

# The Famine of 1740-'41 in Limerick City

by John Hanamy

The story of the eighteenth century famine is one of total starvation and devastation. The outbreak of disease in 1741 probably resulted in the deaths of over twelve per cent of the entire population of the city. It is a catastrophe that has received relatively little attention compared with the Great Famine of 1845-50 and deserves further exploration.



Sketch of Nicholas Peacock's house (1746), Kilmoreen, Kildimo, County Limerick by Michael O'Halloran in June 2007.

Information on the eighteenth century famine is sparse. We have little or no government documents, few eye witness accounts and the number of newspapers in 1740-41 was confined to only a handful compared with those published a hundred years later. With the exception of *The Belfast News-Letter*, all newspapers in Ireland were printed and published in Dublin at this time.

The famine that devastated the country and particularly the fertile lands of the Golden Vale in the mid-years of the eighteenth century was preceded by the coldest winter on record in Ireland. Temperatures fell to below thirty degrees with indoor temperatures as low as 10°F or -15°C.<sup>1</sup> Rivers froze and more alarmingly the quays and ports froze solid bringing trade to a standstill. Coal was in very short supply and people resorted to stripping forests and woods for any source of fuel.<sup>2</sup> People froze to death. The newspapers carry stories of elderly people found kneeling in empty fire grates dead from hypothermia.<sup>3</sup>

The Great Frost of 1740 remains to this day the longest period of extreme cold in modern European history and its causes remain unknown. One theory is that it was precipitated by volcanic eruptions on the Kamchatka peninsula in Russia,

which sent thousands of tons of dust into the upper atmosphere.<sup>4</sup>

This iron frost finally abated in March 1740 but the thaw brought a new calamity. Potatoes, the staple diet of many tenant farmers, especially in Munster, were normally stored in the soil, covered with a few sods of earth. They were safe during the winter until required the following spring when the next crop was ready. The melting of the ice flooded the ground, reducing most of the potatoes to a rotting pulp. This was a 'calamity for the poor'.<sup>5</sup> In a few weeks the main source of food upon which most people in Munster and Limerick depended was almost completely destroyed.

The meteorological phenomena continued. Temperatures remained very low and the little rain that fell in March and April meant that crops sown in the spring of 1740 had little chance of survival. The disaster was complete.

The first deaths from hunger are reported in the spring of 1740. The eyewitness accounts are few but a traveller wrote of seeing 'an aged father eating grass like a beast'...and 'the hungry infant suckling at the breast of the already expired parent'.<sup>6</sup>

