

# *Memories of the Famine from the Irish Folklore Commission*

---

## **Editorial Introduction**

In 1945, on the centenary of the outbreak of the Great Famine, the Irish Folklore Commission circulated a questionnaire on the Famine. In many areas teachers, usually national teachers, proved expert collectors of information. This was recorded in writing and forwarded to the Commission in the form of written statements, on forms that had been prepared and distributed by the Commission.

The following three articles comprise three typical statements furnished to the Folklore Commission 50 years ago, all relating to Co. Tipperary. Except for the statement of Patrick Lyons (for which see editorial footnote), the statements have been edited only minimally, so as to make them suitable for publication. Biographical data on the three authors are on p. vi of this issue.

All three statements come from Volume 1068 of the Main Manuscripts Collection of the Department of Irish Folklore in U.C.D., since 1971 the successor of the Irish Folklore Commission. They are reproduced here with the permission of the Head of the Department. The editor wishes to acknowledge the assistance and advice he received from Bairbre Ní Fhloinn of the Department, and advice also received from Cathal Póirtéir of R.T.E.

## *The Famine in Ballylooby*

---

By Tadhg MacCárthaigh\*

An unusually thick "blight fog" settled on the potato-crop about the end of July 1845. It worsened in 1846, and finally in 1847 destroyed the entire crop. While growing it withered the stalks, sending the poison down the stems towards the potato. Later, before being dug, the crop showed a percentage of blackened potatoes. Much the same process of decay can be observed nowadays where a crop has been affected by blight. The blight returned in the two following years [after 1845].

In our parish many persons died as the direct result of disease (cholera), and of hunger also. It was the poorer and lesser peasant proprietors who suffered mostly from the Famine ravages. It was no uncommon sight to see persons dead by our roadsides in fields, or even beside their houses. My informant relates this story. A labouring man, by name Ned Glaisheen, being so overcome with hunger, visited a neighbouring farmer's house in the parish of Cahir (James O'Donnell by name), and when O'Donnell heard the poor man's story he gave him a griddle cake (loaf). Thereupon Ned retired towards the Mitchelstown road and in some quiet place ate the

---

\*The author obtained much of the information in this article in July 1945 from a pensioner, Seán O'Connell, of Scartnaglorane, aged 72. – Editor, THJ.

entire cake and drank a considerable amount of water. Later he was found dead by the ditch-side.

The local authorities (Grand Jury or Guardians?) looked after the burials. They paid labouring men to bury the dead at so much a body. My informant saw one of those fellows who earned their money in this detestable manner. He knew him by the nickname of "Paddy the Puncher". He earned this title from the manner in which he dispatched to eternity those poor people who were on death's doors. He received a shilling or so per body, and consequently his whole interest lay in the number of his burials. In later years, when Paddy returned to the district, he was set upon by an old woman who recognised him and cursed him away from the house.

Graves were made any place. As far as possible, relatives did their best to bury their dead friends in their native churchyard. The narrative concerning "Paddy the Puncher" is not a general fact of the circumstances; rather, it may be limited to isolated cases. However, I am inclined to believe that in the later stages of the Famine period this method of burial may have been quite a common occurrence.

Graves were made outside of graveyards, where deaths were numerous and entailed too much trouble to transfer to other places. Clogheen Hospital (Union and Workhouse) was not able to accommodate the growing number of cholera victims, so a second hospital was built beside Cahir which is still [1945] in good repair. Most of the paupers from Clogheen Workhouse were also removed to a renovated gentleman's residence which stood about three miles from Cahir at Tincurry on the side of the Mitchelstown-Cahir road. Its ruins are still to be seen.

A new graveyard was opened to bury dead from the local fever hospitals. This new graveyard stands at Searbhach on the southern slope of the Galtees. It was not used since those times. My grand-aunt was taken to the Cahir Fever Hospital in 1947. She died in 1986.

