

*Walk through our*  
*delays and ramble through*  
**Lest We Forget**

*our deserted streets and see*  
**Kildare and the Great Famine**

*the able bodied labourers at*

*our corners hoards of*

*veggies at our doors disease*

*and famine in the hovels of*

*the poor.*



*Published by the Kildare Council*

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KILDARE AND THE GREAT FAMINE**

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Kildare County Council

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## RÉAMHRÁ

Thit níos mó díobháil ar bhochtáin na tire ná ar aon dream eile in Éireann de bharr an Ghorta Mhóir. Dob é an Ghaeilge an teanga coitianta acusan, agus, mar sin, is cóir trácht a déanamh orthu i nGaeilge sa réamhrá seo. Sé atá sa leabhar seo ná cur síos an stair an Ghorta i gCondae Chill Dara, agus ar an toradh uafásach a d'fhágadh ina dhiaidh. Tá sé thar a bheith oiriúnach go bhfuil istigh ann dán de chuid Timmy Conway, a thugann an ais d'ár gcuimhne pian na "boicht ainnis" sa chondae lena linn.

Famine is an emotive, evocative word - nowhere more so than in Ireland, where it devastated the country a century and a half ago. Across the intervening decades, it is difficult for us to grasp the reality of the Great Famine. The pictures we see with depressing frequency on our television screens show us something of the devastation wrought by present-day famine. The famine which hit Ireland 150 years ago was, if anything, worse, leaving effects which are still being measured. The Irish coined their own word for the Great Famine: they called it *An Drochshaol*, literally "the bad life".

Kildare suffered less from the Famine than did some other parts of the country. Nevertheless, its effects in the county were devastating and far-reaching. Between death and emigration, Kildare lost almost 20,000 souls between 1841 and 1851, and not until 1986 did the county's population again reach the 1841 figure. These essays tell some of the stories behind that grim statistic, and, in doing so, help to broaden our knowledge of a significant period in the history of our county and our land.

I wish to express thanks to all the contributors; to Dr. Ray Gillespie of the Department of History at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth; to Kildare Archaeological Society, whose seminar on the Famine in Kildare became the inspiration for the volume; to Kildare County Council's Famine Commemoration Committee and to the County Library Service, for their help and co-operation.

*Séan O Fearghail*  
*Cathaoirleach*  
*Comhairle Chondae Chill Dara*

# FAMINE GRAVEYARD

TIMMY CONWAY

*Básadh gan aithnid*

*Gan a lorg*

*Curtha*

*Gan Leac,*

*Gan Bláth,*

*Gan Deoir,*

*Gan neach a gcaoineadh,*

*Ár mboicht ainnis,*

*Anamacha tréigthe Chille Dara.*

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# COUNTY KILDARE AND THE FAMINE

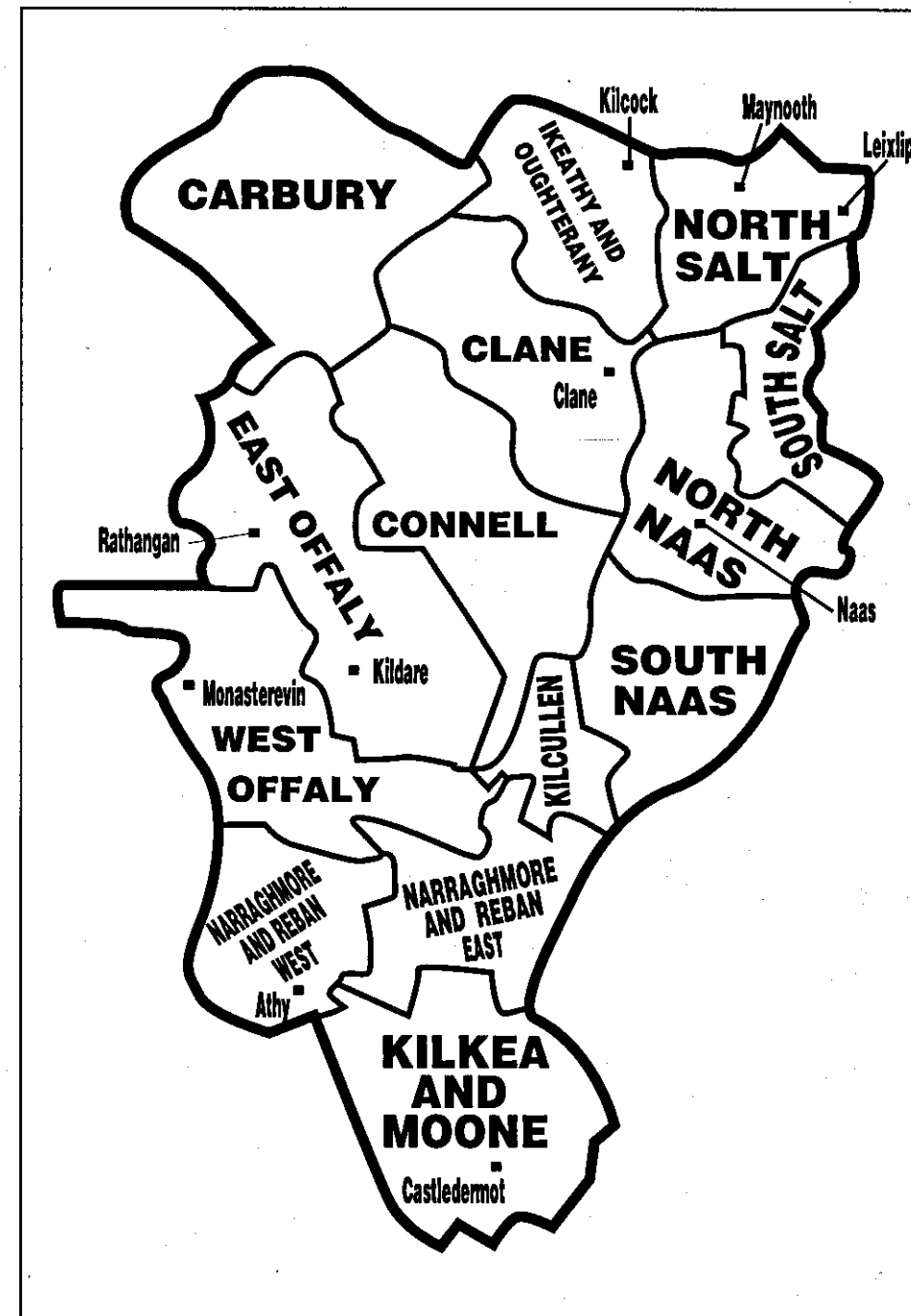
R.V. COMERFORD

This paper has two purposes, the first of which is to attempt to draw in very broad outline the impact of the great famine on County Kildare. As is the case for most of the country, the detailed research that would permit the painting of a comprehensive picture of this county during that traumatic and complicated period has yet to be completed. The commemoration of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the great famine will inevitably involve much re-circulation of stereotyped information, interpretation and assumptions. With 1995 scarcely begun a number of volumes of this type of material were already on their way to the bookshelves. It is to be hoped that the period of commemoration will also inspire some original research. A spectacular headline has been set by Dr. Donal Kerr, recently retired as Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Maynooth whose new work 'A nation of beggars?' appeared at the end of 1994. This outstanding study of high politics goes far to explain how it was that a minister such as Lord John Russell, who had worked during his career for justice for Ireland, was ineffectual at a time when resolute government action could have mitigated more effectively the disastrous human consequences of the potato failure and the concomitant collapse of so much of the rural economy.

The greatest potential for original research is at local level. That leads to the second purpose of this paper, which is to suggest to those interested in taking up research on the famine in County Kildare a small number of the avenues they might pursue.

*The history of the great Irish famine of 1847*<sup>2</sup> a standard work for generations, was written by Canon John O' Rourke, parish priest of Maynooth from 1869 until his death in 1887. Indeed, he was a student in Maynooth

## County Kildare: Baronies and principal Towns



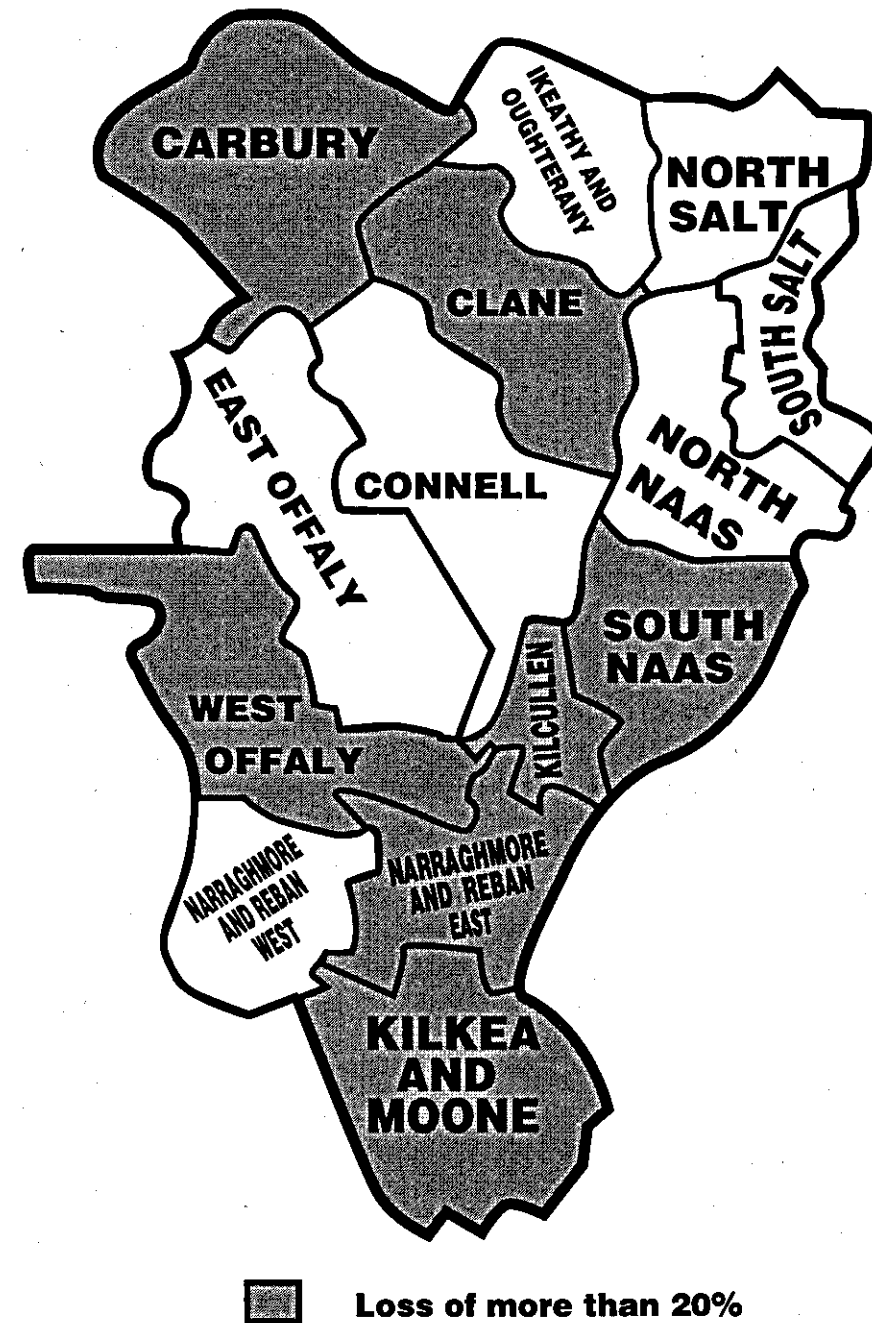
College throughout the famine years being ordained there in 1849. These local antecedents scarcely show in the text which provides nothing at all by way of introduction to the story of the famine in county Kildare. O' Rourke does report on the incidence of the famine in certain localities but these are mainly in the areas of notorious suffering in the West and South West, notably Skibbereen. Indeed a very curious feature of this book is that the author never adverts to anything of the famine that he may have witnessed himself at the time. So, when he comes to describe the effect of the blight on a crop of potatoes he draws not on anything he may have witnessed in 1845, 1846 or 1847 but on his experience while curate in Castledermot in 1850:

