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Glimpses of South Tipperary during the Great Famine

By Nellie Beary Ó Cléirigh

Just before the Great Famine Clonmel was “a borough, a market and assize town situated on the banks of the river Suir in a beautiful and fertile valley bounded by picturesque mountains”, to quote Lewis’s *Topographical Dictionary* of 1837. It was a very advanced place, lit by gas light and had an ample water supply from pumps in the various streets.

Its numerous institutions in 1837 included the large barracks for artillery, cavalry and infantry; the fever hospital and dispensary, both handsome and commodious buildings; the house of industry for the county of Tipperary, an extensive building in an airy situation at the foot of the western bridge (opened in 1811); the district lunatic asylum for County Tipperary (opened in 1835); and the county gaol, which included a tread-mill which raised water for the prison.

Clonmel’s trade was sufficient to support branches of the Bank of Ireland, the Provincial Bank, the Agricultural and Commercial Bank, and the National Bank of Ireland. Its factories included the large cotton factory owned by Mr Malcolmson, two very large ale and porter breweries, and at Marlfield a very extensive distillery for whiskey. The royal mail and car establishment of Charles Bianconi must have brought additional business to the town. The post was daily, and the revenue from it in 1835 was about £3,000.

It is difficult to judge from this picture how much poverty there was in the town and how much it was to be affected by the potato famine. The census of 1841 gave Clonmel a population of 13,010; this excluded the Parish of St. Mary’s. The occupations ranged from agriculture, manufacturing and trade to manual labour and those providing services like the 550 males and 543 females who “ministered to clothing”. Over 2,800 were in unclassified occupations but, most significant, 576 men and 2,916 women were listed as “unspecified occupation”, which was probably a euphemistic way of saying that they were unemployed.

Ireland’s Society of Friends, or the Quakers as they are more generally known, were the first and the greatest private supplier of Famine relief in Ireland. Because Clonmel and its environs had a sizeable Quaker population, the area benefitted from their efforts.

Distress in Ireland 1846-47, also titled *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends during the Famine in Ireland 1846-47*, provides some significant information about Clonmel and south Tipperary during these years, although most of the book is devoted to horrendous descriptions of conditions in the south and west. The Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends was set up on 13 November 1846. By that time it was obvious that the Government in London was neither willing nor able to provide adequate relief, and that private charity would be necessary.

The Central Committee, which included Benjamin Grubb of Clonmel as a corresponding member, set up sub-committees for soup-kitchens and for the distribution of clothing. They also divided the country into auxiliary committees for specific areas, including four for Munster. The district assigned to Clonmel included the County of Tipperary except the three Baronies of Upper Ormond, Lower Ormond and Owney and Arra; these were administered from Limerick. Two baronies in County Waterford, Glenahiry and Upperthird, came under the Clonmel Committee.



The Auxiliary Committee for Clonmel were:

Barclay Clibborn
Joseph Clibborn
Robert Davis
William Davis
Thomas J. Grubb
Joseph Grubb

Benjamin Grubb
John Hughes
Thomas Hughes
Samuel Fayle
Joshua Malcolmson
John T. Pim

Without more detailed information it is difficult to prove that the Quaker Relief Committee was the official local committee. Before relief could be obtained from the Government, however, such a committee had to be set up and funds collected. These would then be matched by the Government and the money spent on relief works. The relief works were administered by the Board of Works, whose staff increased to over 11,500 before the Famine ended.

As the Government provided only half the cost of the relief works, a relatively prosperous area like Clonmel could provide more money and get more work started than remote areas where there was no one to set up a Relief Committee and no one able to contribute. The relief works were the main source of money and — something not realised today — the early famine proposals were to sell food to the people rather than give it away.

Papers in the National Archives (Relief Commission 1 12 Incoming Letters Co. Tipperary 2/442/1/2 Oct 1846-Nov 1846) provide some idea of the money subscribed in Clonmel. A letter dated 29 July 1846 from Alderman Hackett, "for Under-Secretary", forwarded £288.2.9 and requested Government Aid in proportion to this sum. He continued: "Great distress prevails in this densely populated district; many of the public works are unfinished while demand for harvest labour is not commensurate to the supply. The utmost economy continues to be exercised by the committee". The works were supervised by Samuel Jones, officer and county inspector.

