

Black (and White) '47

By Edmund O'Riordan

Introduction

Bias, prejudice and agenda are particular enemies of historiography, and many a great work is rendered less great when one or all of these bedfellows befriend the historian. No period in Irish history has been as difficult to approach without bias as the period 1845-1850, not least because it has been labelled *An Gorta Mor*, "The Great Hunger" or more commonly "The Great Famine".

Almost everything that has been written about the period in the past decade has, understandably, been concerned with the adverse impact and diverse consequences of the potato blight on the poorer classes who died in cabin, workhouse or ditch from starvation and fever, or who emigrated to England, Australia and the United States of America. The reduction of Ireland's population by 2,000,000 over a ten-year period has been seared into the Irish psyche and is not easily laid to one side when researching those years.

While acknowledging that, just as two wrongs do not make a right, two biases do not make a balance, it is the intention of this article to produce a biased account of 1846/1847 as gleaned from the pages of *The Tipperary Free Press* and *The Cork Examiner* – newspapers which, as is the norm, also had their own bias and prejudice, in both cases a Nationalist/Liberal one. Material from other sources will be used as appropriate.

With the same sense of agenda that unwittingly accompanied most "local" Great Famine reports a few years ago (*mea culpa*), it is intended here to trawl through the newsprint with eyes trained to ignore anything that smacks of potato blight, workhouse, pauper or Indian meal. It is hoped that this approach will not be seen as attempting to minimize the devastation and horror of those years or to detract from the memory of the suffering that existed but will, rather, provide a framework through which we can better view and understand that devastation, suffering and horror.

Luxury – for some

Micháel Ó hAodha suggests that the first half of the nineteenth century was a black and dreary period in the annals of drama in Great Britain.¹ A few obligatory references to Boucicault and Edmund Keane are all that seem necessary in a treatment of Irish theatre until Yeats and Lady Gregory burst on the scene in a blaze of Celtic Revival at the end of that century. However, a perusal of the pages of the newspapers from 1846-47 shows that, in spite of this paucity of theatre, in those years at least, the "middle classes" and the "gentry" knew how to enjoy themselves.

"Seldom, indeed we may say never, have we witnessed a more splendid Ball in Nenagh..." asserted the report in the *Tipperary Free Press* on Tuesday, 13 January, 1846. The ball was given by the officers of the 1st Royals. The report continued:

As early as nine o'clock the rank and beauty of the country poured in and arrivals were

continuous up to twelve... Several rooms handsomely decorated were thrown open, and refreshments abundantly provided. The ballroom was magnificently decorated ...[as the] graceful figures... floated on "the light fantastic toe". The splendid Quadrille band of the 831 regiment, from Limerick was in attendance, and during the evening performed, amongst other airs, The Canadian Sleigh Waltz ...[with bells] in imitation of sleighs travelling over the snow.²

Supper that evening consisted of "every delicacy that the season could afford or the most fastidious appetite desire" with the "old Baronial Boar's Head" decorating the table. The tables were laid for 200 people. The report finished by lavishing praise on the officers of the Royal First and stated: "we can only echo the sentiments of all, when we say, long may such gallant fellows be quartered among us."³

A notice that "Cards of Invitation" had been sent out to the gentry of Birr in Co. Offaly for the ball on 15 January appears on the same page as this report.⁴ The Nenagh invitations included the aristocracy and "many families of the *respectable portion* [emphasis added] of the residents of Nenagh." One can get some idea of the fashion worn at these balls by a perusal of the "Fashions for January" column in *The Tipperary Free Press* on 3 January, 1846. "The damask fashionable this season is the veloutes, the broad velvet stripe contrasting well with this description of silk. These dresses require no trimming, but are made extremely full and very long behind; on other materials flounces of Alençon, or point lace are worn. Taffetas d'Italie are fashionable for petites soirees..."⁵