The fifteenth of July in that year - St Swithin's day - was a day of clouds and lightening, of thunder and terrific rain ... that the air was charged with electricity to a most unusual extent was felt by everybody. Those who had an intimate knowledge of the various potato blights from '45 said, "This is the beginning of the blight" So it was ... Next day, — a still, oppressive, sultry, electric sort of day - I, in company with some others, visited various potato fields. There was but one symptom that the blight had come; all the blossoms were closed, even at mid-day: this was enough to the experienced eye - the blight had come. Heat, noon-tide sun, nothing ever opened them again. In some days they began to fall off the stems; in eight or ten days other symptoms appeared and so began the potato blight of 1850, a mild one, but still the true blight. How like this fifteenth of July must have been the nineteenth of August, 1845 ...<sup>3</sup>

It might, of course, be surmised that O'Rourke said little or nothing about Kildare because there was little or nothing to say: that the county escaped lightly while less fortunate parts of the country suffered the brunt of the calamity. It is true that the eastern part of the country generally was less severely affected, but the distinction is a matter of degree and even for a county like Kildare the latter half of the 1840s was a period of quite considerable socioeconomic distress.

Population decline is one of the most easily comprehended indicators of famine-time distress. The government's census of 1851 shows a dramatic decrease of almost twenty per cent for the county as a whole since the previous census, that of 1841. If the current wisdom of historical demogra-

County Kildare: Baronies (hatched) with population loss exceeding twenty per cent, 1841-1851



phers is correct the population actually continued to expand between 1841 and the famine, so that the decline over the famine years may have been greater than twenty per cent. For present purposes the 1841 census is on balance a more suitable starting point than estimates, however ingeniously worked-out, for 1845 or 1846.

The overall national figure of approximately twenty per cent masks very substantial variations by region and county: Dublin city and county and Belfast actually increased their populations slightly while Roscommon recorded a loss of thirty-one per cent. The population of Kildare at 95,000 in 1851 had declined by just over sixteen per cent. This is a mere four percentage points below the national figure. For every six people in the county in 1841 there were just five in 1851: this represents very serious demographic upheaval.

If the extent of population decline in Kildare demands attention, what may be even more startling are the variations observable within the county. The barony, a county division little used or known, today, provides a useful unit for the viewing of nineteenth century statistics. Kildare's fourteen baronies

Population change by Baronies, 1841-51

Barony	Population			%Change
	1841	1851	Change	
Carbury	9,690	7,589	-2,101	-21.68
Clane	8,534	6,812	-1,722	-20.18
Connell	9,949	8,896	-1,053	-10.58
Ikeathy & Oughterany	6,162	5,239	-923	-14.98
Kilcullen	3,324	2,442	-882	-26.53
Kilkea & Moone	11,092	8,572	-2,520	-22.72
Naas, South	7,698	5,548	-2,150	-27.93
Narragh & Reban East	7,049	5,105	-1,944	-27.58
Carbury	9,690	7,589	-2,101	-21.68
Narragh & Reban West	9,035	8,354	-681	-7.54
Offaly East	10,584	8,899	-1,685	-15.92
Offaly West	11,213	8,930	-2,283	-20.36
Salt North	7,717	7,809	+92	+1.19
Salt South	4,252	3,602	-650	-15.29

SOURCE: Census of Ireland, 1851

had populations ranging in 1841 from 3,324 (Kilcullen) to 11,213 (West Offaly). Ten years later seven of these baronies had each undergone a population decline of more than twenty per cent (as high as twenty-eight per cent in the case of South Naas) while at the other extreme North Salt embracing the Maynooth estate of the duke of Leinster had an actual increase of just over one per cent.

Identifying all the factors that may explain the variations in population change during the famine is not a simple matter, but undoubtedly a major influence was the prevailing system of agriculture.<sup>4</sup> Looking at pre-famine Kildare and making ingenious use of cartographic evidence for the various estates of the duke of Leinster, Arnold Horner has identified in the north east of the county (that is, in North Salt) a trend away from tillage and in the south east the opposite trend.<sup>5</sup> Typically, tillage farming areas were densely populated with a high proportion of the people dependent on the potato, and it was those who suffered worst in the famine. Peter Connell has shown how the south-eastern portion of Co. Meath, especially the barony of Dunboyne adjoining North Salt, being predominantly pastoral experienced much less population depletion than those parts of Meath where tillage was intensively practiced.<sup>6</sup>

In general the population of provincial towns fared no better in the famine than that of the countryside, if only because many townspeople were directly dependent on agriculture. The five towns of Naas, Athy, Kildare, Maynooth and Castledermot suffered a combined loss of almost twenty-two per cent between 1841 and 1851. Indeed virtually the entire loss of population in the barony of Naas North is attributable to Naas town. Maynooth is a striking instance of the vulnerability of the urban population in the famine years. Construction of the Midland and Great Western railway to the town was completed in 1847; the college was enjoying unwonted prosperity as the proceeds of Peel's 1845 grant went into the construction of Pugin's Gothic Revival square; and the Duke of Leinster was spending on the labour-intensive refurbishment of his stock of medieval ruins. Despite such boosts to employment the recorded population of the town dropped by twenty per cent to 1,696 in the ten year period 1841 -1851.



## Change in Population of towns 1841-1851

	1841	1851	Decrease	%
Athy	4,698	3,873	825	-17.56
Naas	3,571	3,010	561	-15.71
Maynooth	2,129	1,696	433	-20.34
Kildare	1,629	1,275	354	-21.73
Castledermot	1,416	666	750	-52.97
Total	13,443	10,520	2,923	N.A.
Average				-21.74

SOURCE: Census of Ireland, 1851)

The registration of births and marriages was not put on a comprehensive footing in Ireland until the 1860's and accordingly church registers are of particular value for the study of demographic developments. Unfortunately in many Catholic parishes throughout the county the keeping of these records began relatively late. A few of these have fallen victim to fire, flood or carelessness. Most of those surviving for the nineteenth century have been microfilmed by the National Library of Ireland. In addition those for County Kildare have been transcribed and the contents arranged by surnames in the County Library. Complete sets of marriage records for the decade from 1841 to 1850 survive for seven Catholic parishes in county Kildare; owing to accidents of survival the selection is biased towards the north of the county. In parishes in some parts of Ireland the frequency of recorded marriages was seriously disrupted during the famine years, and in that light the figures for the seven Kildare parishes are interesting.

## Recorded Marriages in Seven Catholic Parishes, 1841-50

	Average				
	1841-45	1847	1848	1849	1850
Allen	29	19	17	23	19
Balyna	19	10	21	23	9
Clane	26	20	14	16	11
Naas	22	23	17	13	12
Kilcock	18	8	14	3	12
Kildare	37	27	28	28	25
Suncroft	13	10	4	5	12

SOURCE: Parochial Registers (on microfilm: National Library)

These figures show a constant trend towards reduced numbers of marriages in the later years of the decade with a few dramatic blips such as the three marriages (two in February and one in November) recorded for Kilcock in 1849. However, there is little sign here of the near total collapse of normal society that occurred in some of the more severely affected parts of the country.

Much of the burden of coping with the famine eventually fell on the poor law unions. These were units into which the country was divided initially under the terms of the poor relief act of 1838; each was named by the town on which it was centred and which was the location of a workhouse. Poor law unions were defined without very much reference to county boundaries. Between them the three unions based in Kildare (those of Celbridge Naas and Athy) cover most of the county although they also included portions of neighbouring counties. Celbridge union embraced a significant area of South-west county Dublin from Clonsilla to Saggart, and Rodanstown in Co. Meath; Naas included Blessington in Co. Wicklow, while Athy extended to a portion of Queen's County including Ballyadams and Stradbally. The following electoral divisions of county Kildare were in Edenderry union: Ardkill, Ballynadrimna, Cadamstown, Carbury, Cloncurry, Mylestown and Rathangan. Graney was attached to Baltinglass union, while a small area near Grangeford was assigned to Carlow union. Naas union and its workhouse are the subject of another chapter in this volume. Unfortunately, the records of Celbridge and Athy unions for the late 1840s have been lost. However, some information on all poor law unions has been preserved in the form of official publications.