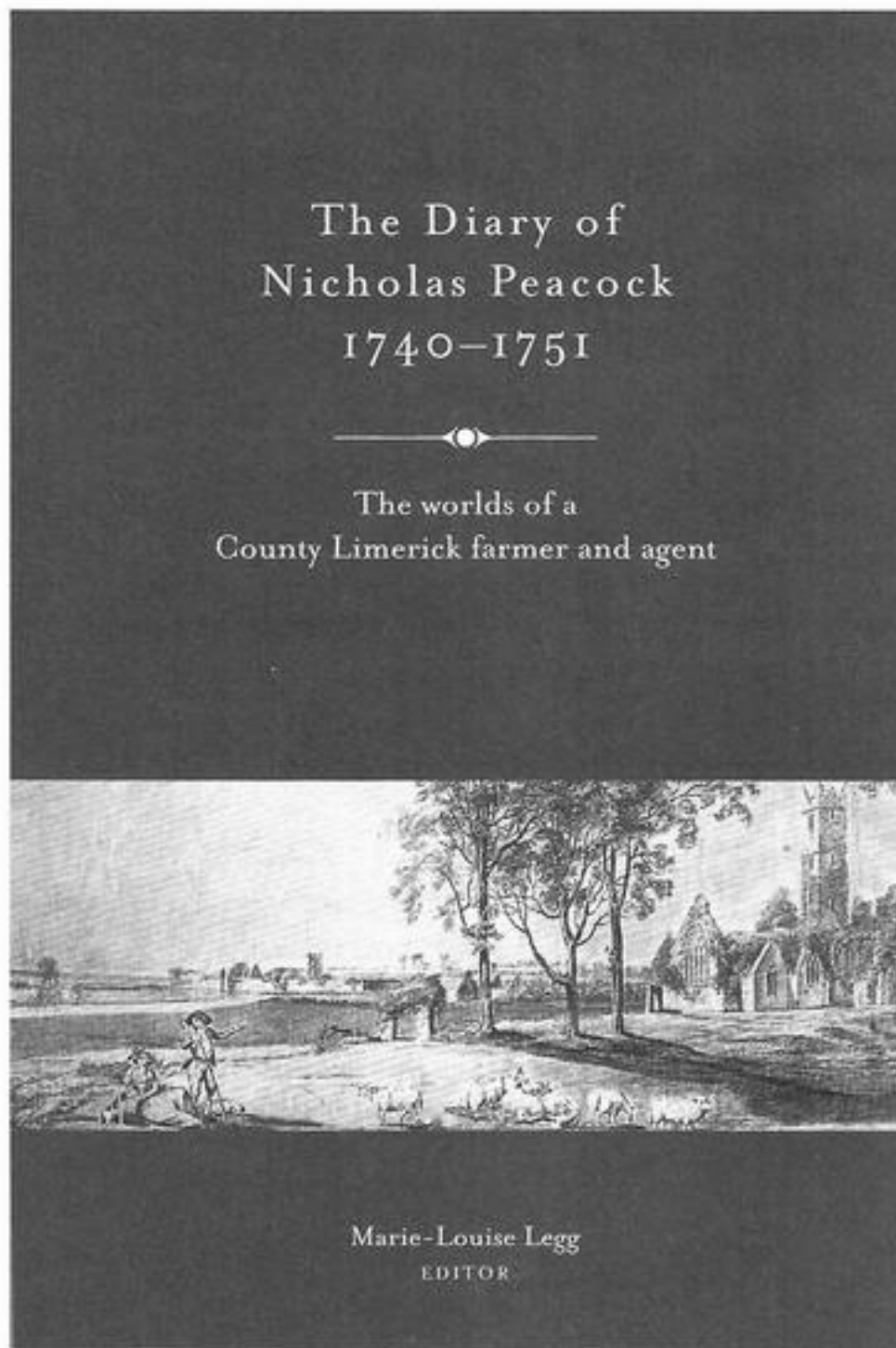
But worse was to come. Hunger drove the starving to the cities and towns in a desperate search for food. The layout of Limerick city in the first half of the eighteenth century made it particularly vulnerable to the disaster that was about to unfold.

The city was technically a fortress, a military base where the gates were shut each night and all day on Sunday. It was garrisoned by three regiments of infantry and the high walls were maintained and always ready in the event of an attack. They kept out enemies while trapping those inside.

In 1731, just nine years previously a petition was brought before the Corporation to expel the Roman Catholic community living in the lands of Saint Francis Abbey, near King John's castle.<sup>7</sup> The petition was unsuccessful but if it had been carried out it may have reduced the population of the city (probably a little over 20,000) and also reduced the deaths that would occur a decade later.

Hunger and famine quickly gave way to disease. From the summer of 1740 a fatal illness called 'the bloody flux'<sup>8</sup> spread first among the poor and then the wealthy. Newspapers began to carry 'cures' for this illness (probably typhus) and Bishop





Left:  
Front cover of the book  
*The Diary of Nicholas  
Peacock 1740-1751* edited  
by Marie-Louise Legg.

Berkeley of Cloyne developed a treatment using tar and spices. Berkeley placed the epicentre of this disease in Munster, particularly Cork and Limerick.<sup>9</sup>

Information on the famine and the accompanying plague that began to claim lives in Limerick city is hard to come by but the diary of a county Limerick farmer, who has been identified as Nicholas Peacock, who farmed lands near Rathkeale may give us some insight.<sup>10</sup> He wrote of giving a bushel of beans to his labourers which may have been as payment for their work but he adds he gave some 'for their boys' which might indicate that he was giving a little extra to tide his workers over a hungry period. He also wrote of men being out sick and having to hire new workers, possibly to replace those who were ill (or dead?).

