Limerick Famine Riots
of 1830

by Bernard Stack

The people who were being exploited had little recourse to law as they lacked the financial means or the education to do so and the authorities were not willing to remedy the situation. Politicians were well aware of the underlying causes of recurring famines and the futility of the feeble efforts made to remedy them. In a letter written on 7 July 1830, by the Duke of Wellington, to Northumberland, he expressed more concern for the miseries of public money than the suffering of the people and went on to prophesy an even greater catastrophe in the future. He wrote:

7 July 1830
I confess that the annually recurring starvation in Ireland, for a period differing, according to the goodness or badness of the season, from one week to three months, gives me more uneasiness than any other evil existing in the United Kingdom. It is starvation, because it is the fact that, although there is an abundance of provisions in the country of a superior kind, and at a cheaper rate than the same can be bought in any other part of Her Majesty’s dominions, those who want in the midst of plenty cannot get, because they do not possess even the smallest sum of money necessary to buy a supply of food. It occurs every year, for that period of time that elapses between the final consumption of one year’s crop of potatoes, and the coming of the crop of the following year, and it is long or short, according as the previous season has been good or bad. Now when this misfortune occurs, there is no relief or mitigation, excepting a recourse to public money. The proprietors of the country, those who ought to think for the people, to foresee this misfortune, and to provide beforehand a remedy for it, are amusing themselves in the Clubs in London, in Cheltenham, or Bath, or on the Continent, and the Government are made responsible for the evil, and they must find the remedy for it where they can – anywhere excepting in the pockets of Irish Gentlemen. Then, if they give public money to provide a remedy for this distress, it is applied to all purposes excepting the one for which it is given; and more particularly to that one, viz. the payment of arrears of an exorbitant rent. However, we must expect that this evil will continue, and will increase as the population will increase, and the chances of a serious evil, such as the loss of a large number of persons by famine, will be greater in proportion to the numbers existing in Ireland in the state in which we know that the great body of the people are living at this moment.

It is little wonder that the people were driven to desperation and it is not known if Wellington was aware that, in 1830, shortly before he wrote his letter, the poor people of Limerick, motivated by hunger and despair took to the streets of their city, in the early hours of 25 June in order to find food to feed their families. This was not the first time there was unrest in the city due to food shortages. Exactly thirteen years earlier, in June 1817, similar riots occurred when 'a mob broke out and plundered the merchant stores of flour and oatmeal'.

Nevertheless, the more recent outbreak of violence caused a sensation and The Limerick Chronicle carried a detailed report with headlines relaying the more striking details as follows:

'Limerick – June 28
PUBLIC DISTRESS
Popular Comission – Outrage and Plunder of Private Property – Attack on the Mills, Stores and Shops – Garrison under arms – Shots fired and several persons wounded.'

This preamble conveys but a faint idea of the alarming crisis which unfortunately arrived, or, more clearly speaking, of the frightful state of disorder in which this city was plunged, from an early hour yesterday morning, until 3 or 4 o’clock in the afternoon. Life and property seemed equally insecure under the reckless dominion of an infuriated multitude.

All our readers are sensible that the great mass of the population of Ireland exists almost exclusively on the potato (sic) root, and its scarcity at this season of the year usually adds to the distress of the labouring classes. The general substitute then is oatmeal, and the increased demand for this article of consumption was sure to cause an advance of price to the buyer.

In this instance the rise drew forth loud and indignant murmurs from the populace. Symptoms of an eruption, too plain to be mistaken, were soon manifest, and the first indication of actual violence was an attack upon five carloads of oatmeal in
Castle-street, coming in to Mr. Caswell, of George's Quay.

