Some recorded texts have shown that John Hare Croker of Ballynaguarde (1784-1857) was a very active member of the gentry in helping the local people in his parish of Cathercorey in County Limerick during the famine. He played a pivotal role in alleviating the suffering of the destitute. His wrote a series of letters to the authorities in Dublin asking them for funds to provide employment for the local people during this critical time. He formed the Ballyneety Relief Committee. Croker’s wife, Catherine, set up a soup kitchen in Ballynaguarde during the famine in an effort to feed the destitute. These letters, the relief committee, the soup kitchen and popular memory relating to these events give a clearer illustration of the deeds of the Crokers during the famine years.

Foreman of the Grand Jury

John Hare Croker was a leading figure in the Grand Jury of Limerick during the famine years (1845-51). During this time, he held the position of Foreman of the Grand Jury in the Spring Assizes of 1845, 1846, and 1849. Croker also held this position in the Summer Assizes of 1846. Excluding 1847, he was also a member of the Grand Jury during the famine. In 1846 several new Acts of Parliament were passed to provide ‘relief by employment’, which included building, repairing and maintaining road, drainage, and other construction work. By the end of 1846, the number of persons employed in all disciplines around the country was nearly 400,000. The government created this employment under the banner of the Public Works Act whose aim was said to stop any landlord from ‘enriching himself’ with relief money intended for the needy. Croker’s estate at Ballynaguarde provided gainful employment for over 130 people during the famine years.

Croker’s Soup Kitchen

Croker wrote a series of letters: The Famine Appeal Letters to Dublin Castle during 1846. These letters urged the authorities to allocate more funds in order to give people further employment in his parish. His main concern, expressed in his letters, was the immediate plight of the destitute in and around his area. The Grand Jury’s role, although effective in setting up relief works, had a major obstacle to overcome before allocating the funds for these works. They would have to be approved by government and as history has shown, time was of the essence in saving peoples’ lives during these years.

Croker’s letter, dated 19 March, 1846, appealed to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Lord Bessborough, and to inform him of the progress of the recently approved work relief scheme. (Bessborough, who died in 1847, was said to be ‘sympathetic’ to those affected by the famine; while his successor, Lord Clarendon was ‘initially unsympathetic to the Irish destitute’. But Croker warned the Lord Lieutenant that this relief scheme was not enough and the minimum amount of work approved was not adequate. He also stated that other destitute parts of the district not covered in these relief works were now being funded by ‘local characters’. They were accused of mishandling funds, which were raised outside of local government, thus, could be used for their own benefit, and not for the local people. He wrote:

Ballynaguarde house
... The numerous other destitute parts of the district to be provided for by works ... by private undertakings and local characters.10

Sometimes overlooked in historical discourse was the abuse of famine funds by these 'local characters'; landlords were usually blamed for all the ills in their immediate area and for the hunger and suffering. However, these 'middlemen' who diverted monies into their own pockets at the expense of the hungry people warrant a mention.

In a further letter on 19 March, 1846 to one Richard Pennfather, Under-Secretary for Ireland (and related to Croker through marriage),11 Croker urged the aforementioned to use his political influence to attain favour before the Lord Lieutenant to provide the funds that he and his committee urgently required:

Sir, I have the honour of enclosing the memorial contained within, & also the report of the County Surveyor [Thomas Kearney], which I request you will lay before His Excellency the Lord Lieutenant and pray his consideration of their contents.12

Croker wrote again to the Under-Secretary in Dublin Castle on 24 April, 1846, informing him that a relief committee had been set up among the gentry and clergy; The Ballyneety Relief Committee. He stated that the sum of £291 had been raised and paid in for the immediate relief of workers until work could begin. Though he stressed that this sum was only a temporary measure and 'inadequate' for the needs of the poor:

I am directed by the gentry, clergymen (of both persuasions) and farmers of this district to state to you for the information of his Excellency the Lord Lieutenant that a Relief Committee with the approbation of the Vice Lieutenant of the County [Limerick] has been formed & a subscription of £291 has been paid in,13 this sum I regret to say

is quite inadequate for the famine labourers14 until some works are begun. Therefore on behalf of the meeting implore His Excellency to order a sum in aid of our subscriptions & also an order to set Indian meal at first cost. I have the honour to be Sir Your obedient servant 
John Croker.15

This relief committee was largely independent from any authority in Dublin or London. Croker and this committee raised over £250, which would be used to fund relief works in the area. The main form of employment was in the construction of public roads, the drainage of bogs, and the levelling of some hills in the area.