Most significantly of all, he mentions several trips from his farm to Limerick city in the year 1740. He made no trips there at all in 1741, but instead sent a servant to transact any business he may have had.<sup>11</sup> Conditions were poor in Limerick in 1741. Writing over a hundred years later Maurice Lenihan claimed that one could walk from Saint John's Gate to

Thomond Bridge and encounter no more than six people.<sup>12</sup>

John Ferrar, wrote just a quarter of a century after the catastrophe in 1767, of an epidemic fever that raged in Limerick. The mayor, Joseph Roche and 'many others of the corporation' including the sheriff Mr Davis died. This indicates how widespread the sickness was, sparing neither rich nor poor.<sup>13</sup>

An examination of the burial registers for Saint Mary's parish may give us a clue to the devastation that occurred in the spring and summer of 1741. Of the three parishes that comprised Limerick city at this time St Mary's was the biggest. It comprised what is today, Merchant's Quay, Nicholas Street, Bridge Street and all the area surrounding the cathedral including land closer to the river that was inhabited then. Of the records accessed almost every second page contains a recorded death for the year 1741. Compared to the other years the numbers who perished in that year run to well over a thousand, easily outstripping the Great Famine a hundred years later. A rough calculation might yield 10% to 15% of

the total population, many of those who died in 1741 including twenty two people called Ryan who may have been from the same extended family, were listed as having no recorded address. They may have come from the countryside begging for food in the city and succumbed to disease or starvation. Pathetically many of the deaths were children and many were from the same family, consistent with the spreading of disease.<sup>14</sup> Even the legal system began to fall apart with prisoners released early to avoid fatal infection in the probably overcrowded prison which was located near the present court house close to the town hall.<sup>15</sup> By contrast the parishes of Saint Munchin's and Saint John's suffered a mere handful of deaths. Clearly the cramped conditions in this part of Englishtown with narrow alleys and lanes were the graveyards of the poor.

The harvest for 1741 was a good one and the oscillating climate finally returned to its normal cycle and the effects of the disastrous two preceding years began to abate. We do not have substantiated figures for the total casualties for the famine of 1740-41 known as 'blian an áir' (year of the slaughter). Figures of 480,000 have been speculated.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps 12% to 20% of the population may have died. There were certainly charitable responses from individuals. Lady Southwell the *seigneure* of Rathkeale dispensed medicine and food to the poor in county Limerick during the crisis<sup>17</sup> and Mary Fitzgerald, wife of Thomas 'Geancach' Knight of Glin, was also remembered in local folklore as 'an bean tighearna' (the female chieftain) because she raided cattle from local landlords, with the help of her tenants and distributed food to the starving people in Glin during the same famine.<sup>18</sup> It is likely that these and other charitable works were a mere drop in the ocean to the catastrophe that had visited Limerick.

The most striking statistic comes from a list of figures charting the growth of the populations of the four provinces of Ireland from 1712 to 1753. Leinster shows a healthy rise from 0.64 million in 1712 to 0.77 million in 1753, Ulster a rise of 0.59 to 0.67. Connaught a smaller rise with a population of 0.30 millions in 1712 to 0.32 in 1753 but when it comes to Munster there was a tiny rise in population from 0.63 million in 1712 and to 0.64 million in 1753.<sup>19</sup> The



population of one of the most fertile parts of the country hardly grew at all in over forty years. The effects of the famine and plague are quite apparent.

Limerick must have been an almost empty ghostly city in the years following 'blian an áir'. In Ferrar's chronology of the history of Limerick the population in the year 1767 is given as 29,100<sup>20</sup> which compared to the estimated figure of 20,000 some thirty years earlier<sup>21</sup> would have meant a population rise of less than ten thousand in over a quarter of a century!

It was not until the city walls were thrown down and Limerick began to transform itself into a new Georgian city that the people began to thrive again. Even in normal times, the over crowding and squalor, stench and filth would make modern eyes water and noses recoil. On reviewing the burial registers it is impossible not to notice many familiar surnames that are still in existence in Limerick. The plucky and resilient people who endured those terrible years are the ancestors of the greater part of the population of Limerick city today. They survived so we could live.



Mary Fitzgerald,  
wife of Thomas (Geancach)  
Knight of Glin,  
known as 'an bean tighearna'.

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