One collection of £300 was sent to the Government on 5 August 1846, and "many of our wealthy citizens have subscribed over and over again". By this time it was becoming obvious that this famine was on a larger scale than any of the earlier ones. Subscribers included John Bagwell for £125, Charles Bianconi, £9, Rev. M. Baldwin £5, Alderman Quin £5, John Murphy £5, Alderman Fennelly £2, Edmond Burke £1, Patrick Dower £1, Nelson Kennedy £3, John Murray £15, John Going £2, Thomas Murphy £3, and Samuel Fayle £1.

Others who were described as "repeats" included Arthur Ryall, West Grove, Anne Grubb, William Shiel M.D., Daniel Crean, Thomas Prossor, Johanna Jacob, Edward Phelan, M.D., John Wallace, James White, I. Clibborn, Peter R. Banfield, Thomas Graham, C. and I. Pim, Daniel Hearn. Apart from the Quaker names which appear on this list, it represents a cross-section of the town's inhabitants. Bagwells owned most of the town; presumably the Murphy who appears several times was from the family of the brewery; Ryalls were bankers; Goings millers, Fayles lived in Queen St. well into this century and were later landlords agents.

Daniel Crean may have been the same family of "old Dr. Crean" of my childhood; Thomas Prossor was a jeweller or clockmaker who is listed in the directories of the period, and whose name appears on the face of my grandfather clock which was probably made by the Graham brothers. James White's family had long and honourable connections with Clonmel, and presumably the Daniel Hearn was of Hearn's Hotel. By December of that year William Worrall was the Secretary of the Committee and Joseph Reville Assistant to the Co. Surveyor — all paid officials.

A further list of subscribers included Malcolmsons; the Bank of Ireland and the clergy; Rev.



I. B. Palliser, clerk (presumably Church of Ireland); and Rev. Dr. John Burke P.P., both of whom subscribed £20. John Hackett, William Byrne, Dominick Ronayne, Robert Sparrow and Mrs Cantwell all bore names that were to feature in public life and business in Clonmel in the century. An interesting entry was the £10 from Tipperary Joint Stock Bank and a similar amount for James Sadlier, both of whom became infamous later on the collapse of the bank.

Pims, Grubbs, Clibborns and Perrys all appear on this list, as well as a number of subscriptions from England and an entry of £5.5.0. from the Constabulary Officers with a note that this represented one day's pay. Many of the same names as before appear on this list, but additional names include Edward Power, Thomas Stokes, Richard Labarte, Misses Strangman, Patrick Hally, J. Kendrick, Miss Millea, William Tinsley and Anthony Trollope.

The last two were to become famous in the years after the famine. Tinsley was an architect/builder who was responsible for some of the interesting houses built in Clonmel and who emigrated to America where he designed a number of Colleges. Anthony Trollope is known to have worked in the Post Office in Clonmel and to have been happy during his sojourn there.

This time the subscriptions included small amounts from more ordinary people, like the Clonmel coopers and from a number of women. Many were from abroad, and some were obviously from the local army officers like Captain Ogle and Captain Challoner. The main subscribers who reappear this time now gave larger amounts. January 1847 was a very bad period and merited contributions of £100 each from Bagwell's in Marlfield and Malcolmson Brothers, with an extra £50 from Mrs Malcolmson.

One further piece of information in the "Incoming Letters" relating to Clonmel was in a letter dated 9 January 1847, which stated that £1524.1.8 was sent to the government relief committee and requesting government money. The average issue of rations in Clonmel during the 6 days of the week was 9,709. Each ration consisted of one quart of excellent soup and 4 ozs. of bread. An increase in the size and number of boilers for soup was needed.

In February 1847 P. Phipps, Lt. Colonel, wrote from Oaklands, Clonmel to the Central Committee, asking where he could obtain any seed for the large tenantry to enable them to "crop their lands". He immediately needed seeds for turnips and black oats.

The Relief Commission Incoming letters provide some details of the efforts and success of other areas in South Tipperary to set up Relief Committees.

Carrick

October 1846. A relief committee was being organised by the Vice-Lieutenant for the County.

Cahir

A committee was set up in 1846.

Clogheen

The Earl of Donoughmore first on the committee. Conditions must have been very bad in Clogheen because it was the only area near Clonmel commented on by Robert Davis when he visited in February 1847. He reported that the soup (or rather porridge) establishment was at full work and appeared to be well attended to.

He proceeded to Burncourt, where he stated that destitution abounded to a fearful degree. Deaths from starvation were becoming a daily occurrence; corpses were buried at night, and in some instances without coffins. The porridge shop was set up through the help of friends and a respectable and kind-hearted farmer. The area was too remote from Clogheen, which was its relief district.

