

The Famine in the Clogheen area

By Edmund O'Riordan

Although the district boasted some of Ireland's finest farmland, and in spite of the fact that it was a milling centre of great importance, in the years leading up to the Great Famine much of the population of Clogheen and the Galty-Vee-Valley was bordering on destitution. These people were to prove easy targets for famine and fever when the potato blight came in 1845.

Following the Poor Law Act of 1838, Clogheen town had been chosen as the site for the workhouse that would serve 137,000 acres between the Knockmealdown and the Galtee mountains, which included the towns and villages of Cahir, Ballyporeen, Burncourt, Newcastle, Kilbehenny, and Clogheen itself. This area was now known as the Clogheen Union, and in March 1842 the workhouse, which had been designed to accommodate 500 people, was opened.¹

Clogheen's seven mills and brewery, most of which were owned by the Grubb family, provided an important market for the farmers of the area, and the money generated helped to pay the rent to Lord Lismore of Shanbally Castle, Lord Kingston of Mitchelstown, or the Earl of Glengall in Cahir. Clogheen also had a regular market for butter, eggs, pigs and fowl, and four times a year the streets were given over to the serious business of holding a fair. The town had grown in size over the previous 50 years and almost every building on the main street had a business of some kind – bakers, blacksmith, butchers, grocers, tailors, nailmakers, pawnbrokers, drapers, shoemakers and a large number of pubs.

Regardless of the fact that they had witnessed earlier famines in their lifetimes, the farmers and the shopkeepers must have felt fairly secure about their lives, and confident about their futures. The workhouse was serving them well by keeping the vagrants off the streets and roads, and taking care of the worst cases of destitution. In spite of the poverty on the slopes of the mountains and in the poorer areas of the towns, in those early years of the workhouse the numbers using it never reached anything near capacity. This was to change.

In Spring of 1845 the master of the workhouse, Mr. Donohue, had purchased eight barrels of seed potatoes, and during the summer months the paupers were kept busy weeding the crop, which was growing well. Catherine Kelley, working away from the workhouse, stole a linen sheet, but she was caught. A short time later she absconded from the workhouse, leaving three children behind.² As harvest time approached many of the paupers applied to leave the workhouse, as employment was now to be had on the farms in the valley. The *Tipperary Free Press*, anxiously investigating rumours that something was wrong with the potato crop all over the county, was soon to report that in South Tipperary the damage to the crop was more serious than they had at first thought.³

Throughout the winter of 1845-46 the poorer people of the Clogheen Union struggled to survive as best they could, relying to a great extent on the charity of their neighbours; there was always the workhouse. The potatoes that had been so diligently tended by the paupers there had also been affected by the blight, and in January 1846 the diet of the inmates was changed to take this into account.

Oatmeal, and soup made from meat, were added to the diet on three days of the week, and by March the Minute Book of the Board of Guardians recorded that as they were unable to

secure a supply of potatoes household bread was to be used as a substitute to feed the inmates. The minutes were signed by Lord Lismore, chairman of the Board, and Richard Burke, Clerk of the Union.⁴ Some years later, after a trial for the murder of his wife, Burke was hanged in Clonmel.⁵

When the Relief Commissioners in Dublin requested that Relief Committees be set up throughout the country, the gentry, business people and larger farmers in the Clogheen area were quick to respond. Under the chairmanship of Lord Lismore they set about the task of procuring employment for those in need, and dealing out provisions "at a reduced rate". The town and surrounding area was divided into ten 'walks' and these were visited by committee members.⁶

By April 18 *The Tipperary Free Press* was able to report that oatmeal and coarse flour had been distributed to over 1,000 people in Clogheen during the week.⁷ Mention had been made at the Relief meeting in Clogheen of the distress "so deplorably extensive in our neighbourhood". In March the Board of Guardians had appealed to the Lord Lieutenant for aid, and requested that Indian meal depots should be set up in Cahir and Clogheen, both "military stations". They pointed out that there were no potatoes to be had, and the people who relied on that crop were at the mercy of a few people who were charging 2s. 6d. (27½p) for a stone of oatmeal. The Board was dubious about the effect of the proposed relief works which, they pointed out, would take six weeks to get under way.⁸

Despite the efforts of the relief committees, they were unable to alleviate the suffering of all the paupers in the surrounding area, and by the middle of April attacks on flour carts had become a problem. Charles Bianconi, then Mayor of Clonmel, had written to Dublin Castle to complain about the insulting practice of sending military escorts to Clonmel with flour carts from Cahir. He pointed out that the Clogheen carts had not found it necessary to use military escorts, and that this show of force was merely reminding the people of their misery.⁹