At one time or another during 1847 over one third of the (1841) population of the county was in receipt of public relief. Government statistics show significant divergences between the three Kildare centred unions, with Athy at 34 per cent, Naas at 25 per cent and Celbridge at 16 per cent.<sup>7</sup> Although these figures need to be interpreted with some caution, they do support the impression of a rising gradation of misery from the north-east to the south-east of the county. Official returns published in 1848 indicate quite clearly that the financial situation of the Celbridge union was relatively easy while Athy union was in quite serious difficulties, with Naas somewhere between the two.<sup>8</sup>

The famine crisis led to the initiation of the agricultural census when in

summer 1847 the constabulary began to collect detailed information about crops and stock. This was subsequently repeated on an annual basis. The information for 1847 bears out the impression of a concentration of corn-growing in the south of the county.<sup>9</sup> Figures for subsequent years document Kildare's participation in the country-wide move away from tillage.

Estate records can sometimes provide the richest of sources for local history in nineteenth century Ireland. Its holdings of 67,000 acres make the Leinster estate incomparably the most important in county Kildare. Connolly's Castletown House may have been larger than the duke of Leinster's Carton House but the Connolly estates were elsewhere, mainly in Donegal. The property and influence of the duke was not concentrated solely on Maynooth and Carton: He also held extensive manors in Kildare and Rathangan in the middle of the county and at Athy, Woodstock, Kilkea, Castledermot and Graney in the south. The Leinster estates were exceptionally well mapped, and maps dominate the Leinster holdings in the National Library. The papers of the estate and its family have been scattered in various ways but the main deposit is located at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland in Belfast and available from there on microfilm.<sup>10</sup> Papers of one kind or another from other estates in the county are preserved in the National Library and other repositories. However, it has to be said that, apart from the Leinster estates, county Kildare does not appear to have been particularly lucky in the matter of survival of estate papers, especially for the famine period. This should be seen by local historians as a challenge not only to make the most of what is available but also to go in search of more by investigating the final stages and dissolution of smaller estates especially, with an eye to tracking down any surviving documentation, be it in attics, solicitors' offices or elsewhere.

The Incumbrance Estates Court was established by an act of parliament of 1849 to facilitate the sale of property by land owners, many of whom were driven to insolvency in the late 1840s by the general economic upheaval of the times but more especially by the inability of tenants to pay rents and by the burden of rates required to pay for the poor law system during the famine years. A steady stream of sales of Kildare properties is recorded for the early 1850's.<sup>11</sup> Several lots of the Graydon estate in Kilcock changed hands at this time. The vendors were mainly small proprietors and the purchasers were mainly of the same class, often with names long-established locally, such as O'Ferrall, Aylmer and Eustace. There is no sign of an influx

of new investors in Kildare land in the aftermath of the famine and the scale of estate court sales is small by comparison with many other counties. Nevertheless, the records of the estates court are well worth investigation by local historians.

If the record of the estates court support the impression of stability in Kildare, some sense of the distress of the famine period can be caught from other records in the National Archives, such as the Outrage Papers from Dublin Castle. These provide evidence from 1846 and 1847 of the threat of raids on boats with food supplies on the stretch of the Grand Canal between Robertstown and Rathangan. "Distress exists at present in this neighbourhood to so great an extent that I have reason to fear there is danger of the provision boats being attacked and plundered on their passage through a very distressed and populous district". So Dublin Castle was informed in September 1846.<sup>12</sup> In November 1846 a contingent of twenty-three constabulary was assembled to protect a fleet of provision boats making its way to Dublin. For 1847 there are several reports of attacks on boats. On the night of 19 January a food boat on its way from Limerick to Dublin was attacked by a large body of men in the bog of Allen and robbed of 'several packages of tobacco, eggs and whiskey'.<sup>13</sup> In December boats en route from Dublin were attacked and plundered 'by a mob' at Derrymullen near Robertstown.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the most striking file among the Outrage Papers for the county during the famine years is that concerning the death in Kildare town on 2 July 1847 of a Limerick man, John Evans, who, in the words of a police report of 4 July 'had been wandering about this town for the last few days'.<sup>15</sup> On 30 June he had obtained lodgings in a 'miserable house' where the family were 'lying in fever'. Next day he was put out of the house 'in a weak state and unable to move'. In this state he lay on 'the side of the lane during that day and night and on the following morning [2 July] he died'. An inquest was held and the jury's verdict was that death was due to 'a Visitation of God hurried on, as we think, by the total neglect of the Relief Committee, the chairman having, been informed of the deceased being exposed and lying sick in the town or street of Kildare on Thursday, 1st July 1847'.<sup>16</sup> The case was taken up in Dublin Castle with letters of enquiry being sent in the name of the under secretary to the chairman of the Relief Committee, the inspection of Naas poor law union, and others. In reply the chairman of the Relief Committee insisted that he had learned about the case only by acci-

dent and only at six 'o clock on the evening of 1st July. The inspector defended the adequacy of the arrangements in place for fever patients from the union in Kilcullen Hospital and expressed regret at the death of this man in the streets.

The Evans case provides much material for reflection on issues, both national and local. That Dublin Castle should investigate a single death by fever in a year while countless thousands died of the same affliction might be described as poignant: there was reassuring commitment to procedures intended to uphold the residual dignity of the individuals alongside the alarming incapacity to cope with mass disaster. And what of the local community? Those of its respected members on the coroner's jury blamed the official of the relief committee, a local body established by statute to implement remedies for distress. But we have no other voice to explain why people passed by on the other side. If humanitarian (not to mention Christian) instincts were overridden by the fear of touching a diseased stranger and by the thought that rates and taxes were being paid to support a system for dealing clinically with the fevered destitute, that leaves us a century and a half later in no position to cast stones. Trying to understand why John Evans lay dying on the public street for a day and a night where at other times acts of charity were legion is the kind of problem that study of the famine poses. Blaming people is easy and frequently erroneous; the challenge is to understand what people do (or fail to do) and why.

Anyone proposing to undertake local research on the famine needs to obtain first an overview of developments in the country generally from 1845 to the early 1850's. Developments that need to be comprehended range from the first onset of potato blight in the autumn of 1845 through to the spate of evictions six and seven years later and including at least the following: Sir Robert Peel's relief measure in 1845-46; the promotion of large scale public works, to provide employment in 1846; the abandonment of public works in 1847 in favour of outdoor relief provided by the Relief Commissioners; the relief work of the Quakers and other private agencies; the transfer of the burden to the Poor Law system later in 1847 in the context of the "Gregory" clause; the crisis of the Poor Law system, the ravages of famine disease and cholera; the flood of emigration. The most satisfactory preliminary introduction to all of this is probably Mary E Daly's *The Famine in Ireland*.<sup>17</sup>

The beginner in local famine research will obviously wish to consult already published work of the same kind. Good examples are still unfortunately scarce, a situation that one hopes will have changed in a few years. Sean Kierse's study of Killaloe Parish might serve as a good model for any local study.<sup>18</sup> It draws on a wide range of sources and presents a coherent, unadorned account that looks at the pre-famine period, the famine years and the effects of the upheaval, all in sixty-six pages. A further twenty pages carry useful appendices and a list of the sources used.

The safest route into the local history of the famine is probably through the study of townlands. Reliable population figures and other data are available by townland from 1841. Griffith's Valuation, readily accessible in research libraries, provides a comprehensive picture of the landholding situation in each townland within a few years of the famine. Less comprehensive but nonetheless invaluable information on the pre-famine scene can be gleaned from the tithe applotment books. Photocopies of those for Kildare have been acquired and bound by the County Library. Having assembled and assessed material on a series of townlands from the census, Griffith's Valuation and the applotment books one has a basis from which to move to other sources such as those already mentioned in this paper.

The Outrage Papers already mentioned constitute but a tiny proportion of the material of local relevance available for any of those years among the records of Dublin Castle now found in the National Archives. The bulk of this is referred to as 'C.S.O.,R.P.' (Chief Secretary's Office, Registered Papers) Finding material of reference to a particular locality can be very time-consuming but rewards can be outstanding. Material from 1846 and 1847 specifically concerned with appeals for relief of distress form a separate section, the Distress Papers.

Kildare's local historians are at a disadvantage insofar as newspapers for the nineteenth century are concerned. With no great county newspaper to draw on the journals of neighbouring counties have to be looked at in the hope of finding relevant nuggets. And of course Dublin newspapers and especially the *Freeman's Journal* merit thorough investigation.

There is much about the famine that does not make sense except by reference to earlier and later developments, and it is therefore very appropriate that this volume has articles looking at previous and subsequent aspects of

distress in Count Kildare. In truth, the famine cannot be understood properly as a single phenomenon but as a complicated congeries of more or less closely connected events in many realms including those of nature, society, the economy and politics. Much generalisation may suit the perspectives of pundits, propagandists, and even social scientists and econometricians, but it is the function of the historian (and especially the local historian) to uphold the fundamental humanistic insight that the Great Famine, like the Great War, the Great Fire of London or the Great Depression, is ultimately to be understood in terms of the infinitely varied experiences of different communities, families and individuals.

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# NAAS WORKHOUSE

## DURING

## THE FAMINE

KAREL KIELY

The primary source of information on the Naas workhouse during the famine period are the minute books of the Naas board of guardians. These are a rich source of information on every aspect of the Naas Union including the population of the workhouse, rate collection, the correspondence between guardians and third parties such as the Poor Law Commissioners, and administrative details such as appointments of staff and details of contracts with suppliers etc. This information was recorded weekly. Population statistics, and later on outdoor relief details, were recorded in standard forms by the clerk of the Union. Following the weekly meeting of the board of guardians where reports were made on union business, with the clerk also recording this information, the minutes were signed by the chairman of the board. Thus the information available can be considered to be extremely accurate and, as such, a very valuable and reliable source. One of the limitations of the minutes is that the information is chiefly administrative; other than basic population statistics there are no details given about the paupers such as place of origin, religion, names, length of stay in the workhouse etc., and only in exceptional circumstances do their names and details appear in the minutes. It is therefore difficult to write the history of the people who were at the centre of the poor law system, meaning that a history of the institution has been recorded rather than a history of the participants in that institution.