Robert Davis went from Burncourt along the base of the Galtees through "the desolate and wretched district to Tencurry, where another porridge kitchen is just set up and at work". He proceeded to Tubrid, where a kitchen was also set up; later there was one at Ardfinnan and another at Castlegrace. Davis commented that in a 40-mile ride and on a remarkable fine day for the season he did not recollect that he saw in all 25 men at agricultural work, and of those not more than 5 or 6 using a spade.

No manure was deposited on the land in preparation for the green crop of '47 and the corn crop of '48. All seemed downstricken and dejected, but he saw flour and meal being conveyed along the road without any escort, save that of the car driver. "For so it is, either from physical inability or from what I should rather hope, bespoke the prevalence of right feeling, the people of these localities do conduct themselves peacefully and refrain from outrage in a remarkable manner."

Thurles

A committee was set up in April was limited to the parish. The most zealous members were the Protestant and Catholic clergymen. A letter headed "The College" 1847 from Patrick Leahy to Randolph Routh of the Commissary General, who were responsible for the administration of relief, states that the Committee "set their faces against allowing females on the Public Works, a thing too common in other parts where females are to be seen breaking stones and otherwise employed at men's work."

The Committee had established an industrial school for females in which they made various articles coarse and fine, "such as being in common use were most likely to obtain a ready sale and to fetch a sufficient price." This school was already at work. It contained some hundreds of females, and many others of the most destitute are likewise employed in their own houses.

A connection was formed with a respectable house in Glasgow, which would continue to give orders for fancy work in muslin. The letter which solicited funds quoted 8,000 as destitute requiring relief, 2,000 in the public works, 700 destitute families without anyone to labour for their support, and 600 individuals belonging to such families. The poor house, which had been built for 700, contained 840. There were 130 sick in the Poor House Infirmary, and 54 in the Fever Hospital.

Henry Cabbot of the Thurles Committee wrote in 15 January 1847: "food is already at a famine price in all our markets; and unless extraordinary efforts be made, the monopoly enjoyed by a few speculators must cost the sacrifice of many thousand lives." All was not pure philanthropy however, as a guarantee was sought that the Committee would not be out of pocket!

Bansha

On 13 October 1846, when the deplorable condition of the parish and neighbourhood was occasioned by the total decay of the potato, the letter asked for work to be commenced on the scheme already approved for the "peace and tranquility of the county".

Kilcash

On 14 January 1847 a list of the Kilcash Relief Committee shows Rev. Mr. Hally P.P. as chairman.

Mullinahone

A letter dated 15 February 1847 from Gurteen House stated that application had been made to absentee landlords for assistance, but with very few exceptions without any success.



Fethard

The Relief Committee were desirous of promoting spade labour in the fields instead of on the roads and more particularly among the female portion of the poorer classes, with a view also of discontinuing the existing degrading system of begging. Fethard actually had a "Spade Labour Committee" to which people should apply and their labour was to be used in "teaching, subsoiling, and cropping". Donations and loans for this committee were to be sent to James Sadlier, esq., Treasurer at the Tipperary Joint Stock Bank, Clonmel.

Subscriptions included Rev. Henry Woodward (Fethard Glebe) £30; William Barton (Grove) £20; James Sadlier (Lakefield) £15; Col. Palliser (Derryluskan), Lord Lismore (Shanbally Castle), Robert Cooke (Kiltinan Castle), Thomas Geogh (Ardsallagh), and John Maunsell (Coolmayne).

Cashel

The list of subscribers to the Cashel Relief Committee included C. Bianconi £5; Timothy O'Brien M.P., £50; M. Pennefather £10; Rev. H. A. Sadlier, £5; Charles H. Hemphill, Mr. Mockler, Mr. Ryall, Mrs. Hemphill Dublin, Pat Cashin, Joseph Grubb, Clonmel, Mr. Michael Dunn, Nailor, £1; Mr. Quirke, Printer £1; Mr. Marnane £1; Judy Halloran (servant) 1/-, and Capt. Minchin £10.

There was stated to be "unbroken quiet, perfect order and peace in Cashel but disorder and tumult and public danger, not alone to property but to life in the neighbouring towns". The letter continued that the committee were using "every possible means to hasten the giving of employment on the large public works about to be undertaken in and about the town". Some 700 people were expected to get employment; the letter was signed P. Heffernan, Chairman.

Ardfinnan

The list of subscribers to the Relief Fund here included the Earl of Donoughmore £40; John Bagwell £20; Earl of Glengall £15; Lorenzo Clutterbuck £10; Viscount Lismore £10; Francis Mulcahy £5; and a number of local families with names such as Prendergast, Phelan, Ryan, and Walsh. A sum of £30 was collected at the Catholic Church doors.