Tipperary followers of fashion were well catered for in October, 1847, as Peter McSwiney and Co.'s "Victoria House", and Laurence McGrath – both of Clonmel – vied for their custom. McSwiney's departments included a "millinery" where every favourite style of the West End was available, a "fur department" where the discerning buyer could save 20 per cent on sable, ermine, chinchilla, boas, capes and cuffs; a silk department with French and Oriental manufactures; as well as plaid, French cashmere, fancy dress, shawl and mantle, and woollen departments.⁶ Laurence McGrath's emporium boasted a similar range of departments, with his millinery department offering "Real Genoa Silk Velvet Bonnets, Fully Trimmed, with Superb Rich Feather" for a mere 12s. to 16s.⁷

A slightly more downmarket evening out in January 1846 compared to the Nenagh Ball, but one that was nonetheless sponsored by "Twelve Families of first rate distinction", was the appearance of "Bateman, 'The Great Versatile Comedian of the Age'", in Clonmel's Theatre "opposite the Barracks".⁸ Bateman was advertised "for one night only" in what was to be the "greatest treat ever given in Clonmel".⁹

Also in January, two letters to *The Tipperary Free Press*, from Nicholas Maher and R.A. Fitzgerald respectively, announced those gentlemen's great pleasure in accepting an invitation to a Repeal Banquet in Limerick City on the 21st of the month.¹⁰ The Repeal movement that dominated the political scene during the first half of the 1840s was to undergo change in 1847 with the death of O'Connell, but in August 1846 it was still very active. During that month, the priests of the diocese of Cashel and Emly in County Tipperary held a repeal banquet at Ryall's Hotel in Cashel. "The tables contained every delicacy of the season and the wines were excellent."¹¹

In the village of Cloneen, County Tipperary, in January 1846, a festival of a different kind was held. A temperance festival in the "Teetotallers' room" continued, after tea, coffee, and cake, with dancing until the early hours of the morning. The night ended with three hearty cheers for Fr. Mathew, the Apostle of Temperance.¹²

The entertainment continued at the 'New Theatre Opposite the Barracks' in Clonmel, in February, with the appearance of "the Celebrated Dramatic Ventriloquist" Gallaher. Many diverse characters were listed for the evening with each one being played by Mr. Gallaher. Doors were open at 7.30; the show commenced at 8 pm precisely. Carriages could be ordered at ten o'clock; boxes 2s., pit 1s., gallery 6d.¹³

As 1846 progressed, the entertainment appears to have become even more lavish. In August the Royal Agricultural Improvement Society of Ireland held their show in Limerick, where cattle were exhibited and agricultural implements displayed. Banquet, ball and suppers brought the week to a close, a week in which the city was thronged.¹⁴ The report of the "General Banquet" at the Theatre stated that "About 400 people sat down to an excellent dinner, provided, as on the former day, by Mr. John Goggin...The wines...were... as on the previous night, of the very best quality." Toasts were drunk to The Queen, The Queen Dowager, Prince Albert and the Royal Family.

The toasts were acknowledged with loud cheers, and applause, and drunk with the "usual honours". The company stood and "cheered vehemently" for several minutes when the society's president's health was proposed.¹⁵ The only discordant note was when a Captain Kennedy suggested that things were not all well in the country, but such were the "expressions of dissatisfaction", loudly and frequently repeated, that Captain Kennedy was forced to sit down.¹⁶

In November and December 1846, Lord Lismore of Shanbally Castle, Clogheen, Co. Tipperary, received news of the birth of his first two grandchildren. On both occasions 200 of his tenants and employees were entertained at Shanbally Castle to sumptuous dinners of roast beef and plum pudding. The music for the after-dinner revelry was supplied by the Clogheen Amateur Band. Bonfires illuminated the neighbourhood from the Knockmealdowns across the valley to the Galtees, and dancing was kept up to a late hour.¹⁷