The cars were surrounded in an instant by a furious mob of men, women, and children, who seized and carried off every bag of oatmeal. The tocsin was now sounded, and the signal was caught up like magic; in the most remote quarters of the City. Every distant or obscure lane and alley, poured forth in overwhelming masses almost half-naked, their dense population, thus congregated in thousands, they were seen flying thro' the streets with shouts and huzzas in all the air of boundless enthusiasm. A groaning cry also suffering from want. They plundered a great part of the cargo, but the Police, who had been out at an early hour, succeeded in protecting four carloads of it for the proprietor. A countless multitude now made for Mr. Hogan's mills, on the canal, which they took by storm, after smashing to atoms every pane of glass in the windows. — A scene of the most profligate waste was here witnessed, upwards of 200 bags of flour having been destroyed or carried away, besides some hundred loaves of bread from the bakery.

Even the very dough was taken off, and more trampled upon, and totally spoiled. — The flour was distributed in the female ap- prons, gowns, and even caps, the men and boys filled their hats with the plunder. Not satisfied with completely gutting this extensive concern in mere wantonness, they broke and destroyed the extensive machinery of the mill, thus rendering the establishment perfectly useless for many days. The Police would vainly attempt to stem the torrent; yet so desperate were the rioters, as to render any effectual check wholly useless, except at a dreadful sacri- fice of human life. About this time a numerous party forcibly boarded a sail- boat from Askleton at the Long Dock, and carried away every bag of flour the vessel contained. While the plunderers worked away on the Quayside, rowboats from the North Strand pulled up to assist the attack, and in half an hour all the property had vanished. The number of bags was sixty. General Sir Edward Blakeley had he Dra- goons, Rifles, and the 59th Regiment out in detachments, early in the day, placing guards upon the Banks, Public Offices, and Merchants' Stores. The Mayor was likewise indefatigable, moving every dis- posable force he could employ to the points of attack, and exposing himself in many situations of danger. The immense crowd of rioters, in order to facilitate their operations, soon divided their forces, and separated into parties, under the vigilance of the Military. A violent assault was made upon Mr. P. Gabbett's store, on Sir Harry's Mall, though happily it did not succeed — sledges and stones having been employed without success. At this place and at Mr. Hogan's Mills the Military were pelted and some of the Dragoons helmets struck off. — The loss, however, was only momentary, and the such gross provoca-

tion was used; the forbearance of the Military was admirable. — The notice of the mobs was now directed to several shops and cellars in the Old Town, which they robbed of bread, pork, and other provision. They attacked the stores of Mr. John N. Russell, in Henry-Street, but without effect, they were vigorously defended. — They likewise surrounded the Bacon stores on the north side of the street, and thunders away at the gates for some time, until the arrival of a Military party. Then the rioters struck off in another direction. In fact, it would be a difficult task to follow them in all their disorderly acts, or to enumerate the variety of outrages upon private property. Suffice it to say, the large bakeries of Mr. Roche, in Brunswick- street, Mr. Lyons, in Thomas-street, and Mr. G. T. Hill, in Catherine-street, were plundered of their contents, and the leaves flung into the street. In addition to this, the bread carts, which supply the retailers were arrested on their way and forcibly emptied of their burthen. A violent rabbler of all sexes and ages, rushed into the Butter Weigh-house, the only emporium for that great article of export, and carried off in spite of every obstacle at least 100 firkins of butter, the property of different persons. Most of this was recovered soon after by the laudable exertion of individuals. Mr. Shee's store near the Ordinance Barracks was taken possession of, and to prove it was not altogether food the rioters were in search of, they removed the coarse salt out of the concerns. Mr. McNamara's store in Denmark-

and Mr. Shee's bacon store, William-street were burst open, and a great quant- ity of provision, including pork heads, hams, and flitches of bacon, and lard, swept away by the invaders. Mr. Banna- tyn's store was also plundered of its contents. A provision store of a person named Cusack, in Pump Lane, was robbed by the mob, and a store of Mr. Nash in Sexton-street, of several firkins of butter. An attempt to break in the provision stores of Mr. John Kelly, in Mardyke, besides those of other merchants, did not succeed. Towards three o'clock the popular tumult began to subside, the precaution of the Mayor, Magistrates, and General Blakeley having met the rioters in almost every quarter of their route. About this hour a small party of Rifles were pelted with stones on George's Quay after making a prisoner, they fired by order of a policeman, upon their assailants, and a similar country fellow, who brought potatoes into town in the morning, was shot through the knee. One of the balls struck the front of Mr. Burroughs' house, exactly opposite our office, and the shock was immediately remedied to the County Infirmary. A special meeting was now convened by the Mayor at the exchange, resolutions were passed reprobating the disturbances, and a liberal sum of money subscribed to purchase oatmeal for sale to the people at a reduced rate. This secured to allay the popular agitation, but while the meeting was being held a powerful mob attacked the Ballycough Mills and plundered the concern of every- thing valuable sweeping the lofts of even the raw grain.