Soon afterwards, however, the Earl of Glengall reported that the populace throughout the whole of the district of Clonmel, Clogheen and Marlfield had attacked flourcarts. According to Lord Lismore, Alfred Grubb, a big miller of the district, had his carriages conveying flour from Clogheen to Lismore attacked and plundered by a tumultuous body of people.¹⁰ The Earl of Glengall also wrote about the problems of providing escorts, the convoys of flourcarts being over a half-mile long.¹¹ On April 15 Dublin Castle arranged for the Third Dragoons to go to Clogheen.¹²

That same week the mills in Clogheen came under attack. At Clogheen itself, at Castlegrace and at Flemingstown the rioters attacked, desperate to secure a supply of food. Reports said they were from the adjoining parish; they were repulsed by the police, who in some cases had been stationed at the mills.¹³

Summer arrived and with the fine weather came the start of the relief works. The few pence per day were barely enough, and often not enough to support the starving families employed on such schemes. One of the farms bisected by the "New Line" from Clogheen to Ballylooby, which was built at this time, was owned by the Condon family. This family has inherited the sad tale of the paupers at work on the road coming to the Condon house in search of turnips or other food. Once word got out that the Condons would give food, they had to refuse it, as the crowds would soon have consumed the family's own meagre food supply. It is said that many people died at work on this road and were buried in ditches along the way.¹⁴

On August 19 *The Tipperary Free Press* reported that that year's potato crop had also been destroyed: "... from the centre to the sea, in every direction, the alarm has spread, and the ruined farmer and cottier look out with fainting hearts on the prospects before them".¹⁵

During the famine years Cahir, Clogheen, Ballyporeen, and Ardfinnan all had fever hospitals. It is well documented that it was the fever brought on by the famine that caused many of the deaths that occurred in those years. In Clogheen the Fever Hospital was at Cockpit Hill (on the little road that now leads to the football field); the Ardfinnan hospital was at Lady's Abbey, where its ruins can still be seen. The workhouse also built fever sheds on its own property to house any inmates who might contract fever, typhus or relapsing fever.

In October 1846 John Prendergast of Bohernagore, Clogheen, who was employed by Mr. Grubb to take a load of flour to Clonmel, was attacked at Knocklofty by a group of men, women, and children. They forced his cart into a boreen; there they filled their own bags which they had brought for the purpose. For similar offences "convicts" had left Clonmel that same day having been sentenced to transportation.¹⁶

In December it was reported by the *Tipperary Free Press* that Lord Lismore was feeding 50 people daily at Shanbally castle, and had arranged to have food distributed to 50 other families at their homes.¹⁷ Tradition has it that the Shanbally soup-kitchen was at the gates of the castle.

In January 1847, Mrs. Grubb of Clashleigh wrote to the Under Secretary appealing for funds for the soup-kitchen which had been established in the village in December 1846. She said they were feeding 260 people daily, but where they could not help along the mountainside, people were dying. She later wrote to say that the starving wretches were imploring them for relief which they could not give, and they were aware that the people were eating grass, bran, and even donkeys.¹⁸

Compounding the problems of starvation and fever, the people now had to contend with the threat of eviction. In January 1847, the same month that the Soup-Kitchen Act had been passed, 62 evictions were authorised at Clogheen court. All the evictions were granted at the behest of a single landlord, and the report was at pains to point out that it was not Lord Lismore, who had actually offered a rent reduction to his tenants.¹⁹

To cope with the extra numbers seeking relief, the workhouse now found it necessary to rent extra accommodation to house the paupers, and sheds at the rear of the house were converted into dormitories. One of the buildings used as an "additional workhouse" was the corn store, 100 perches from the main house, the property of William and James Fennell. Another was Clogheen's old courthouse, which was at the square where O'Donnell's garage now stands.

Other districts in Clogheen Union were also appealing independently to the commissioners in Dublin for aid. From Rochestown, Ardfinnan, Mr. Barton wrote that his district was very poor and extensive, including the electoral division of Ballybacon which contained 3,109 of the poorer inhabitants. He was seeking a 100-gallon boiler.²⁰

Clogheen soup-kitchen sent a further appeal, this time from Samuel Grubb and James Fennell, to say that hundreds relied solely on the efforts of the soup-kitchen. They had reached a stage where even "respectable tradespeople" were now applying to them for help. They added that the bulk of the population were paupers.²¹ From Ballyporeen the relief committee wrote that many people had died from actual want and starvation, and the great mass of the people were reduced to a dreadful state of misery and wretchedness. They were in the process of erecting two boilers.²²