In Clonmel, in July 1847, Colonel Ricketts kindly consented to allow the band of the Scots Greys Regiment to perform every Thursday evening at Fairy Hill. *The Tipperary Free Press* suggested that this would be a rich treat for the fair townswomen, who could enjoy the beauties of Fairy Hill, "the witchery of the summer's eve, and the delightful strains of one of the sweetest Bands in her Majesty's service."¹⁸ In nearby Cahir in July "a picnic on a very elegant scale" took place at Cahir Cottage. Over fifty people were present, chiefly from the neighbourhoods of Clonmel and Cahir. An amateur band attended, and after the dinner, which presented all the delicacies of the season, dancing was commenced and kept up with much spirits until a late hour.¹⁹

November 1847 saw a banquet being given by the Repealers of Dungarvan in honour of their "late candidate" John F. Maguire, who had apparently lost a recent election. The banquet took place at the Franchise Club Rooms on a Sunday evening. "The rooms, which were opened into one immense salon, were most tastefully decorated; and Mr. William Sheehan and his lady gave as splendid an entertainment as was ever yet seen in the borough." The evening was conducted by P. Landers, John Cleary, John O'Brien, Jeremiah Morrissey, Christopher O'Brien, James Boland and Richard Kelly.²⁰

A February 1848 edition of the *Freeman's Journal* gives an idea of the entertainment in the Dublin theatres during that season. At the Theatre Royal, "Bohemian Girl" was being performed, with a concluding programme of a farce called "How to settle accounts with your Laundress", while at the Queen's Theatre another farce was playing - "My Young Wife and my old Umbrella".²¹

Mr. W.E. Mills, manager, informed the nobility, gentry, officers of the garrison, and the

general public of Cork on 27 April 1848 that the Theatre Royal, in Cork City was to open on Monday, 1 May. A highly talented company selected from the "Principal Theatres of the United Kingdom" was to perform on opening night. Mr. D. Leonard, "the celebrated Irish Comedian", was scheduled to appear in May, while fans of "Miss Jarman" could catch her performance at a date to be announced.²²

The introduction of gas light into private houses had many obvious advantages but the ladies had, according to the *Tipperary Free Press* in September 1847, taken advantage, under pretence of the "dazzling uncomfortableness" of the bright lights, and taken to opening parasols at the evening soiree. "A pink parasol, judiciously held between a lady's face and a gas burner, throws a tender rosette hue over the complexion." The parasol could also be "dexterously manoeuvred" as an aid if the ladies decided to favour someone with sidelong glances out of the glare of the lights.²³

October heralded the first meetings of the season for some of Cork's societies and clubs. Cork Historical Society held its first meeting of the session at The Lecture Room of the Royal Cork Institution. The President, Mr. M. J. Barry. Esq., (Barrister) was billed to deliver the opening address.²⁴ The members and subscribers of the Cork Scientific and Literary Society were informed of a meeting to be held on 7 October :

Essay to be read – On Comedy and its tendencies – Ought the 'School for Scandal' be performed in this moral age? – by Wm. Keleher.

Essay for Discussion – On Oxygen and its compounds, illustrated with experiments – by Geo. Coleby.²⁵

Members of the Royal Yacht Club in "Cove" were requested to take notice of the second general meeting of the season on Thursday, 7 October.²⁶ Presumably, a recent invention in Cork by Robert Buckley was the talking point of the evening. Mr. Buckley had invented a "cork-stuffed life preserving mattress" and tested same on the River Lee in June 1847. His letter to the *Cork Examiner* expressed concern that an English company to whom he had shown his device was trying to patent what *The Examiner* called a 'Curious Invention'.²⁷ Mr. Buckley stated that he had fitted out the Cork Steam Ships Company's vessels with the life preserver.²⁸

One of the most unusual advertisements in 1848 was one for an "Extraordinary Exhibition of Aborigines" at Theatre Royal, Cook Street in Cork.²⁹ It consisted of "Two women, two men, and a baby of The Bush Tribe, from the interior of South Africa, belonging to a race that, from their wild habits, could never before be induced to visit a place of civilisation." Admission: 2s to boxes, gallery 6d. Children under ten – half price; "private interviews...2s. 6d."³⁰