We subjoin a list of the casualties that occurred during the day: Patrick Kelly, John Enright, and Michael Molony, gun shot wounds, dangerous; Michael Day, severe contusion; Patrick Walsh and Michael Elin, ditto. These are in hospital. The first three were shot from some distance in defence of merchant's stores.

Should these dreadful outrages be repeated, and private property again be submitted to the grasp of the spoiler, we tell the respectable inhabitants, it can only occur thro' their own culpable apathy, want of union, and manly energy. The Mayor is most anxious to have the support of a strong civil power, and he will not be so artful in a number of special constables yesterday. Let the citizens in their own defence cooperate with the authorities, extremities may then be avoided, and the confusion of blood prevented; otherwise they may assuredly themselves the consequences will be of a most disastrous character, for these outrages cannot be repeated with impunity — forbearance will but invite insult and aggression.

Let it not be forgotten, that all this devastation will eventually fall upon the City and Liberties, and that heavy present- ment for the losses already sustained will be sent before the Grand Jury next Assizes. The military are harassed, and the garrison were under arms all last night. The Riot Act was read yesterday, but no shots were fired by the army, unless in the solitory base above noticed, several charges with fixed bayonets were made in the crowd, but no injury resulted. All public houses were closed up at nine o'clock last night by order of the Mayor, and notice given for all persons to be in their houses before that hour. The evening and night passed over in tranquillity; may we hope it will not be interrupted this day. A patrol (sic) of cavalry paraded the streets until an advan- ced hour this morning. Some persons were detected last night offering for sale part of the meat and butter taken from the stores. The victuallers in Denmark-street market behaved with great resolutions and stopped a large portion of the provision, which was being abstracted from the concerns of Messrs. McNamara and O'Brien.

The figure and aspect of the women emerging from the stores were of the most ludicrous character. So bedaubed they were with flour, head face and clothes, so ridiculous was the plight in which they ran through the streets, and so disordered their dress, as to resemble, in truth, rather a horde of wild Indians than a number of civilised beings.

The mail on the Dublin mail from hence yesterday was doubled by the Postmaster here. The bread-carts from the various bakeries drove thro' the town this morning escorted by small detachments of
military. It is a remarkable circumstance that no rioting whatever took place in the streets, after the small military party had fired and wounded the countryman on the New Bridge.

Several ruffians took a most unworthy advantage of the disordered state of society yesterday. They had the audacity to enter some grocers and spirit shops, carrying away whiskey, cheese, and other articles, which the owners did not dare refuse them. The loss of property resulting from the wholesale pillage is estimated at £5,000, a very moderate computation.

Guards were fixed upon all the merchants' stores, and public bakeries, and pawn-offices last night. The Mayor remained up all night, regardless of all personal comforts, while the property of his fellow citizens was in the slightest danger.

The relief committee have morts open this morning for the sale of oatmeal, at the reduced price of 3d per pottle to the poor—a most reasonable resource.

Should violence be resumed after this, the Magistrates will feel justified in employing every expedient to preserve the public peace.