With regard to burials, I have heard the following true account. In a homestead ravaged by the famine-disease, only two brothers remained alive. Finally the older passed away and the onus of his burial rested with the younger brother, who was himself weakened-out also. He began the journey by night to the local graveyard with the dead body upon his back, but was not able to reach his destination. A relation of my own uncle (long deceased) helped the corpse-bearer to bury his brother in the churchyard at Whitechurch.

I could write a great deal under the heading of dissolution of local families, which would be of invaluable aid to the future social historian who might be tempted to deal in a more detailed manner with the causes, changes and general effects of the Famine on peasant proprietorship. For me this would entail much questioning and moving about all over the parish, and finally writing down many names of people and families who have either changed or lost farms or else have gone to America. Hence I shall give only a few of the details.

Generally speaking, I have learned that the Famine affected more than 90% of the local families in regard to their holdings. I could say the period was in a way reminiscent of the famous Scottish Clearances. The typical local farmer held no more than 10 Irish acres. Many held much smaller places. However, owing to his poverty he found it difficult to till his wheat, oats or potato-plot. He often got help from his neighbours, a fact which gave rise to the well-known word *meithiol*. His standard of living was very low; he and his family depended mostly on the potato crop for their sustenance. The corn crops were sold to pay the exacting landlord – the Jellicoes, Walpoles, Jacksons and Waterparks. They were our local landlords.

No wonder these broken-hearted farmers drowned their grief sometimes in our village pubs, when beer was sold by the gallon! Of course, the population generally was then double what it is now. I have recently been shown places where 12, 20 and 40 families lived in a restricted locality of about 20 to 30 Irish acres. I cannot even imagine how they existed under these trying

circumstances of uneconomic living. Life then in those places must have been active, gay and, with the general use of the Irish language and the practice of our Gaelic habits and traditions, the typical Irish countryside of those times must have presented a striking contrast to that of the present day with its depopulated areas and de-nationalized inhabitants.

I have here a list of some of the local families who were obliged at this time to emigrate to America:-

**O'Donnells** (the "Gearrs"), left the farm which is now occupied by a man named Walsh;

**O Tuathail**, left a farm of 12 acres and went to America;

**Tierneys**, one of [their] children became an American bishop;

**O'Briens**, went to America. A descendant of this family, a priest, called in 1932 to inspect the ruins of his ancestral home at Newtown in the north of our parish.

(A longer list may not serve any useful purpose in the present questionnaire.)

As far as I can ascertain, farmsteads changed owners in a free and easy manner. The Famine ravages simply could not pay their high rents [*sic*], and [they] decided to move away to some other part of the countryside in the hope of getting work or a new lease of a farm. Others came into occupation of places which were left derelict by owners who left for America, or who were victims of the plague.

I have the following information regarding a family which is still residing in our parish – their descendants, I should say. The name is — . About 1849 three brothers of the family left their parental home in Kilgainey and moved into three small farms in the locality. One of them built a house in 1850 on his 10-acre farm. The landlord asked him to take some fields adjacent to —'s farm. These fields were previously owned by families who had then moved away or died. In that way — acquired a decent farm of about 40 acres. This description gives an idea of the wholesale clearances which were a common feature of the period 1847 to 1855. I could give a similar account of most of the "big" farmers of our parish – how they were acquired in the Famine days, and how later on they were extended to their present dimensions.

Lord Waterpark had a storehouse built beside our village, in which he stored corn and other farm produce that he confiscated from his tenants as payment for their rents. Waterpark's agent O'Brien looked after the sale of these confiscated goods. This agent is still remembered in our parish for his infamous treatment of the absentee landlord's tenants. A Quaker settler, Jackson by name, was kinder to his neighbours. He does not appear to have been a landlord. He spoke Irish fluently and helped the Famine victims by giving them plots of potatoes and free milk.