It is safe to assume that these were the same Bush People who were on exhibition in Dublin earlier in the month.³¹ A report in the *Freeman's Journal* stated that when they were in London they were shown at the "Royal property", where their keeper had to restrain them due to their excitement and terror at the band-playing and the fireworks. Vauxhall Gardens were crowded for the visit and many of the leading aristocracy were present.³²

It remains to outline briefly some of the goods on offer in the newspapers of South Tipperary and Cork in those years. They included wines, coffee, cocoa, cider, silk and wool products, shower bath and curtains, hats, brandy, plated goods, marine paintings, clocks and watches, fine arts, groceries, tartan and clan, boots and slippers, sugar and jewellery. The organised and discerning shoppers would possibly have restocked their cellars and presses in time for Christmas 1847 when the ships from Cadiz and Oporto arrived. W.J. Tomkins gave notice that he had just received – direct from Cadiz – 12 Butts, 30 Hogsheads and 32 Quarter Casks of

'most superior Sherry Wines, precisely similar to his late importations ... which gave such general satisfaction'.³³ An "Immense stock of Valentines" was available in 1848 from Guy Brothers, Patrick Street, Cork.³⁴

For those with more money than they needed for shopping, the pages carried an abundance of life insurance, assurance and investments schemes. For Christmas 1848, Woodford Bourne in Cork advertised their quality teas, while A.P.Dillon offered Christmas presents and supplies, including coffee, port, whiskey, rum, cigars, "Prime Wicklow Hams", sugar, spices and candles.³⁵ At The Magasin, 83 Patrick Street, Cork, Ms. E. McAuliffe offered to the public a large and varied stock of fruits foreign preserves, conserves, liquor, crystallised brandy, bottled fruits, jams and jellies, pickles and sauces, bottled meats, dessert and wine biscuits and British wines.³⁶

Sport

It is reasonable to deduce from an advertised cricket match of 16 June 1846 that cricket was popular enough among the gentlemen of Cahir, County Tipperary, to warrant the setting up of a cricket club. One of their matches was Cahir Cricket Club *versus* The Garrison. Class does not appear to have been any problem on the Garrison side as the officers took to the field with the mere privates. In spite of the best efforts of Pt. Dangate, who appears to have had a splendid game, Cahir Club was victorious.³⁷

Freshwater angling has been popular for many centuries if we are to judge by Isaac Walton's seventeenth century *The Compleat Angler*, and the thought of mid-nineteenth century rivers teeming with trout and salmon can cause an increase in the heart-rate of modern anglers. George Markham felt compelled to put pen to paper on 27 February 1846 regarding the number of fine salmon taken by anglers in the river Suir in Clonmel in the first three weeks of February. Mr. Markham was advocating that because these salmon had yet to spawn, the Commissioners of Fisheries should delay the opening of the angling season until March, and that it should close on the last day of October.³⁸

Horse racing and hunting were popular diversions during the 1840s. A horse-racing course named New Melton was constructed near New Inn in Cahir in the 1830s. Following the Cashel races on 12 September 1846, a meet was held at New Melton towards the end of October.³⁹ Apparently a handsome course, it was all grass, three miles long, and had thirty two fences.⁴⁰ Mr. Power's "Saucepan" beat Lord Waterford's "Firefly" into second place in the first race. The second race was won by Mr. Clutterbuck's "Little Jem" and the third by Mr. Curran's "Wonder". The final race of the day was a "Farmers' Race", Mr. Dunn's "Little Moll" taking the money from "Lady Agnes", "Colleen Bawn" and "Moonspike".

It is impossible to assess the numbers who attended race meetings in Ireland in 1847 from advertisements and race reports alone. However, one may get an insight into the popularity of the sport from an unlikely source. A report carried in the *Tipperary Free Press* on 12 May 1847 on the progress of the new Irish railways is revealing. It stated that the largest train "that had ever been started" on the Great Southern and Western Railway since its inception had been to convey passengers to the Steeple Chase at Lucan in the previous week.