He continued to address the Lord Lieutenant in Dublin on behalf of the Ballyneety Relief Committee, of which he was chairperson. He also continued to press for more funds to alleviate the suffering, not by aid alone but by giving a more sustained gainful employment to the needy. In the following letter, he urged the Lord Lieutenant to ignore government reports; in which they stated that a more 'general effort' should be applied; and again stressed that 'immediate action' must be taken to avoid disaster in his district.16 This 'government report' was carried out in Croker's area by one Lieutenant Inglis, who was the Officer of the Board of Works. Inglis's report to the Lord Lieutenant, however, was not complimentary regarding the success of the relief works. Croker, undeterred, continued to appeal to the authorities to ignore Inglis's report and continue to fund the relief works.17

Writing to the Relief Committee in Dublin Castle he added:

... Cannot agree with Lt. Inglis in his report to you for that a more combined & general effort on the part of the residents ... that should be said Lord Lieutenant be pleased of the commencement of the works ... that the workers recommence with being sufficient to overcome the destitute of this district.18

Local newspapers of the time, particularly The Limerick Chronicle reproduced Croker's (and other Grand Jury members') letters in its editions. On 25 July, 1846, it published Croker's (then Foreman of the Grand Jury of County Limerick), correspondence with the British Prime Minister, Robert Peel, after he (Peel) approved the continuation of the relief works, which were drawn up in the Summer Assizes of 1846:

That the most cordial thanks of this Grand Jury be given to Sir Robert Peel, for his foresight and wisdom in devising ... their energy in carrying out those measures which have so entirely relieved the poor of this country from impending famine, by providing them with cheap food and employment.19

Meetings of the Relief Committee

But these relief works – championed by Croker (and other prominent landowners) were criticised and their validity challenged by other members of the ruling establishment. Some were accused of setting up these relief works to primarily improve one's own estates. One such example is recorded in the minutes of a meeting at Ballyneety Presentment Sessions, held on Monday 12 October, 1846, with a purpose to "provide employment for the poor" which was reported in the Limerick Chronicle. These sessions were held in Ballyneety Court House, or Sessions House. Heated exchanges took place between Croker (who chaired the meeting) and one Caleb Powell MP.20 Also present at this session, in their official capacity, were Thomas Kearney and Lieutenant Inglis. Croker, for one, was an advocate of building gravel roads, which gave access to bogs on his land. Powell, on the other hand, and perhaps quite correctly pointed out that 'works of this description would improve the property of private individuals, by affording them ingress [access] to their bogs at public expense' and 'if the pro-
priets of the bogs transferred them to the rate-payers, then there could be no objection to making roads to them. Some landowners, on the other hand, objected to the building of larger public roads as suggested by Kowney in the area, which Croker was also in opposition to; he claimed that construction on public roads would 'confiscate the property of the landed proprietors'. But he also argued that these works should 'do more than provide employment for the people for three months'. Powell, on hearing Croker's objections, took offence, and muttered what the reporter at the meeting said: 'was impossible to catch, but [Powell] was said to impart something personal to Mr. Croker'. The meeting, however, seemed to have a favourable outcome for the landowners - while both Powell's objections and his applications for new roads were rejected meetings of this type give us a window into the microeconomics and internal feuding between the landed gentry and other political figures. All these disputes went on it should be stressed - while the ordinary people of the parish waited for food and employment; any type of employment - whether it was on a 'public road' or a 'private estate' - which would keep one's family free from starvation.

Croker did not sit on the Grand Jury of the County of Limerick in 1847. He would have been 63 years old by then. Ironically, the relief works were suspended in 1847, when government decided to give the people 'direct aid' by way of soup and grain. Croker was a strong advocate of giving aid to the people in the form of gainful employment, which he saw, quite rightly it could be argued, as a more long term answer in helping the destitute. Although relief works of this sort are deemed as failures in some academic texts, these works did prove successful in preventing starvation in local areas.

It is not perhaps, an overstatement to suggest that Croker, and his contemporaries, could have done a lot more for famine relief than the incompetent government officials if they were given the appropriate funds and cooperation in their attempts to set up and manage these relief works. His effort to help the destitute, which he did both officially, and unofficially, was an attempt to help the people by giving them aid through these relief works, not the new infamous soup kitchens which followed the suspension of these types of relief works in other parts of the country.