Karel Kiely

Naas Workhouse during The Famine

*The introduction of the Poor Law into Ireland:* While England had been operating a poor law system dating from the beginning of the Reformation it was not considered to introduce such a system to Ireland until the amendment to the English poor law of 1834 which had as its basis the workhouse system. There were disparate views expressed on the introduction of the poor law to Ireland. In the opinion of J.C. Curwen, a retired M.P., the author of a series of letters entitled "Observations on the State of Ireland" (published 1813) its existence in England had led to increased miseries, where the amount of the Poor Rate had doubled in thirty years, "while the sufferings of the labouring classes .... are increased in a still greater proportion."<sup>1</sup> The bishop of Ossory, Dr. Kinsella, was completely in favour of a poor law as he believed that it would halt the conversion of much of the land into grassland, one factor that had been responsible for unemployment and the lack of sufficient land for subsistence. Kinsella felt that "If there were tax on estates .... the owners of these grasslands would find that they gained little by disposing of the land in this way."<sup>2</sup>

The Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Conditions of the Poorer Classes in Ireland was set up in September 1833, with Richard Whately, the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin as its chairman. It subsequently became known as the Whately Commission. Its brief was "to inquire into the condition of the poorer classes of our subjects in Ireland, and into various institutions at present established by law for their relief; and also, whether any and what further remedial measures appear to be requisite to ameliorate the conditions of the Irish poor."<sup>3</sup> The work of the commission took three years to complete and their findings were presented in three reports. As well as attempting to analyse the causes of poverty and assessing the levels of destitution amongst the population, they reported on the charitable institutions already in existence in some of the principal towns of Ireland.

The detailed examinations carried out by the Commissioners are valuable in their portrayal of poverty in individual local parishes, including, for example, those of Naas and Osberstown in Co. Kildare. This particular examination was carried out by Captain White and T. N. Vaughan, Esq., and attended by a wide selection of people, including John Clarke Esq., a sub-inspector of police; Rev. George Parker a curate of Naas, James Flanagan, a labourer, and so on. The following extract gives a vivid account

of the extent of vagrancy in the area and the habits of both the vagrants and the local shopkeepers on whose charity they were dependent: *"The number of vagrants in this parish amounts to about 250 and all the witnesses say that they have increased within recollection even to the amount of 100 per cent". Mr. Hardy says "within the last three years the sum I give away weekly at my door has increased from Is. 6d. to 2s. 6d., and I only give in like proportion as formerly to each". He further states, "that the beggars assemble at the shop doors of the town every Saturday morning amounting in numbers to above 100, of all ages; these are residents, and they receive a half-penny each from about nine or ten shop keepers, who prefer a regular weekly allowance to being annoyed daily".*<sup>4</sup>

At the core of the Commission's eventual recommendations was a rejection of the proposal for introducing the English workhouse system to Ireland. The extensive research they had undertaken in Ireland had amply illustrated to them the extent of poverty, the backward economy and the lack of employment. The commissioners felt that what was required in Ireland was economic development which could be best achieved by improving agricultural standards on existing farms, bringing waste land into production (as had been advocated for many years), by state loans, by undertaking public works such as road building, and by assisting people to emigrate. They believed that the workhouse system as it existed in England would not be practicable in an Irish context. In their second report they stated that they estimated the numbers out of work and in need for at least 30 weeks of the year at not less than 585,000, and when the number of dependents are taken into consideration, the total number estimated to be in distress was 2,385,000. In these circumstances a workhouse system would be unsuitable, and would be incapable of coping with such numbers. However, the recommendations of the commissioners, which suggested large scale government intervention, were at variance with the prevailing laissez-faire social policies of the day which declined involvement in attempting to solve the causes of unemployment or in the prevention of poverty. Rather it felt that the workhouse system would in some way deter pauperism. British M.P.s were in accord in wanting to introduce a poor law to Ireland; they sympathised with the plight of the Irish poor, but did not feel that they should have to pay for their relief.

Some of the Irish clergy, such as Dr. James Doyle, Bishop of Kildare and

Leighlin, were in favour of a poor law being introduced. They were dealing with the destitution of their parishioners at first hand, and believed that the poor law would at least provide a safety valve, ensuring that people would not die from lack of food. Landowners did not want to pay for it, while politicians like Daniel O'Connell feared the effects that incarceration in workhouses would have on social structures, "a poor law would debase the morals and deteriorate the condition of the Irish and widen the breach between the upper and lower classes."<sup>5</sup> The government, under Lord John Russell, was unwilling to consider a new approach to the problem of poverty and decided to move ahead with plans to introduce the English poor law system to Ireland sending one of the English Poor Law Commissioners, George Nicholls, to carry out a further inquiry in Ireland. Nicholls, a former workhouse master and known advocate of the workhouse system, the governing principle of which was that support at the public expense in a workhouse should always be less desirable to the destitute than the support to be obtained by independent employment, completed his first report in November 1836. It is unsurprising, in view of his work with the English poor law, that he recommended the workhouse system for Ireland. He felt that the workhouse system would work in Ireland because 'rather than bear the discipline and restrictions of a workhouse', the Irish would seek out any type of work. In his opinion one could be assured that resorting to the workhouse would be the final option for the destitute in Ireland. Nicholls therefore advocated that relief would be restricted only to the workhouse, and that, as was the case in England, destitution alone would qualify as grounds for relief.

Nicholls also considered the expense of providing the workhouses, the means of creating local machinery for the administration of unions in Ireland, and estimated the annual charge of such a system of relief. Basing his projections on the cost of the workhouses built in England, he estimated that approximately 100 workhouses would be needed at a cost, on average, of £7,000. The money would come from a government advance, "a loan requiring an installment of 5 per cent of the principal to be paid off annually out of the rates," for example.<sup>6</sup> He estimated the population of Ireland at circa 8 million and reckoned that workhouse accommodation would occasionally be required for a maximum of one per cent of this population, i.e. 80,000 persons, a small number of the destitute of Ireland; about 800 persons would have to be accommodated in each workhouse.

Nicholls calculated that the average cost of supporting an inmate of a workhouse would be 1s. per week per person:<sup>7</sup> the average weekly cost of the establishment, including salaries, clothing, bedding and so on, would be 6d. per head, making a total of 1s. 6d. per person per week.

"An Act for the more Effectual Relief of the Destitute Poor in Ireland", 1838, extended the English poor law system to Ireland, vindicating the stance of George Nicholls and rejecting the recommendations of the commission. It provided for the division of the country into unions with a workhouse in each: the election of a Board of Guardians to administer each union, and the levying of a rate to finance the Poor Law system. George Nicholls was appointed to implement the Poor Act in Ireland along with four assistants, one each in Belfast, Limerick, Cork and Dublin. Ireland was not to have an independent Poor Law Commission; the English Commission, based in London, would administer the poor law in Ireland. On September 11th, 1838, four assistant commissioners, none of whom had previous experience in any capacity in Ireland, assembled in Dublin. In his instructions to them Nicholls considered how they should best proceed; he concluded that it would be desirable that the commissioners should follow the procedures used in the formation of the unions in England, i.e. that the union should consist of the market town and the district surrounding and dependent on it.<sup>8</sup> The commissioners were furnished with a map on which "a series of circles of this radius has been described around 97 market towns." The union was to encompass about 10 statute miles and county or baronial boundaries were not necessarily adhered to if "a sufficient cause exists for departing from them."<sup>9</sup> Nicholls also stressed the importance of the workhouse; it would be the keystone of the entire undertaking, and everything would depend on the efficiency of the workhouse within each union. He urged that at the earliest possible opportunity steps to provide a competent building in size and arrangement should be taken.

The specifications for the building of the workhouses were extensive. While the commissioners sought to commence construction immediately so that accommodation for paupers was provided as soon as possible, they also wanted to ensure that provision be made for possibly enlarging the buildings in the future. They decided that no land needed to be attached to the workhouse and that the inmates should "be confined within the limits of the buildings."<sup>10</sup> The 35th section of the Act had limited the amount of

land to be occupied with any workhouse to 12 acres. The architect appointed to superintend the erection of workhouses in Ireland was George Wilkinson of Oxford. He arrived in Ireland in January 1839 on a salary of £500 per annum. His task was to devise "a series of plans of different capacities, capable of holding from 300 to 1,000 inmates .... together with the descriptive specifications and estimates for each."<sup>11</sup> Once a union had been declared an advertisement for land was put in the local papers, and then Wilkinson was obliged to inspect all sites offered for workhouses. The style of the buildings had been decided by the commissioners, and was "intended to be of the cheapest description, compatible with durability; and effect is aimed at by harmony of proportion and simplicity of arrangement, all mere decorations being studiously excluded." They varied only in the numbers to be accommodated in them. The establishment of the workhouse system proceeded at a remarkable pace; by March 1839, the Sixth Annual Report states that 22 unions had been declared and a year later 64 workhouses were under construction with another 10 ready to commence. On 12 February 1839 Naas union was declared.

*The establishment of the Naas Poor Law Union:* The prominent market town of Naas was chosen as the site for the workhouse of the Naas Union. In 1831 the population of the town of Naas was 3,808, while the parish of Naas had a population of 1,083, giving a total of 4,891.<sup>12</sup> In the previous census of 1821 the figures were 3,073 and 620 respectively. In common with the rest of the country the population of the area had been increasing though its difficult to ascertain the size of the population of Naas in the early part of the nineteenth century as the towns of County Kildare were not included in contemporary population studies; even T.J. Rawson's statistical survey of Co. Kildare in 1807 contained no population statistics.

Before the advent of the poor law and the formation of the Naas Union, the poor of the town of Naas were cared for out of the charity of the residents and the churchgoers of the town, as well as out of the grand jury cess, a rate levied by the grand juries as a tax on land or buildings in order to pay for the maintenance of roads and public buildings such as courthouses, and fever hospitals. The vestry books of the Church of Ireland parish of St. David's, with a church located in the centre of Naas town, give some indication of poverty in the area, details of relief and in what form it was given. These books, which date from 1813, include poor fund account books for

the poor and sick, the labouring poor, Thomas' Charity account book and Burgh's Charity Fund account book. The relief was usually distributed by the Church Warden or the Rector, and they kept detailed itemised accounts of all money or goods distributed, as well as all the contributions received for the various funds. The most frequent recipients of relief were widows, who got 2 to 4 shillings a month.