On that occasion, an engine pulling 23 carriages conveyed 1,500 racegoers to their destination.⁴¹ Travelling on that line a few months earlier – January 1847 – Alexander Somerville recorded that the Irish trains were so steady that passengers would think they were sitting in a parlour.⁴²

Health and Medicine

In January 1846 (and again in November 1847,⁴³ and at intervals) a publication entitled 'The Silent Friend on Human Frailty' was being advertised in the *Tipperary Free Press* as:

A MEDICAL WORK on the INFIRMITIES OF THE GENERATIVE SYSTEM, in both sexes, being an Enquiry into concealed cause that destroys physical energy, and the ability of manhood, ere vigour has stabilised her [e]mpire:- with Observations on the baneful effects of SOLITARY INDULGENCE...⁴⁴

But help was at hand for Irish readers. Perrys, the publishers of the book, had a remedy – several remedies in fact – to counter the worst excesses of human frailty. Their "Cordial Balm of Syriacum" – like some nineteenth century Viagra – was intended for those who suffered from a multitude of afflictions including "weakness", "total impotence" and "barrenness".

The balm was particularly recommended for those about to enter matrimony "...lest in the event of procreation occurring, the innocent offspring should bear enstamped upon it the physical characters derivable from parental debility."⁴⁵ By contrast, the claims in the advertisement for "Lord Eldon's Aperient Pills" were much more modest but Tipperary customers could be assured of the efficacy of the pills in cases "arising from obstruction in the liver, spleen and biliary ducts, and from morbid or disordered secretions of the Stomach and Bowels..."⁴⁶

Those concerned about the improvement and preservation of their eyesight most likely took advantage of the visit of Mr. Cowan Solomon, optician to the Royal Family, to Clonmel in April 1846. Mr. Solomon was concerned for his customers and announced through the columns of the *Tipperary Free Press* that he had been induced to prolong his stay in Clonmel by the increasing demand for his services. If failing eyesight was not a problem, perhaps deafness was, and Mr. Solomon could also assist in such cases. For the benefit of his customers, he had imported such things as magic lanterns and spirit levels as well as his new improved hearing apparatus.⁴⁷

The problem of toothache was also of concern to the Tipperary newspaper-reading public in 1846-47. Those suffering from toothache could follow the example of "families of distinction" and acquire "Bullock's Original Camphor Tooth Paste" which preserved the teeth, strengthened the gums and prevented toothache. As a bonus it sweetened the breath.⁴⁸ Those who ignored the advice in that particular September 1846 advert could make amends in February 1847 when, not one, but two surgeon dentists advertised their services in Clonmel.

Local parents were, no doubt, gratified to find that both gentlemen regulated and arranged children's teeth while Mr. Jones also announced that, due to improvements, "persons can now enjoy the comforts of well adjusted Artificial Teeth", and further, that the "Silician Teeth" invented by Messrs. Jones "are most effective in restoring articulation and mastication."⁴⁹

Conclusion

While the research for this article was undertaken with a stated bias, the results have been presented without any moral judgement and in as value-free a style as possible. It is expected that much of the irony of the material will be obvious to the reader.

However, it is impossible not to draw attention to the difference between the clothes advertised in McSwiney's and McGrath's of Clonmel and the clothes of the peasants and labourers. Neither is it possible to ignore the differing modes of travel for rich and poor during

the Famine, and the intended destinations. For some it was the famine march to the workhouse or ports to take them away from hunger and death; for others it was the first-class carriage on the railway with a day at the races at the end of the journey. The years 1845-1850 saw the construction of much of Ireland's rail network, and 1842 saw Ireland with 31 miles of rail track; this had grown to 700 miles by 1850.⁵⁰

It is thought-provoking to realise that in January 1847, around the same time that the *Cork Examiner* carried an advertisement, repeated in *The Tipperary Free Press*, claiming "the greatest difficulty in Ireland is that of getting good tea",⁵¹ it carried an article about a man and woman being arrested in Youghal for attempting to sell the body of a seven-year-old boy so that they could buy food. A jury of twelve men, an apothecary, a doctor and a sub-constable all sat and listened to the evidence.⁵² It would appear that the institutions of state were functioning adequately on that date.