Popular Memory and Mrs Croker's Soup Kitchen

The popular memories and oral testimonies regarding the Crokers during the famine differ somewhat. The descendants of people who did not work on the Ballynaguarda estate do not remember much being passed down to them orally concerning any good works carried out by the Crokers' during the famine; only the misery and suffering that was felt, not in the Ballynaguarda area however, but all over the country. It is important to note the oral tradition did not pass down any stories of individual suffering on or around the Croker estate. Of course this does not mean that neither 'individual suffering' nor family suffering did not take place on the Croker estate. The descendants of the estate workers, on the other hand, remembered being told that 'old John Croker was a good landlord', who 'spent his own money to give people work in the area' when it was most drastically needed for survival during the famine years.

Another oral recollection recalls the work of John Croker's wife, Catherine Bagwell Croker. She was remembered in popular memory as operating a type of 'soup-kitchen' in Ballynaguarda to provide the impoverished with food and relief. 'She' [Mrs Croker], as one oral testimony recalled being told: 'used to give out the soup and bread to the poor herself.' Attempts to feed the destitute children in particular, came up against the inevitable religious superstition; the parents' of children were warned that 'this soup would turn their children into Protestants'. A popular rhyme of this era, in opposition to Mrs. Croker's soup kitchen (and others) went like: 'Proddy-woody [Protestant] ring your
School house

bell, and call the soupers' [converted Catholic children] down to hell.' While another remembered being told that some clergy in the area told the people that 'If they didn't keep their children away from that place [soup kitchen] that they would have to answer to the Lord God when they die.' It was said that it was 'Better to die of starvation and disease that sup from the Devil's [Protestant] spoon.'

Political indecision, it could be argued, went on while the Dublin authorities played with peoples' lives, while trying to decide what 'best' action should be taken to tackle hunger and death, which went on while they argued and heckled for position and power at the expense of local communities like those in the area of the Croker estate. Also, the religious virtues of what was 'right and wrong' undoubtedly prayed on the minds, and toyed with the lives of a deeply devout, impoverished, and scared populace.

If Croker is to be judged by the content of his letters with Dublin Castle, and actions like those in The Ballyneety Relief Committee and Extraordinary Sessions, they illustrate him being a rather direct representative, as he tried to help the destitute in his area during the famine. On the other hand, he could also be viewed as an archetypal rich landowner—protecting his own interests by securing his tenants' livelihoods—thus protecting his rents and so on. But even in the post-famine period of 1853, Croker continuously stressed the good work that was being carried out through the Board of Works schemes, which he reasonably claimed, benefited landlord, tenant, worker and government. After all, Croker was a landlord, and any landlord of good meaning would, while striving for the betterment of their own estate, also endeavour to better the lives of their tenants and the destitute in the process. While eating soup from Mrs. Croker's soup kitchen may not have directly converted hungry children into 'Protestants', it may have saved their lives.

If John Hare Croker tried to use his political and personal influence to bring to the attention of the authorities the plights that faced the destitute in his area if urgent action was not taken, then a more positive look at this famine landlord— and his wife, for her work should be documented. But, as another oral source added: 'No matter what they [Crokers] done for anyone during the famine, they would be blamed for causing it [the famine] anyhow.'

References
3. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
8. These letters are kept in the National Archives, Dublin.
13. £281' in today's money would be worth approximately €23,000.00.
14. As underlined in original letter.
15. Croker to Under Secretary 24 April 1846: Famine Relief Commission Files.
16. Ibid., 27 May 1846.
17. Ibid.
18. Croker to Relief Commissioners, 27 May 1846: Famine Relief Commission Files.
20. The same Caleb Powell who called the Crokers: 'An arrogant bunch of uneducated blockheads'.
22. Ibid.
24. Catherine Bagwell Croker is remembered in the area as 'being a Quaker'.
25. This soup kitchen was located on the site of the old Ballynagardar Protestant School, which locals say the Croker family built earlier in the 19th Century to teach the children of their own estate workers' how to read and write.
27. All references to 'oral' or 'oral memories' are taken from Oral Interviews conducted for this paper.
Limerick and the Paris Peace Conference 1919

**by Des Ryan**

Wilson’s Fourteen Points [the local newspapers referred them as principles] gave hope to millions of people around the world who felt that at last the shackles of colonialism and imperialism could be shaken off and that they would have the right to govern themselves. On February 11th, 1918, while addressing the United States Congress, Wilson said that “National aspirations must be respected; people may now be dominated and governed only by their own consent.” Self determination “is not a mere phrase. It is an important principle of action which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril”. Unfortunately it was a false hope, as the victorious powers, particularly England and France, were not prepared to relinquish control of

![Lloyd George, Georges Clemenceau, and Woodrow Wilson, Paris 1919](image)