

Kilkenny in the 19th Century

By PAT WALSH, Member

WAR

DURING the previous century progress had been made. The new inventions which had revolutionised industry and increased production in the woollen and linen industries so vital to Kilkenny were not adopted until some decades later. The population had increased and the wars on the Continent had repercussions here; prices had increased, particularly of provisions. During the '98 insurrection fighting had taken place at Castlecomer and near the county border at New Ross.

The Army headquarters were in Kilkenny, the troops were commanded by one Asgall and many executions took place, one of these being the subject of a beautiful poem by Dr. Campion, the "Kilkenny Man."

LEVIES

The loss of the Native Parliament was not felt immediately, as some of the duties on imports were to remain in operation for some time after the passing of the Act of Union. For some years after the passing of the Act, large quantities of provisions were exported. Kilkenny shared in this trade and was one of the counties referred to as the "Grainery of England."

TURMOIL

The century which opened so inauspiciously was to be a period of strife and turmoil. The struggle for Catholic Emancipation, The Tithe War, the Repeal agitation, the Young Irelanders, the Famine (so called), the laying of the railways, the Fenian Rising and the Land Agitation were some of the highlights of a thrill-packed century.

DUMPING

During and after the first two decades the protective duties imposed under the Act of Union were gradually withdrawn, and the country was flooded with imported goods in 1825; the Irish markets were glutted with almost every article from England. The dumpnig was severely felt in the woollen industry, and Kilkenny, long famed for the processing of wool, spinning, weaving, etc., was severely affected by the cross-channel imports. In Kilkenny, Cork and Carrick-on-Suir, three of the principal centres of the industry, the value of woollen products produced about 1820 was £200,000, and in 1840 it was £20,000; the decline in the woollen industry in Kilkenny was arrested about 1850.

KILKENNY TEXTILES

The Ormonde Mills were opened by Messrs. Henry Scott & Co. and later by Mr. Tomas Reade with the introduction of up-to-date machinery and re-organisation. The mills gave employment to about 500 hands. Kilkenny's famous carpet industry, which gave employment to 200 hands, was completely wiped out by 1840. The linen industry which had declined rapidly since the end of the previous century was also seriously affected. It is worthy of note that Louis Cromellen, a Huguenot who had firmly established the linen industry in the North, had planned to launch a large scale growing and processing of flax in Kilkenny. This aroused such hostility in the North and in cross-channel circles that he was forced to abandon the project.

BREWERIES AND DISTILLERIES

Up to the middle of the century, Kilkenny had four (4) breweries, three (3) distilleries and many maltings. Ballyragget, a noted corn growing area also had breweries and distilleries. Most of the corn mills which had been so

active during the previous century were gradually slowing down.

Coal mining in North Kilkenny flourished, but a sharp decline in consumption was experienced with the closing of the many distilleries in the area.

COAL AND MARBLE

In the late 17th century, Kilkenny coal was used in many institutions in Dublin although the canals had not been cut or roads improved until nearly three-quarters of a century later.

The marble and stone industries were in a flourishing condition. Kilkenny had been long noted for its stone and marble craftsmen. The firm of Collis employed hundreds of hands in the quarrying and working of stone and marble and sent its products to many countries.

ROADS AND RAILS

In 1820-1 new roads were laid in the city and district. The Dublin road from the Railway Station to St. John's Old School, the Castlecomer new road from Barrack Street corner to the city boundary, the Kells road and many other roads were laid during this period.

The railway service was extended to Kilkenny about 1850 and to Waterford some time later. The service to Kilkenny was via Carlow, the connection with Maryboro came later.

TITHES

As the century progressed and the country adjusted itself to the new conditions the fight for Catholic Emancipation became more intense. The people were united in their demand and brilliantly led by the great tribune Daniel O'Connell who defeated his opponent in a Parliamentary election in Clare. O'Connell's victory sparked off a series of events which abruptly ended in 1850, and culminated in the collapse of the National

agitation. For years the people had been agitating for the removal of the tithes, an immoral imposition which was paid by the people to maintain an alien institution; severe assessments were made which often led to disturbances. A simple demand for the tithe rent in Kilkenny led to what is known as the "Battle of Carrickshock."

BATTLE OF CARRICKSHOCK

A process server named Butler left Kilmoganny early one morning to serve a demand for the tithe rent on a William Walsh who lived near Carrickshock. A large posse of police led by a mounted officer accompanied Butler. They were followed by a very large crowd who demanded Butler be handed over to them; this was refused. Near Newmarket the crowd, many of whom were armed with pitch forks, sticks etc., were led by William Kane who wore a sash and a semi-uniform, and had drawn abreast with the police, now shouted "Butler or Blood." The police, on reaching the top of the hill near Carrickshock, were dismayed to see large bodies of men coming from the Ballyhale area, who had been attracted by the ringing of the church bells. The police halted and the crowd surrounded them, dragged Butler to the roadside where he was violently assaulted and fell mortally wounded. The police now turned down a side road and into what is known since as the "Battle Bosheen." Here they were surrounded by the crowd who attacked them with volleys of stones, pitch forks, etc. In the melee which followed eleven police were killed and three of the attackers. Many arrests were made and a trial which aroused nation-wide interest was held in Kilkenny where the arrested men were charged with conspiracy and murder. The accused men were acquitted through the brilliant advocacy of a rising lawyer, Daniel O'Connell.