As always, there are more questions than answers. What is one to make of the market reports in May 1848 from Dublin that the consumption of potatoes was very slack and the "hucksters" declaring that 'for weeks their supplies [of potatoes] lay on hands'?⁵³ Was this just a peculiarity of the market-place or an example of Amartya Sen's theory on food-entitlement in practice? Some food certainly seems to have been in plentiful supply in July 1847 when *The Tipperary Free Press* reported that 200 fishing boats from Penzance, with a crew of six each, were fishing out of Kingstown (Dun Laoire);⁵⁴ but perhaps these were British fish and not destined for Irish tables.

Was it because of a fashion-conscious, race-going, banquet-attending, rail-travelling, sherry-drinking section of Irish society that England handed the problem of Irish poverty over to Irish property in 1847? Was it because of this same section of society that *Punch* so viciously caricatured the Irish hungry? Was it callous indifference or congenital inability to be concerned for the poorer classes that made the 400 diners at the Limerick banquet in autumn 1846 shout down the warning voice of Captain Kennedy? Is there, after all, evidence to support John Mitchel's claim that "they died in the midst of plenty"?

Footnotes

1. Mich  l    hAodha, *Theatre in Ireland* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1974), p. 12.
2. *T.F.P.*, 14 January, 1846.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *T.F.P.*, 3 January 1846. (This regular column in the *Tipperary Free Press* was taken from the London and Paris Ladies' Magazine.)
6. *T.F.P.*, 27 October 1847.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *T.F.P.*, 3 January 1846. (Clonmel's modern Regal Theatre stands at the site of the theatre mentioned here.)
9. *Ibid.*
10. *T.F.P.* January 10, 1846.
11. E O'Riordan, *Famine in the Valley*, (Clogheen, Co. Tipperary, 1995), p.51.
12. *T.F.P.* January 17, 1846.
13. *T.F.P.* 28 February 1846.
14. *T.F.P.* August 19, 1846.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. O'Riordan, *Famine in the Valley*, (1995) pp. 51-2.
18. *T.F.P.*, 14 July 1847.

19. T.F.P., 17 July 1847.
20. T.F.P., 27 November 1847
21. *Freeman's Journal*, 1 February 1848.
22. *Cork Examiner*, April 1848.
23. T.F.P., 22 September 1847.
24. *Cork Examiner*, 4 October 1847.
25. Ibid.
26. *Cork Examiner*, 4 October 1847.
27. *Cork Examiner*, 17 January 1848.
28. Ibid.
29. *Cork Examiner*, 23 February 1848.
30. Ibid.
31. *Freeman's Journal*, 1 February 1848.
32. Ibid.
33. *Cork Examiner*, 24 September 1847.
34. *Cork Examiner*, 8 December 1848.
35. *Cork Examiner*, 15 December 1848.
36. *Cork Examiner*, 24 September 1847.
37. T.F.P., 20 June 1846.
38. T.F.P., 28 February 1846
39. T.F.P., 24 October 1846.
40. J. Williams, *Irish Horse Racing – An Illustrated History*, (Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1982), p.31.
41. T.F.P., 12 May 1847.
42. K. O'Connor, *Ironing the Land*, (Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1999), p.51.
43. *Tipperary Free Press*, 3 November 1847.
44. *Tipperary Free Press*, 7 January 7 1846.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. T.F.P. 8 April 1846.
48. T.F.P. 19 September 1846.
49. T.F.P. 17 February 1847.
50. S.J.Connolly, (ed) *The Oxford Companion to Irish History*. (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998) p. 471.
51. *Cork Examiner*, 1 January 1847.
52. *Cork Examiner*, 3 February 1847.
53. *Freeman's Journal*. 31 May 1848.
54. T.F.P. 3 July 1847.