The Thomas' Charity account was run on £20 per annum left to the parish for the express purpose of aiding the poor of the parish. Throughout the 1830s it was used to buy blankets, clothing, fuel and coffins, as well as to pay rent. Money from the various accounts was also distributed to the sick, paid to the Fever hospital and given to the cholera fund. While a number of those receiving assistance were Protestant, some are listed as Catholic, but in most cases the religion of the recipients is not specified. This was similar to many of the Dublin parishes where multi-denominational lists were kept and paid out of weekly collections, charity sermons and bequests, such as the Thomas' Charity account book mentioned previously.<sup>13</sup> These lists are confined to the town of Naas and give no indication of the incidence of poverty in outlying rural areas. The vestry cess was phased out by the mid 1830s as fewer people were paying it. A note written in the Poor Fund and Thomas' Charity account book in August 1841 stated that the workhouse now being open the usual weekly allowance to the poor from the church would cease and no relief would be given except in cases inadmissible to the workhouse, or to those who needed only a little extra added to their own means of support to keep them out of the workhouse.

A site was selected for the Naas Union workhouse south-east of the town of Naas, adjacent to the Fever hospital on land rented from John Hickey of Craddockstown, Naas, an elected member of the board of guardians for the electoral division of Naas. The site covered five acres, one rood and fourteen perches. The building of the workhouse commenced on 11 July 1839.<sup>14</sup> The only other references thereafter about the progress of the building work were to a problem with the mortar used in its construction at a meeting on 23 September 1839,<sup>15</sup> while in December of the same year the architect, Mr. Wilkinson, suspended the work until the contractor complied with the terms set out for the work and materials by him.<sup>16</sup>

The first priority of the board of guardians was to acquire capital to build

the workhouse. This was to be raised by evaluating land and dwellings throughout the county and imposing a rate on the owners. Rateable property under the Poor Law Act included land, buildings, mines opened seven years, commons and right of commons, all profits from rights of fishing, canals, rights of way, rents from turf banks and so on. Mr Edward Vaughan's proposal to value the rateable of the union at the rate of two pounds, two shillings and six pence for every one thousand statute acres, including every description of rateable property in the Union was accepted at an extraordinary meeting of the Board on 3 September 1839. He was supplied with two copies of the maps of the Ordnance Survey of the land within the Union and given nine calendar months to complete the valuation. In June 1840 the Board conferred with Mr. Vaughan on the progress of the valuation and decided to divide the Union into the following four districts for the purpose of conferring with the valuers in the future.<sup>17</sup> The master and matron, Samuel Atkinson and Susan Quinn, were elected at a meeting of the board on 3 February 1841<sup>18</sup> on annual salaries of £50 and £25 respectively, exclusive of accommodation, fuel, candles and food. The master and porter were put in charge of the workhouse at the end of May and it opened its doors to receive paupers on 4 August 1841, admitting 5 men, 1 woman and 1 child.<sup>19</sup> By the following week 71 more paupers were accommodated in the workhouse, a total of 78 in all. The numbers in the house continued to rise steadily from then on. The administration of the poor law ran relatively smoothly in its infant years in Naas but the system's severe limitations were soon highlighted by the greatest disaster Ireland was to suffer in the 19th century - the Great Famine.

*The administration of Naas Union from December 1845 to September 1847:* Ireland was accustomed to famine, of which there had been localised occurrences throughout the early 1800s including 1821-22 and 1836. In 1845 the first incidence of potato disease occurred in some of the south eastern counties. In 1846, following a wet spring and summer, universal failure of the potato crop occurred, and thus began a series of potato crop failures that brought famine to Ireland for the rest of the decade. The workhouse system had not been designed to cope with the large numbers of people now seeking relief. Sir George Nicholls had calculated that the workhouses of Ireland needed to hold only 80,000 people, when in fact much larger numbers were destitute in the country. The famine exacerbated the problems of poverty and homelessness which the workhouses had been set



up to tackle, and made the work of the guardians laborious and troublesome as they tried to cope with a rapidly worsening situation in the latter half of the 1840's.

The Naas Union Minute book for the period 5 April 1845 to 5 December 1845 is badly damaged and cannot be used for research purposes. Therefore it cannot be ascertained how the Naas workhouse and its inmates fared throughout that year. The Royal Commission appointed "to inquire into the law and practice with regard to the occupation of land in Ireland", known as the Devon Commission, delivered its report in February 1845, a few months before the famine began. This is a useful document for examining the poverty and conditions of the people in Co. Kildare at this period, and in view of the evidence contained within it, it is unsurprising that Co. Kildare, and specifically the area administered by the Naas Union, suffered greatly during the famine years. Conditions in the county were serious pre-1845, but the famine made them impossible. A number of landowners, tenant farmers and clergymen gave evidence related to farm size, rents, and tenancy arrangements in County Kildare. Mr Owen Conlon, a farmer with 186 acres at Pollardstown, Curragh, questioned about consolidation of farms in his district, answered that tenants had been evicted and amalgamation of holdings had taken place. He found the standard of living of labourers very poor, with a large amount of unemployment.<sup>20</sup> Mr Patrick Dunne farming 360 acres at Kilkea, County Kildare, mentioned that the previous five or six years had been very bad for farmers, especially those with smaller farms, "not a poorer set of men anywhere than the small tillage farmers."<sup>21</sup> Richard Grattan Esq. M.D. spoke extensively on the problem of poverty in his evidence, and suggested ways by which it might be alleviated. His evidence also highlighted the importance of the potato in County Kildare. If rent could not be paid the potato crop was detained until it could be, but "the potatoes are of such value to the poor that they will make any sacrifice rather than let their potatoes be seized for rent."<sup>22</sup> The rector of Athy, Rev. John Bagot, was also interviewed, and he stressed that casual labourers could not get employment, and that hundreds of people were idle off season.<sup>23</sup>

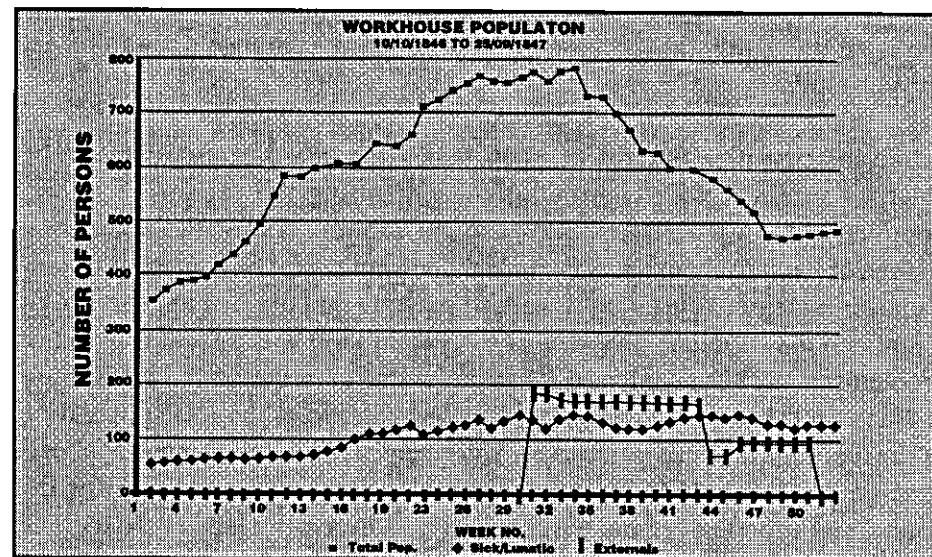
The first Naas Union Minute book of the famine years commences at the end of 1845 (Minute Book No. 4). A study of the minutes reveals that a primary concern of both the Poor Law Commissioners and the board of

guardians in late December 1845 and early January 1846 was the physical state of the workhouse. The minutes of 31 December 1845 recorded a notice from the Commissioners calling the attention of the board to the need for executing repairs to the workhouse.<sup>24</sup> By the end of January the Master had inspected the workhouse and delivered his report on the condition of the house which needed extensive repair work, mainly to floors, windows and woodwork. As the workhouse had only been completed in 1841 the fact that the cheapest materials had been used in its construction was becoming evident. It would also suggest that there were problems with damp in the workhouse due to this rotting of its wooden structures in only a few years. There were also plans underway at this stage to build on to the existing workhouse; in late January 1846 a payment was made to a Mr. Waldron of £100 for the building of a Fever Ward;<sup>25</sup> though the decision to extend the building was probably taken sometime in 1845. It was also decided that additional accommodation was needed for women and children within the workhouse. This grouping comprised the majority of the workhouse population from its earliest days and throughout the period under examination. The best method proposed by the architect of providing this accommodation was to raise a second storey over the dining hall. The plans received from Mr. Wilkinson, the architect, for a convalescent ward and a nursery room over the dining hall were adopted, with a number of alterations suggested by the Board. The architect himself attended a meeting of the Board in August to further discuss this building work,<sup>26</sup> and on that occasion it was agreed to raise the male and female idiot wards one storey in order that they would blend with the appearance of the present house hospital.

While the first nine months of 1846 reveal the board of guardians to be chiefly concerned with overseeing and organising the expansion of and improvements to the Naas workhouse, an examination of the population figures of the workhouse for the period does not reveal any unusual fluctuations or increases. This would seem to indicate that the first appearance of blight and the subsequent failure of the potato crop was not causing major problems in the Naas Union, nor putting undue pressure on the workhouse at Naas. In the period covered by Minute book No. 4 the total population of the workhouse is 405 persons on 13 December 1845, peaking at 508 persons on 21 March 1846, comfortably within the limit set of 550 for the house, and dropping gradually down to 338 by early October 1846. The

failure of the potato crop is not addressed in the minutes until September 1846 when a communication from the Poor Law Commissioners thanks the Board for their replies to queries relating to the potato crop. Some weeks later the guardians received a letter from one of their Union rate collectors, William Oldfield, stating that due to the failure of the potato crop, and also due to the fact that he has to collect in the largest and poorest district in the Naas Union (Ballymore Eustace), he will be unable to undertake the collection of the present rate.<sup>27</sup> This area of the Union was situated on the borders of counties Kildare and Wicklow, a mountainous terrain, which had felt the effects of the potato crop failure earlier than other districts in the Naas Union. From late 1846 the workhouse population had begun to rise rapidly; it more than doubled in six months, from 355 persons on 10 October 1846 to 762 persons in April. The workhouse was calculated to contain only 550 inmates and this increasing population was putting a serious strain on existing facilities. The minutes of 16 December 1846 recorded that the guardians were having problems accommodating the numbers of paupers applying to enter the house and the Poor Law Commissioners had written to them questioning the numbers, 65 persons, admitted in the previous week, and calling attention to "the propriety of being guided by the Medical Officer how many may be received without endangering the health of the inmates."<sup>28</sup>

The guardians defended their high admission rates stating that "they were



induced even at some risk to admit so many persons now than the House was calculated to contain,"<sup>29</sup> in view of the severity of the weather and the extreme destitution, and that they must extend relief to the farthest limits the Medical Officer would permit. With 584 persons already in the house at this stage it was decided to admit a further 24, and then proposed that until some arrangement could be made to provide further accommodation, no more paupers were to be admitted. The following week the Poor Law Commissioners sanctioned arrangements for providing additional accommodation in the workhouse and a decision was taken to employ a carpenter to erect temporary platforms in the stables for beds until building work could be completed.<sup>30</sup> While it has not been possible to ascertain where these paupers originated, local folklore in the Naas area holds that there was a large influx from Co. Wicklow, part of which comprised the poorest area of the Naas Union.