The Mayor and the General have this day made such wise dispensations of military force on all public roads, as will afford every facility to the safe conduct of provisions coming into market from any part of the country. We cannot leave this disagreeable subject, without noticing the judicious arrangements of Major General Sir Edward Blakeney in every quarter of the city, the mild but firm demeanour of this gallant Officer in the most trying situations, won golden opinions, even from the class of persons whose excesses he was fortunate in subduing, while the alacrity he evinced cooperate with the Mayor and Civic Authorities in all matters affecting the welfare and security of the inhabitants, demands the warmest acknowledgements. The citizens of Limerick are sensible of the obligations they owe Sir Edward Blakeney. It is not flattery to state that the Siaviter in modo, and the fortiter in re, were rarely found in such happy combination. The sentiments avowed by General Blakeney, on numerous occasions during the tumult, were such as to reflect honour in the character of a British soldier and a gentleman, Sir E. Blakeney was the first to suggest a subscription for relief of the distressed classes, in order to deprive them of every pretext for violence or plunder and thereby warrant the Magistrates in resorting to coercive measures should those be unavoidable.

Rioting also occurred in the county. In Askeaton, a furious mob attacked the mills of Mr. Paul Erson and plundered a vast quantity of flour and oatmeal, leaving the entire building a mere ruin.

Cavalry were sent 'towards Annacotty and Castle Connell, in consequence of farmers' property being attacked'. In the west of the county contributions were made to relieve the distressed and there was an outbreak of typhus fever in Rathkeale.

Retribution

The 'coercive measures', threatened by the magistrates, were brought to bear on
those who were arrested and charged with rioting and affray. Special sittings of the City Quarter Sessions were held to deal with those who 'prejudiced the character of the city'. While not exonerating the leaders on whom he was about to pass sentence on, he said that the court did not make reference to the causes of the riots. Potatoes were scarce due to a partial failure of the crop in the coastal areas that supplied the city. Consequently, the price of meal increased from 16 to 20 shillings per ton. This caused panic among the population of the city who live from hand to mouth. The sudden nature of the distress caught the charities by surprise and they were unable to relieve the people affected, as they had done in the past. He continued to observe that 'proprietors are mostly absentees and their fortunes are not spent on their estates. The poverty of the redundant population was the effect of early and imprudent marriage. The population was then overgrown and consequently unemployed which led to severe distress being felt from time to time, whenever the potato crop, the chief support of the populace, fails.' Notwithstanding the cause of the distress the court dealt with the culprits 'who worked on the fears and alarms of the lower order to support them in the plunder that they had planned.' It was also stated that those who led the lawless rabble in the riots were in a state of comparative comfort and could not plead want as an excuse for their violence.31

Given the nature of this outbreak and the prejudiced opinions expressed, it is not surprising that there were numerous convictions at the Assizes. One man, John Ahern was convicted of rioting and defying the Riot Act, which was read three or four times. Several others were convicted for their part in the rioting and received a variety of sentences. Among them, Edward Atkinson was charged with aspactuating police at Old Clare Street and was among the rioters that refused to disperse. Four prisoners were taken by the police but were released when they were hailed with stones. The police fired a blank cartridge over the heads of the rioters, but this exasperated the mob further and the police were forced to take refuge in the Guard House. The mob, led by Atkinson, then broke down the door and only retreated when the police charged them. Atkinson who was arrested near the Canal, was found guilty and sentenced to three months imprisonment. This sentence appears mild when compared to the one given to William Borenizer. He was found guilty of stealing lard, bacon and canvas from a store, owned by James and Samuel Phelps, and was sentenced to transportation for seven years. Others sentenced, for attempting to rescue prisoners from the police, were Patrick McMahon who stoned police at Quay Lane, near George's Quay received six months hard labour and Michael Ryan, a grown boy, received twelve months hard labour. Fear of granting leniency to prisoners arrested for stealing fibrics of butter from the weight house and threatening a policeman "to dash his brains out", Not all those arrested were convicted. James Sutherland, a baker, was charged with riot and unlawful assembly but proved, with the use of allibis, that he was on the roof watching the riot and only came down when it was over. The convictions were not just confined to the city. John Buckley and John Madden were charged with stealing flour from Mr Samuel Caswell at Ballyclough Mills. They were convicted on the evidence of Peter Hynes clerk and miller at the mills and they were sentenced to 'be transported for seven years'. The sentences given by the court were bizarre, some for their leniency and others for their harshness. A James McMahon was sentenced to 'be transported for forty years' for receiving goods on credit, from the shops of Mr Thomas McMahon and Mr Chapple in Limerick city and not paying for them, while robbery with violence was treated less severely.32

