.*, D. 637.
16. C.S.O. Outrage Papers, 17/11295.
17. Parl. Papers (1846), Vol. 37, p. 98.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 153.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 165.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 165.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
23. Parl. Papers, Vol. 51, "Relief of Distress in Ireland 1847", p. 484.
24. Parl. Papers (1846), Vol. 37, p. 179.
25. *Ibid.*, 182.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 192.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 207.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 207.
29. Parl. Papers (1846), Vol. 51. pp. 14-15.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
32. L.R., 11 Aug., 1846.
33. Quoted in An Anthology of the Potato, p. 62.
34. Parl. Papers (1846), Vol. 37, p. 356.
35. *Ibid.*, 357.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 317. The road from the Cross of Murroe to The Five Roads was built during the famine. It used to be called 'The Stirabout Road'.
37. P.L.I.S.C., no. 6644.
38. Parl. Papers (1847), Vol. 57, Appendix Cf. M.B.L.U. where it is shown that Murroe and Abington were constantly in arrears throughout 1847.
39. L.R., 4 Sept., 1846.
40. L.R., 18 Sept., 1846.
41. Slat., 1846/63.
42. *Ibid.*, 1846/63a.
43. L.R., 18 Dec., 1846.
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*
46. Parl. Papers (1846), Vol. 51, p. 118.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 236.
48. *Ibid.*, Appendix.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 317.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 335.
51. L.R., 20 Nov., 1846.
52. T.S.F., p. 33.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 36. Matthew Barrington of Glenstal was a Quaker and acted on one of the committees during the famine years.
54. The house now belongs to Mr. Mattie Hoyne, who married a Miss Molohey.
55. Parl. Papers, Vol. 51, p. 483.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 444.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 427. It was calculated that it cost the government on an average 1/2^s/2d. per head per week to supply soup. This included payment of staff. P.L.I.S.A., 1849, nos. 7057-61.
58. P.L.I.S.C., 1849, nos. 7046-49.
59. M.B.L.U. p. 25 and *passim*, where it is shown that there was considerable difficulty in getting burial space for those who died in the Limerick Workhouse.
60. Le Fanu Papers, Barrington to Le Fanu, 24 June, 1828.
61. Grand Jury Records, 1828.
62. Le Fanu Papers, Cloncurry to Le Fanu, 9 Aug., 1830.
63. Report of Medical Charities, Ireland, 1841, Appendix. The following are the Grand Jury Grants for the Murroe Dispensary during the famine years:
1845: £55. 8s. 1846: £51. 3s.
1847: £55. 1s. 1848: £39. 4s.
64. L. Chr., 9 Jan., 1847.
65. Slat. 1847. Dr. Paul Cullen to Slattery, Rome, 14 Jan., 1847.
66. Slat., 1847, 7, Card., Franson to Slattery, 30 Jan., Cf. also letter from Cullen to Slattery, 3 Feb.
67. Quoted in L.R., 19 Mar., '47.
68. The actual name of the fungus was phytophthora infestans. Cf. *An Anthology of the Potato*, p. 14.
69. Parl. Papers (1846), Vol. 37, p. 110.
70. *Ibid.*, p. III.
71. *The Nation*, 9 Jan. '47.
72. *Ibid.*
73. *Ibid.*, 6 Mar., '47.
74. L.R., 2 Mar., '47, Duhig, Lord Cloncurry's agent, lived in a house on the spot where the new school now stands.
75. Slat., 1847/20.
76. Slat., 1847/29, 32.
77. *Ibid.*, 1847/45.
78. In his report to Dr. Slattery, prior to the Visitation, Fr. Costello noted that "Six other schools very badly attended this year." Cf. Slat. 1847/53.
79. M.B.L.U. under these dates.
80. Census of Ireland, 1851. ii. I have made my calculations by adding up the figures for all the townlands in the present Cath. parish of Murroe and Boher.
81. Murroe parochial registers.
82. L.R., 4 Oct., 1847.
83. T.S.F., p. 387. The amount of potatoes grown in Co. Limerick for the years 1847-49 are as follows:
1847: 12,141 acres. 1848: 39,019 a.
1849: 17,508 a.
Cf. *Irish Almanac*, 1851, p. 223.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- a = abbot
A = Acre
ab = archbishop
A.F.M. = *Annals of the Four Masters*
A.E.S.C.I. = *Abstract of Evidence taken before the House of Lords upon the state of crime in Ireland, 1835-39*
Archiv. Hib. = *Archivium Hibernium*
b = bishop
bar. = barony
Book of S. & D. = *Book of Survey and Distribution*
B.P. = The Barrington Papers
Cal. Pat. Rolls. = *Calendar of Patent and Close Rolls in Ireland* (ed. Morrin)
C.C. = Catholic Curate
Co. = County
Col. = Colonel
Dunlop = R. Dunlop, *Ireland under the Commonwealth*
Fiants = *Calendar of Fiants*
Harris = *Harris's Collectanea*
H.B.C. = *Handbook of British Chronology*
Hib. Dom. = *Hibernia Dominicana*
I.E.R. = *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*
I.M.E.D. = *Irish Monastic and Episcopel Deeds*
Ir. Rec. Comm. = *Irish Records Commission*
J.L.F.C. = *Journal of the Limerick Field Club*
Doc. (or doc.) = Document
J.R.S.A.I. = *Journal of Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*
Limk. Chron. = *Limerick Chronicle*
L.R. = *Limerick Reporter*
M.B.L.U. = *Rough Minute Book of the Limerick Union*
D.E.P. = *Dublin Evening Post*
Comm. Jn. IR. = *Commons Journals, Ireland*
C.O.D. = *Calendar of Ormond Deeds*
S.C. = *Civil Survey* (ed. Simmington)
C.S.O. = *Chief Secretary's Office, Dublin Castle*
C.P.L. = *Calendar of Papal Letters*
Mt. = Mountain
N.L.I. = *National Library, Ireland*
Nat. Archiv. = *National Archives*
P. = Perches
Parl. Papers = *Parliamentary Papers*
P.L.C. = *Poor Law Commissioners (Ireland)*
P.L.I.S.C. = *Poor Law Ireland. Report of Select Committee. (1849)*
P.P. = *Parish Priest*
prof. = *Profitable land*
P.R.O.I. = *Public Record Office, Ireland*
R. = *Road*
R. & S. = *Richardson and Sayles, Parliaments and Councils in Medieval Ireland*
R.B.O. = *The Red Book of Ormond*
R.I.A. = *Royal Irish Academy*
R.L.C.F.R. = *Report of London Committee for Famine Relief in Ireland, 1833*
R.S.C.S.I. = *Report of Select Committee in the State of Ireland 1825. (Commons Report)*
Slat. = *Papers of Dr. M. Slattery, Cashel Archives.*
Statuta = *Statuta Synodalia* (T. Bray)
T.A.B. = *Tithe Applotment Book*
T.F.P. = *Tipperary Free Press*
Tipp. Vind. = *The Tipperary Vindicator*
T.S.F. = *Transactions of the Society of Friends during the Famine in Ireland*
V.F. = *Vicar Forane*
V.G. = *Vicar General*