Since the passing of the Act of Union many demands were made for its repeal. Monster meetings were held throughout the country. The area meeting for Kilkenny

was held on Daly's Hill and an estimated 300,000 attended. It was addressed by Daniel O'Connell and other speakers. Many of the local repeal advocates were later prominent Young Irelanders. Dr. Kane, Mayor, held a conference with the Young Ireland leaders, Smith O'Brien and his colleagues, when they arrived from Graiguenamanagh where they received an enthusiastic welcome and met General Cooney who had fought at Vinegar Hill.

FAMINE

We are now approaching the period of the great hunger generally referred to as the famine. It is worthy of note that during this period huge quantities of foodstuffs were exported. Kilkenny was not as severely affected as other areas, but a review of the period 1830-'50 will show how the famine (so called) affected Kilkenny. The census of 1831 returns Kilkenny City with a population of 23,741, with four breweries, three distilleries, three tanneries, extensive bacon yards, flour mills, starch and salt works, a large provision trade, stone and marble works, linen and woollen mills. The population had been steadily increasing since 1750, and after the first violent impact of the act of Union on the local industries increasing industrial activity is an indication of the city's progress, and its stability can be seen in the establishment of a Savings Bank under the patronage of the Earl of Ormonde in 1816. In 1835 the Bank had 800 depositors and deposits amounted to £23,784.

In 1841 the city's population is given as 24,725 and the population of the county 202,420, both figures the highest on record up to 1946/'7. City and county had increased populations. The county towns, Callan, Castlecomer, etc., had more than double the present populations. Thomastown, at the head of the Nore navigation and a distributing centre until about 1830, was also in this category. Castlecomer had a noted butter market and on some market days up to one thousand (1,000) firkins would be on offer.

After 1847 there was a sharp decline in population.

The deaths due to hunger and disease, the disruption of industry, the change in the ownership of land, emigration, etc., all contributed to the decline in population in Kilkenny and elsewhere. In 1871 the city population had fallen to 12,710 and the county to 109,379, a decline of 50% in both cases. The Young Ireland campaign had collapsed and the National sentiment later erupted in the Fenian Movement.

FENIANS

There was much activity in Kilkenny during this period, the great head centre? James Stephens was a Kilkenny man. As a young man he had manned the barricades at Killenaule with Smith O'Brien. John Haltigan, also a Kilkenny man, was the local Fenian leader. After the failure of the attempted insurrection underground tactics were adopted by the Fenians and the agitation gradually levelled off into the demand for land reform which had repercussions in Kilkenny and elsewhere. Kilkenny's position during the period 1846/'50 is worth noting. A rapid decline in population set in through deaths from hunger and disease. From the period of demoralisation which followed the great starvation, as it's now known, dates the decay and decline of many of Kilkenny's industries and the consequent fall in population. The land agitation which had favourable repercussion in Kilkenny as elsewhere brought to a close a fateful and eventful century.

CORPORATION

In 1843 Irishtown, which held its Charter from the Bishop of Ossory and had at one time sent two members to Parliament, had its own Civic authority and was governed by a Portreeve, now lost its status. An Act passed in 1843 abolished Irishtown as a civic unit and it became incorporated with the Hightown, and both were henceforth known under the style The Mayor, Aldermen, and Burgesses of Kilkenny.

The Portreeve was elected annually. He was Clerk of the Market and held office weekly for the recovery of debts not exceeding 40/-. Irishtown Civic Authority was also known as the Corporation of St. Canice and was disfranchised at the passing of the Act of Union and £15,000 was paid to the Board of First Fruits.

During reconstruction of the premises of Messrs. Hanrahans, Irishtown, a slab was uncovered bearing the inscription :

Irishtown Crane

“Erected by the voluntary subscriptions of the inhabitants for public accommodation.”

William Grace, Portreeve, 1822.

William Grace was the last Portreeve of Irishtown in whose honour a bull was baited on James's Green. It was held about 1828 and was the last “bait” held in Kilkenny. Irishtown had its own fair known as the fair of St. Canice.

To-day, with its many cultural societies, Musical, Literary, Archaeological, etc., and the possibility of the establishment in the near future of a cultural centre, Kilkenny's future seems assured in the cultural sphere.

Otter Trapping, 1865

John Finn, a smith living in Collier's Lane, Kilkenny, has very ingeniously invented and made a trap for taking otters. The trials made by him were most successful in catching these animals so destructive to fish. In times not far remote, a reward was regularly given to everyone who killed an otter. Finn ought to be doubly rewarded as he is likely to destroy otters on the Nore to an extent which will render his services vastly more valuable to the Fishery Conservators than a water bailiff.