Relief

It is interesting that relief was suggested as a measure to prevent further "violence or plunder" rather than as an empathetic gesture. In July 1830, the General Relief Committee for Limerick City commissioned a census, which found 2,461 indigent and unemployed families within the city for the previous month of June. The response of the committee was to employ 5,000 "destitute creatures of both sexes and all ages" requiring roads. The relief fund was operated and had sums contributed by "the more respectable residents of the neighbourhood." Among those who were singled out for mention were Rev. Enright of St Mary's Chapel in general and Mr. Fisher of Rutland Street. Funds were sought from inside and outside the city and the inland Steam Navigation Company responded, to a request, from the Relief Committee, by sourcing potatoes between Banagher on the Shannon and Tarbert and Kilrush on the estuary and transported them free of charge to Limerick.33

Another of the relief measures introduced in Limerick was at the Strand, on the northern side of Thomond Bridge, which was "enlarged and the passage made more commodious" and a solid masonry wall was built on the side by the river.34 Millers also responded to relieve the want and hunger. Joseph Barrington offered the use of his mills at Barrington's Bridge to prepare corn for consumption gratis. At Newtown Perry (sic) Mills Mr Russell offered meal, from the best wheat, for sale at 2d per stone, which was much cheaper than oatmeal, and superior to it as an article of food. Flour was being sold for 2s a bag under the price of any miller in the city.35

Relief committees around the country were constantly under pressure when partial failures of the potato crop caused distress and hunger amongst the poorer people. The calamity of a total failure of the entire potato crop on year on was not envisaged or foreseen in 1830. However fifteen years later, Ireland was to experience what became known as the Great Famine and the lesser famines, which went before, while catastrophic, paled in comparison.

DEFINITIONS

Flibb is a salted and cured side of bacon. Huzzah (originally huzza) exclaimed after accomplishing a great feat or before attacking someone. Pottle: a container holding a half gallon (1.9 litres) measure. "Suswiter in modo, fortiter in re" is a Latin term meaning gently in manner, strongly in deed.

Tocsin is an alarm bell or a warning signal.

FOOTNOTES

1 The statement 'an army marches on its stomach' has been attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte.

2 http://www.irishtimes.com/ancestor/magazine/emigration/pre-fam.htm

3 Potatoes are not native to Ireland but more than likely originated in South America, where the Spanish referred to them as patata. Potatoes were introduced to Ireland around 1590. It is not known who introduced them, but it was almost certainly not Sir Walter Raleigh.

4 http://www.amazon.co.uk/forum/politics/_encoding UTF8&cForum=ExizT2D8f1UY5H3Z&cPage=3&cSo rt=oldest&cThread=TxsPV072ECXW R39

5 Wellington to Northumberland, 7 July 1830, in Despatches, vii 111-2; reproduced in P. S. O'Hegarty, A History of Ireland under the Union (London 1952) 211-2. [See also http://multitext.ucd.ie/G/Famine] The 3rd Duke of Northumberland was Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in 1830. The 1st Duke of Wellington, who fought at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, was Prime Minister in 1830, having overseen the introduction of Catholic Emancipation the previous year. Ironically, it was Waterloo and the ending of the war that caused the economic depression that Wellington describes in his letter.

6 The Limerick Chronicle 26 June 1830.

7 Ibid.

8 The New Bridge is now known as Mathew Bridge.

9 The loss sustained by Mr Erson was valued at £200.

10 The loss sustained by Mr (O’)Shea was valued at £780.

11 The Limerick Chronicle 26 June 1830.

12 The Limerick Chronicle 21 July 1830.

13 The Limerick Chronicle 17, 21 and 24 July 1830 give details of the convictions and sentences imposed on the rioters.

14 The Limerick Chronicle 21 July 1830.

15 The Limerick Chronicle 10 July 1830.

16 The Limerick Chronicle 28 July 1830. The Strand is now known as Clancy Strand.

17 The Limerick Chronicle 26 June 1830.