A further incident which happened about 1852 illustrates the harshness of the masters of the people in those days. My great-grandfather and great grandmother (R.I.P.) were employed by an estate agent Jellico to gather weeds in "cishes" (*ciseáin*) as a method for cleaning up his land. Jellico stood by, watching the operations. In the evening they had collected a few small potatoes (*críochtáin*) for themselves. He, having seen this, harshly ordered them to forfeit these seemingly useless potatoes. They received fourpence per day! On another occasion he granted them with other workmen a half-day to go to Cahir town to see the execution of two men who had been convicted of stealing some timber from a local wood. "Twill teach ye to obey the law", he remarked.

Naturally, food for the Irish people during the Famine period was scanty. Some little milk, some half-blackened potatoes, boiled *praiseach* (charlock), with small amounts of oatmeal (or rye) were the main types of food used. Dandelion herb was also used. Later on, with the advent of the relief schemes, Indian meal was used in place of the above foods.

Querns were used in grinding whatever corn (oats, rye and barley) that might be available. In 1847 and later the Government set up food centres at cross-roads and beside public relief

works. The Indian meal was boiled in a metal pot, two of which are still to be seen in my district. Typical examples of these "boilers" should be preserved. The meal was apportioned to deserving persons.

A local soup-kitchen was established by the minister of Tubrid (Dr. Geoffrey Keating's church) at the nearby cross-roads; it was financed, of course, from State funds. I cannot ascertain the conditions necessary for the reception of soup-donations. Souperism was practised in the south-east of our parish, so the tradition has it, and in Ballybacon parish which is adjacent. To speak of a person as a "souper" in our district was tantamount to the greatest taunt and insult. These "souters" wore black hats and could easily be identified at the local fairs. This idea of souperism has died out during my time.

A condition of reception of soup was to forswear allegiance to the Blessed Virgin and to disregard the Catholic law of abstinence, with denial of Mass. The greater portion of my parish was not affected by this souperism. The persons I have interrogated regarding the location of these soup-centres appeared reserved and not inclined to give much information, especially in regard to families associated with this movement. Proselytism was practised widely by local Protestants, whose influence was then 100% greater than it is nowadays. Besides, our Irish rural populations, being in great part uneducated, fell easy victims (in a few cases in our parish) to the subtle and attractive offers of the proselytisers.

Local relief schemes were numerous. Two new roads were laid down in my district – the main line from Cahir to Mitchelstown and the line from Cahir to Clogheen *via* Ballylooby. Many steep hills were cut through in these works. The mountain road from Clogheen *via* the "V" [Vee] to Melleray was laid down about 1848. The pay for the labourers employed on these works was fourpence per day. These men often were obliged to walk from the other side of Cahir to their work, a distance varying from 10 to 15 miles. "Yellow-meal" was the only food available.

A local inhabitant, by name James O'Brien, whose son resides close by, was a ganger on one of these schemes. They were financed from State grants. Drainage-work was carried out on a landlord's estate, portion of which was very marshy. Long deep drains were dug, which can still be seen. Workers suffered much from the fact that they were obliged to stand all day on water-logged areas. They were allowed one meal of "stirabout" per day!

As far as my parish was concerned, the relief schemes were of advantage to the people generally. The roads opened up easy ways of getting to the nearest towns, hence greater increase in trade and business, and the drainage increased the amount of arable land.

# *An Ghorta sa Chaisleán Nua agus sa Ghráinseach*

## Le Séamus Ó Maolcathaigh

Bhí mo sheanathair, Pádraig de Búrc, a deich nó a dó dhéag de bhlianta le linn na Gorta. Táim ag cur síos anseo gach is cuimhin liom a chloisint uaidh i dtaobh “an drochaimsir”, mar dheireadh sé féin i gcónaí.

Dheireadh sé gur tháinig ceo agus gur iompaigh na crainn dubh. – “crainn” an focal ar na “gasa” sa cheantar seo — agus go bhfaighfeá boladh dreuite amach as gach aon gharraí prátaí. Bhí na prátaí go léir dubh ach amháin fo- “chriocán”.

