

The Famine in Kilkenny

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This is a short account of a very interesting lecture given by Mr. Thomas P. O'Neill, National Library, to the Society on "The Famine, with special reference to Kilkenny."

IN an inquiry into the condition of the people of Ireland in 1835, witnesses from Kilkenny, as well as from the rest of the country, testified as to the appalling conditions in which the poorer people lived. Potatoes were the staple diet—in many cases the only diet—and the hungry months of July and August were lean indeed. In these months the old potatoes were used up and the new ones had not come in.

One witness, J. Cahill, a tradesman of Galmoy Barony, warned: "Where the potato is the principal food of the peasantry, they are altogether dependent on the year's production and, should the crop fail, extreme distress will be inevitable." Clothing was bad, for the people could not afford it. Father Robert Power, P.P., of Lisdowney, said: "This is more particularly true in reference to children and, in many instances, to women; the men more frequently contrive to be possessed of decent clothes."

The houses in which the people lived, too, were little more than hovels. The Parish Priest of Paulstown wrote: "They are, in general, miserable huts, for the most part badly thatched. The furniture consists of a stool or two, with a box, and a cross-legged table, and two or three shelves fastened to the wall. Bedsteads are seldom seen in them, and a truss of straw strewn on the ground, and kept in at the edge by a rough stick or, perhaps, a few stones, with half a blanket and a coarse sheet, constitute the bed; the floor is miserably damp."

The first great failure of the potato crop in the harvest of 1845 led to some distress in the Spring and Summer of 1846. The judicious measures of Sir Robert Peel, the British Prime Minister, helped to allay this, and there was no real famine in that season,

There was quite an amount of suffering and want, however, and the Mayor of Kilkenny; Father Martin Doyle, P.P., Graignamanagh; Rev. Mr. Luke Fowler, of Freshford, and others, wrote to the Chief Secretary on behalf of the people.

G. A. Prim was secretary of the Kilkenny Relief Committee and he wrote in April, 1846, that hundreds of unemployed persons had held meetings in the city and had issued placards calling for work or bread.

The complete failure in 1846, however, was followed by terrible scenes throughout Ireland in the Winter of 1846 and 1847. Public works were the main scheme of relief operated by the government at this period and some 20,000 persons in County Kilkenny were employed on useless roadworks, and a large number of these were women and boys forced to work to keep their starving families.

Because of the prevailing starvation, there was much discontent, and many people were forced to steal to preserve their lives. James Doran, of Ennisnag, was prosecuted for stealing a few handfuls of flour, valued at threepence, and even the Crown prosecution had to admit that he was starving—he was not sent to jail.

Others who stole wheat, even though starving, were not treated so mercifully. This did not deter starving people and flour carts at Ballyragget area were attacked in December, 1846, while, at Rochestown, in the same month, a Board of Works pay clerk, Frederick Burrowes, was waylaid and robbed. A few months later, in March, 1847, another pay clerk, Arthur Prim, accompanied by Sub-Constable Yeates, was on his way to pay those on the relief works at Dunnamaggan. Five men attacked and killed Prim and Yeates at Shortallstown and robbed them of £300. One attacker was severely wounded and died later.

CHANGE OF POLICY

From Spring of 1847 the government changed its policy because of the failure of the public works scheme. People in many parts of the country were dying of starvation. Schull and Skibbereen became bywords, but, on a lesser

scale, the catastrophe was felt all over the country.

Newspapers reported that the poor of Castlecomer were badly hit and that deaths from starvation had taken place in that district. The government decided to issue cooked food to the people and close the public works.

From the Spring of 1847, until the following Autumn, this food, a kind of Indian meal stirabout or gruel, was issued from soup kitchens, established throughout the length and breadth of Ireland. About one-third of the northern half of Kilkenny depended on these daily rations during the Summer of 1847, while, in the southern half, that is Callan poor law union, every second person lived on these free rations.

This temporary soup kitchen scheme ended in August, 1847, and, from that, no relief was given to the poor except under the Poor Law system. This system was mainly based on the workhouses. These were grim penal buildings which were more like jails than charitable institutions. There were only two meals a day in Callan and Kilkenny workhouses. Breakfasts in Callan consisted of eight ounces of Indian meal stirabout, a half ounce of rice and a half pint of new milk, while dinner consisted of the same amount of Indian meal, two ounces of rice and a half pint of buttermilk. The Kilkenny jails gave more liberal portions of fresh milk and some bread. The poor never got bread.

WORKHOUSE—'A BYE-WORD'

Bad as the workhouses in general were, that of Kilkenny was particularly bad. During the famine it was reported "that the Kilkenny workhouse has long been a bye-word . . . amongst the workhouses of Ireland, as being one of the worst managed." Dr. Robert Cane and Dr. Joseph Lalor both reported adversely on conditions within the institution. The condition of the workhouse school was also deplorable. The schoolmaster was incompetent as a teacher and most of the boys' time appears to have been spent picking stones. The day room, it was said, was "a disgusting

sight, the paupers noisy and turbulent, crowded, young and old about the fireplace, their clothing in many instances torn and ragged, their linen dirty, even filthy.”

OUT-DOOR RELIEF

For some years after 1847, relief outside the workhouses was granted to the poor when the workhouses were overcrowded. In April, 1848, one-fifth of the population of Callan Union received outdoor assistance—a higher proportion than in any Union outside Munster and Connacht. In Kilkenny, the position was not nearly so bad, but the workhouse accommodation there had to be increased by using auxiliary buildings and so on. In 1851, over 4,000 persons were in the Kilkenny workhouse, while there were 2,000 inmates in Callan workhouse and an auxiliary building.

Fever caused the greatest loss of life. From late in 1846, there was an epidemic of typhus, which caused over 5,000 deaths in Co. Kilkenny. Dysentery and diarrhoea were also prevalent, but, in 1849, cholera appeared and, in Kilkenny city, Freshford, Thomastown and Graignamanagh, caused a number of deaths.

This, coupled with a large-scale emigration, caused a serious fall in population by 1851. Emigration, for instance, that aided by the Wandesfordes of Castlecomer, was sometimes used by the landlords to clear their estates. From Moneenroe, Coolbawn, Lowan and Tourtane townlands near Castlecomer, 4,854 individuals were sent to Canada at a cost to the landlord of £14,525. Some of these emigrants, who were miners, went on to Pottsville in the United States.

The population in Co. Kilkenny during the famine fell from 183,000 to 138,000. The city population did not fall because of the large numbers in the workhouse in 1851.

The baronies of Fassadinin and Galmoy lost more than other parts, and the parish of Castlecomer fell from 11,245 to 6,556. Some townlands showed a fantastic decrease. Donaguile lost 650 of its 850 inhabitants, while Rathosheen,

which had 91 inhabitants in 1841, had only eight persons left in 1851.

Kilkenny was not by any means the most severely stricken of Irish counties during the famine. The counties of Connacht and Munster suffered far greater hardships, but the fact that conditions were so bad in Kilkenny helps us to visualise how much worse they were in Schull and Skibbereen.

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