The number of inmates in the Naas workhouse continued to rise steadily each week while work progressed on preparing the stables for human habitation. In January 1847 the Poor Law Commissioners proposed several means by which increased accommodation might be created, including the erection of additional buildings, for which they intended to make plans available. However, by the end of the month, with the workhouse very overcrowded, and with more and more people making applications for admittance, an emergency decision was taken to find temporary accommodation for fifty persons.<sup>31</sup> The suggestion of the Commissioners that extra buildings be erected was considered by the guardians, but they decided not to proceed with any arrangements for building on to the house for the present.<sup>32</sup> They did not seem to think it was necessary to do so, perhaps because they thought they were dealing with an isolated disaster and that such an undertaking was unnecessary. A house was rented in Naas town for six months from Thomas Burgh Esq. for the sum of £10 sterling, with a capacity for thirty or forty beds,<sup>33</sup> and a committee was formed to oversee the removal of female children to it. The fact that the house was hired for only six months, until harvest time, supports the view that the guardians considered their current difficulties to be both unique and short term. In common with the government who had provided soup kitchens until the harvest season of 1847 they did not consider the possibility of another crop failure in 1847.

Conditions in the workhouse continued to worsen. Mr. Ball, assistant commissioner, inspected the workhouse in March and reported negatively on the state in which he found it to the Poor Law Commissioners.

The Medical Officer reported to the board that both the fever hospital and the infirmary were very overcrowded, and warned that it might become necessary, if disease became more widespread, to find further accommodation for the sick.<sup>34</sup> He sought to have the order for buttermilk discontinued, and the order for new milk increased. The milk supply ordered from the contractor was no longer adequate because of the increase in the number of inmates, and it was decided to supplement the deficiency in milk with soup on Tuesdays in addition to other times. The Poor Law Commissioners sent the guardians an extract from the "Gardener's Chronicle" on how to make bread from flour with beet and parsnips etc.<sup>35</sup> Three tons of Indian meal were bought to be used in the house in equal quantities with oatmeal, and cocoa was to be used instead of milk for dinner, four days in each week.

In late May 1847 a decision was made to give the paupers only two meals each day, commencing on 1 June, one of oatmeal and rice, the other of Indian meal and oatmeal. The orders for coffins, in two sizes,<sup>36</sup> and the increase in the salary of the R.C. Chaplain due to the "onerous duties on account of the illness in the house,"<sup>37</sup> amply illustrate the conditions prevailing inside the workhouse. The staff of the workhouse were also suffering the effects of famine and disease. The minutes of 11 August 1847 record the death of the Master of the Workhouse, James Butler, which had taken place on the previous night. He had died of typhus fever. A new Master, Patrick Grannan, the former schoolmaster of the house was appointed within a month. In September the Medical Officer made an application to the board for a weeks leave of absence for reasons of ill health which was granted. The threat of fever was always present, more so when there was a scarcity of food, and in 1847 its incidence was becoming more and more common. There were four main types; typhus (Black fever), relapsing fever (Yellow fever), dysentery (Famine dropsy), and scurvy (Black leg), of which typhus and Yellow fever were the most prevalent. The rapid increase in the occurrences of fever led to the re-introduction of the Central Board of Health, which had ceased to provide a medical service in late 1846 as there had not been a widespread occurrence of fever after the potato crop failed in 1845. The Irish Fever Act, introduced in April

1847, established temporary fever hospitals throughout the country.

On 24 April 1847 the total population of the workhouse was 777 persons, with 50 accommodated in the stables, 100 in the house rented in town and 40 in the fever hospital. The vast majority of this number was comprised of females aged 15 and upwards, boys and girls under 15 and children under 2 years. This division was to continue for two months but by the end of June there were 600 in the workhouse and 180 outside. The numbers had dropped again by the end of July to 597 persons. It was no longer necessary to continue renting the house from Mr. Burgh as there was enough room in the workhouse proper,<sup>38</sup> due to seasonal factors such as the availability of employment in harvest time and better weather conditions. The beginning of August saw the completion of the new buildings which could accommodate 60 persons. The workhouse was now calculated to contain a maximum of 650.

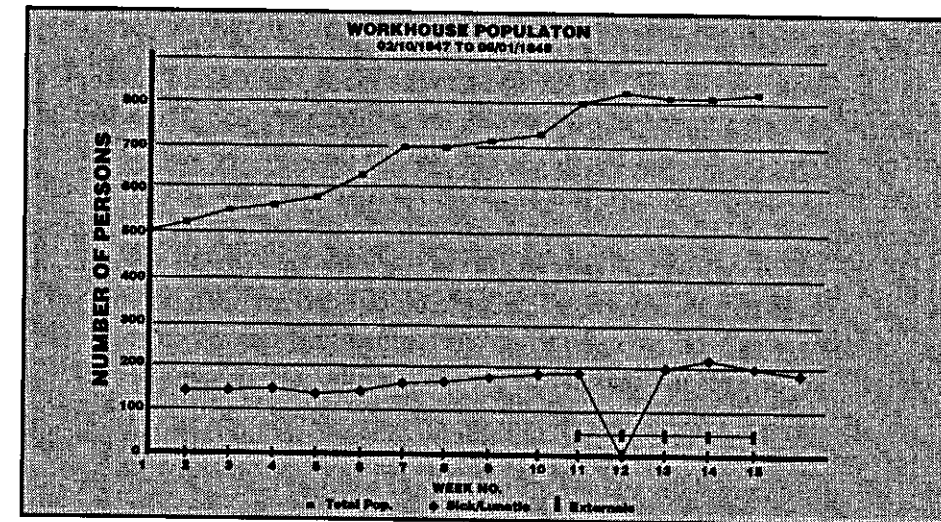
In late June 1847 the Poor Law Commissioners sent copies of the Irish Poor Relief Extension Act (8 June, 1847) to the guardians, drawing attention to the 12th section which was to be observed in all cases of persons receiving relief from the Poor Rates, where the person receiving relief would have to show that he had resided in the electoral division in which he was seeking relief for thirty calendar months in the previous three years. The act extended the provision of relief of the destitute poor, if needed, to outside the workhouse, and regulated and limited the provision of such relief e.g. the 13th section, the so called Gregory clause, stated that "no person who shall be in the Occupation of any Land of greater extent than the Quarter of a Statute Acre shall be deemed and taken to be a destitute person". This clause confronted the destitute with a hard choice; they could either quit their holding permanently and then apply for relief, or remain on their holdings and starve to death. The act also established a separate Poor Law Commission for Ireland and re-drew the boundaries of some unions.

Throughout the rest of the summer the guardians were concerned with organising the rates for the Union; they had informed the Poor Law Commissioners that they could not collect rates until the harvest became available but were informed that they would not be justified in any further delay in making the rate. The Commissioners were anxious to establish the rate for the workhouse and also for the purposes of outdoor relief, in order

to avoid any delay in carrying out the provisions of the Temporary Relief Act. The Union was divided into eight Relieving Officers' districts, with officers to receive salaries of between £40 and £50 per annum. The Poor Law Commissioners informed the Board in early August that no money would be advanced to the Union after 15 August 1847, news which caused much consternation amongst members of the Board. They asked for the decision to be reconsidered and pointed out that the rate struck on 4 August for the general relief of the whole Union could not be collected under the Poor Law Act for two months after the date for striking such a rate and that the Union would be without any means of relieving the large numbers of destitute paupers in the area as the Union "is at present in debt for necessities advanced for maintaining the paupers in the house to the amount of £1,600."<sup>39</sup> The rate which had been struck was £13,554, but it was not possible to collect this until October 4th. The guardians wrote to the Commissioners stressing the absolute necessity of continuing with the usual fortnightly advances made on the security of future rates due. Otherwise they would not be able to carry out their duty in providing relief to "those poor people who are totally destitute and depending entirely upon the daily portion of meal which they have hitherto secured." The Relief Commissioners wrote to the guardians on 14 August 1847 stating that they were obliged to discontinue the temporary relief measures in the Naas Union.

*The administration of Naas Union from October 1847 to July 1849:* The election of a new board of guardians took place in early October 1847, and they undertook the division of the Union into four districts for the purpose of providing Fever accommodation. It was decided that the guardians of the different districts would be given the job of finding and renting suitable houses in the locations chosen, Kilcullen, Naas, Robertstown and Ballymore. The new board also had pressure from the Poor Law Commissioners to deal with the distress in the Ballysax and Kilmeague electoral divisions which had been brought to their attention by some ratepayers in those divisions.<sup>40</sup> Demand for accommodation in the workhouse was once again becoming a problem; in the month of October alone the number in the workhouse rose from 506 on 2 October to 590 by 30 October. In November it was agreed to rent a house for lodging children as before in order to make room for other classes of paupers in the workhouse. The Poor Law Commissioners had stated their intention of restricting the

numbers of inmates to be maintained in the workhouse, and they requested that the guardians have the Medical Officer make suggestions about the number that could be accommodated. They also urged that as the house was already over-populated and distress was increasing, with no sign of an improvement in employment prospects for many of the destitute, the board should move quickly to get the relieving officers to embark on their duties. Difficulties arose in taking a house for the accommodation of children, though the nature of these problems are not specified in the minutes' and instead it was decided that sleeping galleries should be erected in the workhouse. In the opinion of the Medical Officer this was a reasonable alternative and the board requested plans for carrying out the measure.