Fuair cuid mhór daoine bás leis an “taom” a lean an Ghorta. Tháinig galar éigin ar na préacháin leis agus ní bhíodh iontu eitilt, agus fuair na céadta acu bás. Agus é ag gabháil an bóthar i bhfochair a mháthar chonaic sé duine marbh sa díog fé dhó. Ba mhinic nuair a osclaítí an doras ar maidin go mbíodh duine marbh caite ar thairsing an dorais.

Bhí “Public Works” ar siúl sa dúthaigh seo. Baineadh cuid mhaith den ard as an mbóthar ó Chnoc Lochta go dtí An Caisleán Nua ag Cnoc an Mhinistéara. De réir mar is cuimhin liom, is dóigh liom gur trí is réal sa tseachtain a bhíodh ag lucht oibre ann. Tá sé ag rith liom leis gur airíos é á rá go ngeibhidís min bhuí leis mar chúiteamh ar a saothar. Ba mhinic a chaitheadh fear tabhairt suas le laigeacht. Bhíodh fir ag faire féachaint an dtitfeadh duine éigin amach mar sin chun luí isteach ina ionad. (Baineadh an cnoc as an mbóthar taobh thoir d’Ard Fhionáin san am céanna, ach níor airíos mo sheanathair ag trácht air sin).

Chaitheadh na feirmeoirí botháin a chur suas i ngach garraí tornap nó ghoidfí iad go léir. Bhíodh na daoine ag cuardach nuair a bhíodh na tornaip tarraingthe isteach, féachaint an bhfaighidís aon chinníní beaga a bheadh fágtha. Ní bhíodh aon bhainne acu leis an “leite mhin bhuí” ach í d’ithe tur. Dá bhfaighidís teacht ar thornap chuiridís tríthi é gearrtha mion.

Bhí fear des na Craithigh sa Chruán agus chaith sé a raibh aige ar mhin bhuí chun í a dhéanamh ina leithin do mhuintir an bhaile. D’éirigh gach aon rud chomh maith san leis go raibh sé níos fearr as i gcionn cúpla bliain ná bhí sé riamh.

Seo rud eile d’airínn ag mo sheanathair. Roimh an gGorta bhítí ag iomáint sa dúthaigh seo. Ní bhíodh aon iomáint san áit ina dhiaigh san. Lem’ linn féin is ea d’athbheodh an iomáint sa dúthaigh arís.

Is cuimhin go dtagadh buile ar mo shanathair chugainn nuair bhíomar óg dá bhfeiceach sé aoinne againn ag déanamh aon díomailt ar bhia, agus nuair chíodh sé aon rud mar sin á dhéanamh dheineadh sé tagairt don nGorta. Agus nuair bhíodh sé ag treabhadh ní fhágfadh sé práta dá laghad, d’iompródh an céachta, gan piocadh.

Seo cúpla rud ata mar bhéaloideas ag na gnáthdhaoinne anseo i bparóiste na Gráinsí:-

Bhí an oiread daoine ag fáil bháis agus nárbh fhéidir cónraí a fháil dóibh go léir. Bhíodh cónra acu a mbíodh a thóin ar “innsí” chun an corp a thabhairt chun na reilige. Chuir sí síos insan uaigh é agus d’osclaítí é, d’fhágtáí an corp thíos agus thógtáí aníos an chónra chun duine éigin a thabhairt chun a churtha.

Cuireadh cuid mhaith daoine a raibh an fiabhras orthu san am sin amach as na tithe agus cuireadh isteach iad fé ársí tirime Dhroichead Ard Fhionáin agus bhítí á bhfeidhil ann. Cuireadh a thuilleadh isteach i bhfothrach Mhainistir Mhuire, atá míle ó dheas ó Ard Fhionáin. Agus, rud iontach, tá sé ag na daoine ná fuair aoinne acu bás féin droichead ná i bhfothrach na seanmhainistreach.

