

THE TWO FAMINES

Some hundred and seven years ago North Clare, in common with other parts of the country, was experiencing the horrors of famine, with all its attendant evils and misfortunes.

A similar holocaust 30 years previously had denuded the population of nine million almost 50 per cent, and that "when we never exported so much and starved in the midst of plenty".

I have before me as I write a published list of subscriptions that were sent to the Mansion House, Relief Committee, Dublin, to alleviate the distress caused by the famine of 1877-78-79. Money poured into Ireland from all parts of the world - from all creeds and classes - at the first appeal for help for a starving people. We in Ireland owe a great debt of gratitude to those people who delivered our people from a ghastly period of suffering and death.

Let us glance back and give some of the examples of the work of exiles and others of those terrible times. Their aid filled the gap of famine. The heart of Australia was moved. No special appeal was made for such spontaneous generosity; no delegation visited her shores; yet for four months a continuous stream of gold flowed to us from that country.

It was not the mere magnitude of the sums that was most surprising (though places like Melbourne and Sydney sometimes transmitted more money in a single instalment than the city of London during the whole course of the distress), it was the generous sympathy with which the appeal was no sooner heard than answered, and the speed with which the committee was inundated with gifts from unknown givers.

While some persons nearer home were calculating and demurring, the people of Australia demanded no other authority than the circular telegram of the Lord Mayor of Dublin to spring to action and cover the colonies with a network of Irish relief organisations.

The subscriptions, as soon as they

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were lodged in the local banks, were telegraphed to London and were made immediately available so that the moneys collected in remote cities of Australia or New Zealand one week were feeding the famished and hardest-hit families of Connemara the next. They wasted no time in telegraphing explanations or preambles or subscription lists.

The effect of these anonymous remittances arriving week after week struck the popular imagination with something of the wonder of a magic shower of gold.

The sum of £62,735 had been received from Australia before the committee could discover how it came or whom to thank; and it was only after several months that the name of Sir John O'Shaughnessy was identified with the Melbourne remittances. In a letter the Lord Mayor of Dublin was able to express the gratitude of the Irish people to him and his fellow-countrymen.

Here is a list of subscriptions published by Mansion House Relief Committee in 1880:

England/Wales	£16,941 17s. 5d.
Scotland	£2,805 6s. 2d.
Ireland	£8,324 18s. 4d.
France	£4,081 6s. 1d.
Asia	£20,576 8s. 9d.
U.S.A.	£11,244 12s. 3d.
Canada	£9,513 6s. 4d.
Newfoundland	£6,117 15s. 7d.
Australia:	
Victoria	£31,314 19s. 11d.
N.S. Wales	£28,000 0s. 0d.
Queensland	£12,062 2s. 9d.
S. Australia	£7,836 10s. 0d.
W. Australia	£1,214 17s. 5d.
Tasmania	£3,619 6s. 3d.
New Zealand	£10,427 2s. 6d.
Fiji Islands	£315 0s. 0d.

Miscellaneous foreign individual subscriptions, £1,703 8s. 8d.; Archbishop of Tuane, £3,000; Maharajah of Vizianagram, India, £1,000.

The Duchess of Marlborough's Committee, the Land League Committee, and the New York Herald Committee also stepped into the breach and brought much needed food and aid to the starving people.

Michael Hogan, the Bard of Thomond, lived through the two famines. In "The Living Skeleton: A Vision of the Famine Year, 1847" he described the thousands of coffinless corpses buried at Killeely as he recalled that dreadful time:

"In a place of shadows sunless,
Barren, sombre, treeless, tuneless,
Weird, sepulchral, starless, moonless,
Yet not wholly wrapt in gloom;
For some cold, unnatural glimmer -
Like a March night dim, and dimmer,
Or a wintry moonbeam's shimmer,
Through a crevice in a tomb -
Glinted on this realm of terror - this
dreary land of dole,
And grisly spectre-shadows - where
the vision led my soul.

All my heart, with horror shrinking,
On a thousand dread things thinking,
I advanced - each footstep sinking
In the corpse-befatted ground
Where, uncoffined and unshrouded,
Lay the blacken'd bodies crowded -
In the festering graves around;
While meagre birds of darkness, and
lank-sided beasts of prey
From the putrefying members tore the
livid flesh away.

And amid that fearful legion -
In this pestilential region,
Like a spirit of contagion,
Sat a woman all alone;
Clad with robes of faded splendour,
Tall, dark-haired, large-eyed, slender,
With a brow by grief made tender,
And white as polished stone;
And she wrung her lean hands, wildly,
venting many a doleful shriek,
With gaunt famine in her dark eye and
the plague-spot in her cheek".