Lismore-Clogheen

Great relief was afforded by some Indian meal given at an early period of 1846 by Viscount Lismore. By May the usual food had almost totally disappeared; 2,017 individuals were then on the list for cheap food. In the first week of April 1846 there were menaces and outrage of property. A car conveying flour a few miles distant was assailed and plundered. The Lismore committee were enabled to deal out flour and meal at reduced prices in Clogheen and its environs.

In April a tumultuous body of persons from the adjoining parish advanced blowing horns, with the design of plundering the town of Clogheen and breaking into the flour mills; but they retired when they got no co-operation from the people of Clogheen. Castlegrace Mills were also attacked but not supported. There were extreme paupers along the base of the north and south mountain range and also in the town. In Kilmoyler, Cahir, the claims of the parish were very strong, having two townlands abutting the Galtee mountains where were located hundreds of under-tenants without means of subsistence and no one to employ them.

Newchapel-Clerihan

A Relief Fund was set up in 1847. Subscriptions included Baron Pennefather £10; Richard Pennefather £5; Stephen Moore £5; Rev. Mr. Grier £25; Bishop of Cashel £5; James Scully Esq. £5. Other contributors were Mockler, Slattery, Tobin, Cooney, O'Donnell, Flinn, Heffernan and Daniel.

Poulmucka

In February 1847 a soup kitchen was established at Poulmucka by private subscriptions from the neighbouring gentry "few in number". Because the soup kitchen was at 4 cross-roads it served a large area. The only paid help were two women at 3/-.

The secretary of the committee wrote that Dr. FitzGibbon of the Dispensary "most kindly had acted with much zeal gratuitously; the destitute were first served gratuitously with so many quarts of excellent soup made with a portion of meat, rice, peas, indian meal, and oatmeal and bread according to the number in family. We then sell to those able to pay at 1d per quart and some bread. So far few deaths, but as fever and dysentery increase rapidly I fear many more will take place." The letter was signed A. Riall, and stated that Mr. Gibbins was the inspecting officer.

Lisronagh

Subscriptions were from O'Neill, Wall, Sheehan, Purcell, Maxey Burke, Cuddihie, Power, Slattery, Hogan, Bradshaw, Keating, Hanrahan and Looby.

Powerstown

The Committee here was headed by Maurice Wall P.P., and included Samuel Riall, J. P. (Annerville), John B. Clibborn (Anner Mills), Joseph Clibborn (Redmondstown Mills), Garrett Neville, William Greene (Powerstown), Thomas Grubb (Rathronan Mills), Patrick Wall (Kilmore), John Cuddihy (also of Kilmore), Edmond O'Brien (Powerstown), John Keeffe (Ballinvoher), John Phelan (Horsepasture), James Dunne (Mullinarinka), Patrick Flaherty (also Mullinarinka), Michael Keeffe (Moorgariffe), and John Britton (Rathronan).

Donoughmore Glebe

Much distress prevailed here on 6 March 1847.

Tubrid

In March 1847 the committee here were issuing 700 gallons of Indian meal porridge daily in their district. Henry Palmer, Vicar of Tubrid, was the Secretary. Areas where relief committees operated but where no details were supplied included Newcastle, Mullock and Tullamelan and Derrygrath.

The incoming letters to the Relief Commission showed that even in times of extreme distress some people still looked after their own interests. A letter dated 13 February 1847 was from Capt. G. R. Kennedy of Heywood, Clonmel, looking for a job on the relief works for his friend, William Worrall, who had served with him in Canada. Kennedy must have had some influence, because Worrall's name appears on the list of officers at a later date. In January 1847 George Roe of the New Inn Relief committee wrote asking from what funds he was to be paid as Secretary of the Relief Committee.

A superficial glance at the census returns for Clonmel in 1851 shows that the town's population was practically unchanged at 13,010. A closer study, however, reveals the large number of inmates in the town's institutions. These included the inmates of the Work House, who numbered 1,194 males and 1,624 females. The population of the gaol had increased to 518 males and 167 females and the uninhabited houses from 186 to 259.

Deaths in the South Riding from 6 April 1841 to 30 March 1851 numbered 19,648, including those in the Work House. These were from smallpox, measles, scarlatina, coughs, dysentery, diarrhoea, cholera and syphilis. A further 5,034 deaths were from consumption. There were 16 executions. According to tradition, there were numerous unrecorded deaths during the Famine, so that the real figures were probably higher than the official ones.