From Vicars Hill in Tubrid, Rev. Henry Palmer wrote that they were daily distributing 400 gallons of Indian meal porridge, and were employing over 300 people in local quarries.²³ In Cahir the Relief committee had identified 500 families representing 2,500 people and were giving them flour and Indian meal twice a week.²⁴ At a meeting in Clogheen on 27 February, 1847 it was stated that the number of inmates in the workhouse was 669; that week they had to refuse admission to 124 paupers. Mention was made of the spread of disease in the workhouse.²⁵

Around the same time, the Society of Friends (Quakers), whose charitable works for the people of Ireland are only now being fully acknowledged, sent Robert Davis to assess the destitution in the Clogheen Union. At Ballyboy, one mile east of Clogheen, he found what he called his first view of actual famine, in which the poor creatures with "sharpened looks and tottering steps" were assembling at the soup-kitchen.

From Ballyboy he made his way to Clogheen, where he visited the soup-kitchen which was distributing porridge. He referred to the area of the Galtee mountains between Burncourt and Tincurry as "a wretched district, where destitution abounds to a fearful degree ... and deaths from actual starvation were becoming of daily occurrence." Robert Davis went on to record that corpses were being buried at night without coffins.²⁶

A similar report appeared in the *Tipperary Free Press* in February. "We apprehend that many of our readers may not be aware of the extreme distress which prevails in the district lying between the Galtee and Knockmealdown mountains" The writer said he had just returned from the area, and in many instances he had to speak to the people as they lay on a little dirty straw in their cabins, as they were too weak to rise. He was assured by the sergeant of police that people were dying of starvation.²⁷

Even though the potato crop was to a great extent blight-free in 1847, the continuity necessary for people to sustain themselves on a single crop had been broken. With the closing of the soup-kitchens and the relief works, and with regulations in place that only allowed relief to able-bodied paupers who admitted themselves to the workhouse, the entire Poor-Law system came under enormous pressure.

To alleviate the pressure on Clogheen workhouse, the Guardians leased a disused factory at Tincurry near Cahir, to be used as a children's workhouse. On January 23, 1848 the schoolmaster was sent from Clogheen with the first of the many children who were to live here away from their parents.²⁸ In an outbreak of measles at Tincurry during the winter of 1848-49 many children died; in one week 13 boys, 13 girls and 6 babies under two years succumbed to the disease.²⁹

In the census of 1841, the figure for Clogheen Union was 43,932; by 1851 that figure was reduced to 32,903. The number of houses in 1841 was 7,034; this had dropped to 5,133 by 1851. The 1851 census found that Clogheen workhouse was home to 495 males and 827 females; the auxiliary workhouse at Tincurry was home to 239 males and 306 females.³⁰

FOOTNOTES

1. P.L.U. bks., Clogheen Union, March 1842.
2. P.L.U. bks., Clogheen Union, August 1845.
3. *Tipperary Free Press* (hereafter TFP), October 1845.
4. P.L.U. bks., Clogheen Union, March 30, 1846.
5. Feeley, Pat, *Nationalist* (Clonmel), 25 April, 1992.
6. TFP, May 9, 1846.
7. TFP, April 18, 1846.
8. P.L.U. bks., Clogheen Union, 28 March, 1846.
9. Outrage Papers, Tipperary, 1846 (National Archives, Dublin).
10. *Ibid.*
11. Outrage Papers, letter dated April 15, 1846 (N.A.).
12. Outrage Papers, Tipperary, 1846 (N.A.).
13. Outrage Papers, Tipperary, 1846 (N.A.).
14. Condon family tradition.
15. TFP, August 19, 1846.

16. TFP, October 21, 1846; also sworn statement of Prendergast in Outrage Papers, National Archives.
17. TFP, December 23, 1846.
18. Famine Relief Papers, Tipperary, 1847 (National Archives).
19. TFP, January 9, 1847.
20. Famine Relief Paper (National Archives), Tipperary 1847.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. Power, P., *History of South Tipperary* (Cork, 1989), pp. 143-4.
24. Famine Relief Papers, Tipperary 1847.
25. P.L.U. bks., Clogheen Union, February, 1847.
26. Report of Robert Davis in "Transactions of the Central Relief Committee of The Society of Friends" (Dublin, 1852), pp. 176-8.
27. TFP, February 27, 1847.
28. P.L.U. bks., January, 1847.
29. P.L.U. bks., February, 1849.
30. Census of Ireland, 1851.

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Tipperary Free Press, 1846-47-48.
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