In Christmas week 1847 it was decided that the sum of one shilling a week as outdoor relief be given to all adults, both male and female, and sixpence per week to all destitute persons under 15 years old. All aged or infirm persons in the workhouse who wished to leave it on condition that they would receive outdoor relief of one shilling were to be discharged and put on the relieving officers' books, and the master or clerk of the union was to discharge anyone coming under the scope of the act who wanted to leave the workhouse and receive outdoor relief.<sup>41</sup> By the beginning of January 1848 the population of the workhouse was almost 800 persons. The minutes of 1 January 1848 record the first expenditure on outdoor relief and the numbers relieved. There were 453 cases relieved in the first week as well as their

dependents, who numbered 929. A week later these figures had increased to 522 and 1079 respectively.<sup>42</sup> The board of guardians sought permission from the commissioners to be allowed to use their discretion when deciding to give outdoor relief to able-bodied persons who could not be admitted to the workhouse due to lack of space, and made particular reference to the extreme destitution in the Downings district near Naas town. It became necessary for the guardians to rent another building, called the Cork Coach Office for one year for £80 pounds, in early January 1848 in order to supply extra accommodation for the vast numbers seeking relief.

In response to a request from the Board the Medical Officer had calculated the number of beds in the workhouse and the hospitals belonging to it, and the maximum number of persons who could be accommodated thereby as 724, which included 2 in each bed in the male, female and children's wards, (total 560) and one in each bed in the 2 Infirm wards.<sup>43</sup> The Medical Officer recommended that the guardians restrict their future admissions in light of these figures. At this time the workhouse was calculated to be able to accommodate 610 persons, with another 60 in the temporary buildings. 400 in the additional workhouse and 40 in the permanent fever hospital, a total of 1110. In fact there were 973 people being accommodated in the various buildings, as well as 110 in the workhouse hospital, 59 in the fever hospital and 19 persons classed as lunatics/idiots, 1161 persons overall. The large numbers being accommodated in the house and the appalling conditions had led to increasing desperation amongst the inmates. The Master lodged complaints against four paupers in the house for their conduct in "forcibly taking food belonging to other inmates, using intimidating language and violating the rules of the house". They were committed to the County Gaol to stand trial at the next Naas Petty Sessions.<sup>44</sup> Also illustrative of the deprivations suffered by those in the workhouse was a report from the Educational Inspectors, who, following a visit to the workhouse school found "a great want of cleanliness amongst the pupils, several had not a change of linen for 19 days and many are covered with cutaneous diseases."<sup>45</sup>

One of the guardians, Mr. John Conlon, gave notice that he would move at the next monthly meeting in March that, due to the huge daily increase of paupers into the workhouse, their wretched condition in clothing and person, which were beyond the means of the workhouse to cope with, as well

as the likelihood that these conditions would continue for some time, that persons who came under the classes that could receive outdoor relief should be discharged. This would then ensure that "sufficient room be had to preserve the test for able-bodied persons, and allow officers time to discharge their duties properly."<sup>46</sup> He was also of the opinion that one shilling per week was insufficient for the "sustainment of life for adults" and proposed that one shilling and sixpence be allowed to all adults and ninepence to children under 15 years of age in the future. By March there had been a considerable increase in the extent of fever, particularly amongst the inmates of the house in town. The Medical Officer thought it was a more malignant form than had previously occurred, and those affected included two children of the schoolmistress and the porter. At the end of the month Mr James Mahon, the assistant Master, died from fever. Between January and the end of March 1848, 80 other people died in the workhouse. The Medical Officer sought the appointment of an apothecary, (a pharmacist) because due to the great increase in numbers he was unable to find the time necessary to prepare and compound the various medicines necessary.

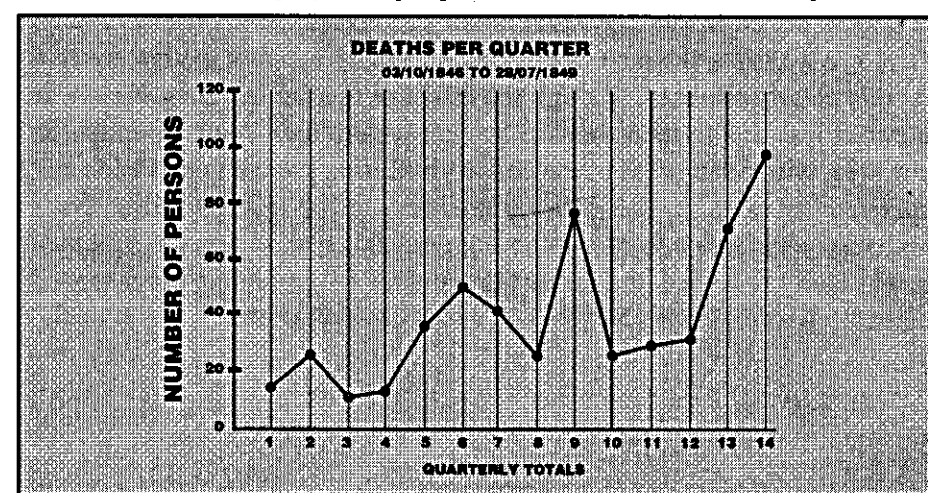
At the beginning of July the Poor Law Commissioners requested that the guardians abandon the system of giving relief in money where it could be avoided, instead arranging to give relief in food. In response the board declared that "from the happy appearance of the country at present, and the probability there is of food being abundant,"<sup>47</sup> they were of the opinion that the need for continuing with outdoor relief, except on a limited scale, would only last a few more weeks. Therefore the board did not consider it to be worth the expense involved in setting up meal stones for such a short time though the Relief Commissioners favoured the distribution of relief in the form of cooked food for a number of reasons, serving as it did as a fitting test of destitution, which could not be sold in exchange for whiskey and tobacco. By the second week of July the board was able to strike off six divisions receiving outdoor relief, and the remaining numbers claiming such relief were accommodated in the workhouse. At the end of the month the Poor Law Commissioners, referring to the approach of the harvest time, stated that all orders authorising relief out of the workhouse under the 2nd section of the Irish Relief Extension Act would be discontinued and that persons who could obtain employment were to be discharged from the relief lists, whether they were receiving it in or out of the workhouse. Despite an epidemic of measles (around 50 cases) the Medical Officer was

able to report that the house was free from fever in early August 1848.

In contrast to the earlier part of 1848 when the numbers being admitted to the house ranged from 85 to 100 persons per week, by late August the admittance rate was more or less steady in the low 20s. The guardians had given up renting the auxiliary workhouse from Mr. Hayes due to the high rent and also because their own new buildings were almost completed. However, under pressure from the Poor Law Commissioners about the crowded state of the workhouse they were obliged to rent the building again.<sup>48</sup> They decided to rent the Old Jail to accommodate the paupers and the Cork office, formerly the auxiliary workhouse, was to be used to accommodate the police. The numbers in the house had once again begun to rise rapidly, from 704 in early October to 1236 at the end of the year. This overcrowding brought its own problems. In the middle of December, 5 paupers broke into the breadstore, taking a large quantity of bread.<sup>49</sup> The Master also reported to the board that several paupers had been observed leaving the house by climbing the boundary walls and returning in the same manner. They were discharged from the house as an example.<sup>50</sup> The death toll was on the increase with 34 deaths in the last quarter of 1849.

At the end of March the Medical Officer reported that fever of a more malignant type was once again on the increase, and as cholera was spreading through the large and crowded towns around the country he requested instructions from the guardians regarding the admission or refusal into the workhouse of patients suffering from this disease and also the removal of persons who might catch it while in the house.<sup>51</sup> He also suggested that the diet of the inmates be changed, substituting a half pint of new milk instead of mixed milk for breakfast and dinner. The Central Board of Health also informed the guardians of the risk of cholera and ordered them to carry into effect the directions and regulations issued in accordance with the Nuisance and Diseases Prevention Act. The guardians decided that no persons suffering from cholera would be admitted to the workhouse but would be attended in their own homes.<sup>52</sup> The Central Board of Health replied that this would not be carrying out the provisions of the act. With fever cases still on the increase throughout April 1849, as well as some cases of dysentery, the Medical Officer reported that the matron Mrs. Quinn was a fever case and she died at the end of the month, aged 48 years.

The cholera epidemic which broke out in Ireland in December 1848 reached its zenith in May 1849, when the minutes of 9 May 1849 record the first appearance of cholera in the town of Naas.<sup>53</sup> The disease came via Scotland to Belfast and was not directly connected to the famine.<sup>54</sup> The Poor Law Commissioners had received a report from their medical inspector Mr. Phelan, in which he offered some suggestions about arrangements for treating workhouse inmates when and if the disease struck. The guardians were ordered to carry into effect the directions issued in accordance with the Nuisance and Diseases Prevention Acts of 1848 and 1849. A deputation of the inhabitants of Naas approached the board about appointing a committee to carry out the provisions of the act.<sup>55</sup> A stove was placed in the sheds adjoining the fever hospital (capable of holding up to 20 persons) for the use of cases which the Medical Officer wished to isolate. By the middle of May some severe cases of cholera had occurred in the workhouse and the auxiliary workhouse of which four were fatal. The Medical Officer demanded a further change in the diet of inmates, substituting the use of soup, buttermilk and stirabout with good bread and sweet milk in an effort to improve health.<sup>56</sup> The Poor Law Commissioners wrote to the guardians on 7 June 1849 stating that they had received a communication from the Central Board of Health about the appearance of cholera in Naas, and that the Naas board of guardians had failed to make any provision for the medical relief of people afflicted with the disease.<sup>57</sup> The board refuted the allegation and pointed out that the symptoms of cholera had disappeared from the workhouse and other localities in the union, although the records show that eighty-five people died in the months of May and June



in Naas workhouse which was unusually high.

Minute Book No. 8 covers the period from 07.10.1848 to 28.07.1849; the last few weeks covered by this book deal with a momentous event for Naas workhouse. The guardians had received a colonisation circular from the Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners in December 1848<sup>58</sup> and this was followed up in a proposal made by one of the guardians, George Wolfe Esq., in early May 1849, that all paupers who had been in the Naas workhouse not less than twelve months and who were willing to do so should be assisted in emigrating to the colonies.<sup>59</sup> This proposal was followed up in the next two months as paupers were selected and contractors hired to provide clothing, supplies and transport. The cost of transporting 300 paupers from the workhouse to Quebec was £4 for each person over 14 years of age and £2 for those under, with children under 1 year free.<sup>60</sup> The final selection of some female orphans who were to emigrate to Australia was undertaken by Lieutenant Henry, a government emigration officer. The number going to Australia is not specified but it was probably circa nine females based on the number discharged from the house in the week ended 28 July 1849.<sup>61</sup> On 19 July 1849 three hundred emigrant paupers left the Naas workhouse to sail from Dublin to Quebec. They had a new outfit of clothes and a supply of provisions for the journey. The adults were given £1 and those under 14 years of age 10 shillings in landing money to help them make their start in the New World.<sup>62</sup> The numbers in the workhouse dropped from 1,231 on 18 July 1849 to 923 following the departure of the emigrants.