Bhí seanfhear ó Bhaile an Ruiséalaigh, trí mhíle siar ó dheas ó Chluain Meala i gContae Phort Láirge, á rá liom gur caitheadh roinnt corp daoine a fuair bás leis an bhfiabhras ar thaobh an

bhóthair ag Méar an Eolais (Fingerpost), míle soir ó Chluain Meala, agus gur thóg fear ón dúthaigh sin iad go léir, duine ar dhuine, ar a dhroim leis ceithre mhíle slí go reilig Chill Rónáin agus gur chuir iad. Níor chuimhin leis an bhfear sin d'inis é seo dom an rud seo a tharla, d'airigh sé ag na seandaoine é.

Deir na daoine sa pharóiste seo gur tháinig meath ar na prátaí dhá bhliain i ndiaidh a chéile. An tríú bliain bhí cuid mhaith daoine agus shíleadar nárbh fhiú iad a chur ar aon chor. Aoinne a chuir an bhliain sin iad bhí an t-ádh leo, mar bhí na prátaí go maith an bhliain sin.

De réir mo thuairime féin níor luigh an Ghorta leath chomh dian ar an dúthaigh seo agus do luigh sí ar fhormhór na tíre. Ní raibh líon na ndaoine bocht chomh mór agus bhí sé i gceantair eile.

## *The Famine in Lisronagh*

---

By Patrick Lyons\*

The blight appeared suddenly [in Lisronagh] in 1845 [and was] in full power [*sic*] in 1846 . . . In [my] locality there were little or no famine evictions, but small-holders left their homes to search for food. Most of the landlords acted nobly, and all the resident landlords did something [*sic*]. The newly rich farmers of the period acted in the main uncharitably. The grain merchants founded a new aristocracy and became magistrates and – [illegible] on the profits of the period.

Luckily for the writer's native place, it held a Man of Ross, Tom Purcell of Caherclough ("Fortwilliam"), a noble Norman knight in the guise of a mere Gaelic-speaking farmer. By some chance Purcell seems to have been able to save most of his potato crop. He was an extensive farmer who carried on quarrying for lime-burning during most of the year. All the starving people of the country flocked to Purcell's quarry, where they were regaled with potatoes roasted at the lime-kiln from the raw, about the best way of cooking a potato. This man was the "Bran" Purcell of C. J. Kickham's *Sally Kavanagh*, who, [though] a dog fancier, shot his dog to save food for the poor. He was marital uncle to Kickham. Happily, Purcell's descendants are numerous and widespread – and opulent in agriculture and finance . . .

In the Famine years a relief work was started to ameliorate the slope of a road over Market Hill, anciently Drumdeel, a steep ridge close to the south of Fethard . . . To provide for dinner each workman brought a turnip, and these were boiled in a large pot with a portion of the meal ration contributed by each worker. A military officer riding by, and noticing post-prandial discolouration on a workman's mouth, said: "You have been eating eggs, my man". The worker replied: "No, sir, turnips" . . .

The people wandered about seeking food or edible herbs until they fell by exhaustion and were picked up like "casualties" and trundled away to places of sepulture . . . In the writer's native place people who had been through the Famine were taciturn on the matter, and the locality did not feel the worst effects of the visitation. There was much emigration to Britain and the U.S.A. . . . The people ate everything edible – and some things properly inedible. Roads were improved on the "pound of meal" – the relief ration. There was no attempt at religious proselytism.

---

\*For several reasons, only about 40% of Lyons's statement is given here. First, his handwriting is practically illegible. Secondly, much of what he recollects relates not to Co. Tipperary but to Co. Mayo, where he lived for many years. Lastly (but not least), he gives no source for any of his information and appears to be drawing on general hearsay. – Editor, THJ.