The famine ended in late 1849 and, though the Naas workhouse continued to function well into the next century, its shortcomings as a welfare system had been clearly exposed. Though the effect of the famine upon Naas was somewhat less due to the relatively greater wealth and smaller population of the area, with other areas of the country suffering greater deprivation and higher fatality rates, it was still a tremendous blow to the locality. Naas workhouse was unable to cope with the demands placed upon it. The system was badly designed and under the pressure of the famine disimproved rapidly.

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# THE FAMINE IN CELBRIDGE 1840-1860

LENA BOYLAN

On August 1st 1840, George Robinson surveyed the Celbridge Workhouse, then in the progress of being built on five acres granted to the Guardians of the Workhouse by Edward Michael Pakenham Connolly of Castletown. His survey is now most valuable as it indicates the measurements and functions of the various areas in the building.

No. 1: The entrance lodge, which was comprised of a central block containing the board room and porters lodge and measured 35' x 20.6' x 22'. The north wing contained the female probationary ward and the south wing, the male probationary ward. Each of these wards measured 18.6' x 21.6' x 21'. North and south of this block were small sheds each measured 7' x 7' x 5'.

No. 2: The main building was behind the entrance lodge but divided from it by the children's playground or yard. The central block here contained the Masters apartments with children's wards on either side and measured 134.6' x 29' x 22'. The north wing contained the female apartments and the south wing the male apartments. Each measured 38.6' x 48.6' x 32'.

No. 3: The chapel area consisted of the dining hall, chapel and surgery and measured 105' x 23' x 13'. The wash house 50' x 23' x 13' was north of the chapel and to the south the kitchen and bake house measured 50' x 23' x 13'.

No. 4: The infirmary east of the chapel area consisted of the central block 84' x 20' x 22.6'. A north and south wing each measured 37' x 20' x 12'. The stone breakers sheds 39' x 20.6' x 12' were north of the infirmary and behind it was the dead house 18.6' x 16' x 6'.

The workhouse was opened in June 1841 and was the smallest of three workhouses built in Co. Kildare under The Poor Law Act of 1838. The other houses were at Naas opened in August 1841 and Athy opened in January 1844, Celbridge afforded accommodation for 519 inmates, Naas 1,110, and Athy 1120.

The accommodation in each case was based on the population of the area each Union represented. The Celbridge Union served the dispensary districts of Celbridge, Lucan, Rathcoole, Leixlip, Maynooth and Kilcock, an area of 86,801 acres and a population calculated to have been 25,242. At the height of the famine in 1847 the following returns were made by the three Unions. The comparative figures tell their own story.

	Celbridge	Naas	Athy
Number in workhouse on 29th Sept. 1846	88	336	269
Admitted and born in W.H. after that date	1214	1121	1856
Discharged and died	1007	962	1467
Remaining in W.H. 29th Sept. 1847	295	495	658
Average weekly cost per head	3/4 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub>	2/4 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub>	2/4 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub>

As Irish workhouses were built to alleviate the distress of the extreme poor in the event of a widespread potato famine our lack of interest in them has been generally conditioned by their association with the horrors of the Great Famine which occurred so shortly after they were erected.

Reports of overcrowding and death by fever within their walls were so prevalent that many starving families chose to die by the roadside and not seek admission. These were the tales handed down by the grandparents of older Celbridge residents, and the inscription on the lonely cross which stands in the workhouse burial ground on the Maynooth road reminds us to remember them with pity.

*Pray For The Souls Of The Poor and Afflicted  
Whose Bodies Have Been Laid In This Cemetery Since 1841.  
R.I.P.*

This burial ground like so many of its kind is commonly called the paupers burial ground, a sad reminder that those who are buried there had no standing in the local community.

Not to be forgotten or overlooked are the efforts of the local gentry, who aware of their responsibilities helped in many ways to ease the sufferings of the poor in the town and neighbourhood of Celbridge. In condemning the neglect of the absentee Irish landlords in 1846, Col. Edward Pakenham Connolly of Castletown reminded a Select Committee of the House of Lords that landlords, who have never seen their estates can hardly have much sympathy for sufferings they never have witnessed. This Castletown landlord it must be said acted in such a generous manner that his attitude towards the depressions of his tenants contrasted greatly with those of the first Connolly owner of Castletown, the very rich 'Speaker' Connolly who refused to respond to the pleas of his tenants in Ballyshannon Co. Donegal in 1728, to grant them a forgiveness or an abatement of their rents when "God in his anger for three years past has altered ye seasons, blasted their labours and withheld ye ground from yielding the usual increase." The Speakers reply to this plea was a sharp reminder to his agent. "I have often told you by no means to suffer two gales to meet - I am sorry for the misfortune of the country by the bad harvest but the ready way to ruin the tenants is to suffer them to be so much in arrears, which by all means be sure to prevent".

Two relief funds were opened by the Church of Ireland in 1846 and continued until 1860. One under the heading of The Celbridge Poor Account was supported by donations and the second, The Holy Communion Account was funded by offerings collected when the Sacrament was administered in Lord Leitrim's house at Killadoon, in Mr. Henry's at Lodge Park, Straffan and in Mr. Doran's at Roselawn. Donations and funds were augmented by generous contributions made at charity sermons preached by visiting clergy and fines levied at the Petty Sessions were donated by magistrates and head constables. In February 1855, when there was intense frost and snow an extra effort was made to help the poor and the large sum of £20.16.6 was collected. The Connolly's contributed £14 to this account. Other contributors were Mr. Giles Shaw, the Celbridge flour miller, the Canes of St. Wolstans, the Smyths of Barberstown Castle and Mr. Arthur Henry of Straffan.

The curate, Rev. Samuel Greer was responsible for the application of all funds and often acted on the advice of the rector, Rev. Robert Pakenham and Dr. Madden. In the absence of the workhouse records for the famine years, one has to rely on the Rev. Greer's accounts to get some idea of the extent of the distress in the Celbridge area and the efforts made to alleviate the hardships of those affected. Seed potatoes, turf, coal, and food including wine, which was regarded as fortification against cholera, and the best of prime beef @ 51/2p per lb. were some of the commodities regularly distributed. Clothing included flannel, shawls for women @ 2/10, India shoes for elderly widows, boots for men and children, often described as poorly clad or naked. Children got extra attention to help them to attend school and church service. One case is particularly mentioned as Mrs. Connolly supplied the tailor with corduroy for making four pairs of trousers for a family of boys. Many Homes required beds and bedding.

Essential services were attended to; houses were whitewashed inside and out. Water for the workhouse was pumped from the mills and stored in large tanks, described as the workhouse reservoirs. An old boxed shore led from the workhouse to the river Liffey, this had to be regularly attended to and the reservoirs opened and cleansed. Tradesmen were helped to continue work to support their families, Baxter the tinman needed tin, McCann the shoemaker, leather and Gardiner the nail maker was supplied with coal for his forge. Moor the hackler in the mill was sent to the seaside for two weeks on the advice of Dr. Madden. Aided too, were a Swiss lacemaker on his way to Limerick, a distressed Italian and a poor blind harper named Smith. Those who wished to emigrate received cash; nine people went to America and two to Australia. The Singletons of Straffan received £5 as part payment towards the purchase of a milch cow by Mr. Barton's kind benevolence, and Wm. Morrison of Celbridge 15/- to assist him to purchase a horse and cart by which he hoped to maintain himself. Dr. Moritz had recommended that he should get out-door work.

Only 27 Celbridge families are named as having been in hospital, seven in the fever hospital. Some of those chose to go to Dublin hospitals. Those who suffered from foot trouble and dropsy were sent to Dublin or to the infirmary in Kildare town. Children with eye and ear disorders were taken to Dr. Wilde the celebrated oculist and ear specialist who had opened his own hospital in Dublin in 1844. The Rev. Greer's records also refer to families ill with fever in their own homes many of whom subsequently died.

The number recorded as hospitalised is not therefore a true indication of the spread of disease in Celbridge.

With the serious outbreak of fever in 1845, fever hospitals became a dire necessity. They were to be erected as separate buildings and not to be extensions of the main block of the workhouses. The fever hospital in Celbridge was built on part of the five acre site east of the workhouse. It was a large hospital close to a pretty cottage, the nurse residence, which still stands. The fever hospital was occupied as a Free State Barracks in the 1920's and burned by the I.R.A. A small fever hospital was opened in Kildrought House in the main street in 1813. There were then three other hospitals in Kildare maintained by private subscriptions. The others were in Kilcullen, Athy and Naas. These hospitals with their dispensaries were erected to give assistance to the poor and partly for to provide employment for medical officers who had returned home after the Napoleonic wars. The fever hospital in Kildrought House was maintained by a fund for the poor of Celbridge by Mary Ann FitzGerald, Thomas Connolly's young niece, who died at Castletown in 1794. Dr. Alexander Taggard, was the first medical officer of this fever hospital. He had served with the Derry Militia quartered in Celbridge in the 1798 period.

All services to the fever hospital were strictly separate from those of the workhouse and infirmary. It has its own kitchen, laundry and recovery area out-of-doors; a long open shed with seating. The staff of Matron, assistant nurses and attendants were also independent. Night time attendants were brought in to watch over delirious patients, they were paid 5/- per night in the 1900's. From 1900 to 1922, when the workhouse was closed it was in the care of the French Sisters of Charity. Their kindness and attention to the poor helped to dispel all previously held ideas that the Celbridge workhouse was a place of horror in the town.

The workhouse is now the Celbridge paint factory. With the exception of the fever hospital, all other areas of the original buildings are intact.

A comparison of figures taken from the registers of the parish churches in the famine years are of some interest but not entirely satisfactory. The Catholic church lists marriages and baptisms and Christ Church burials and baptisms.

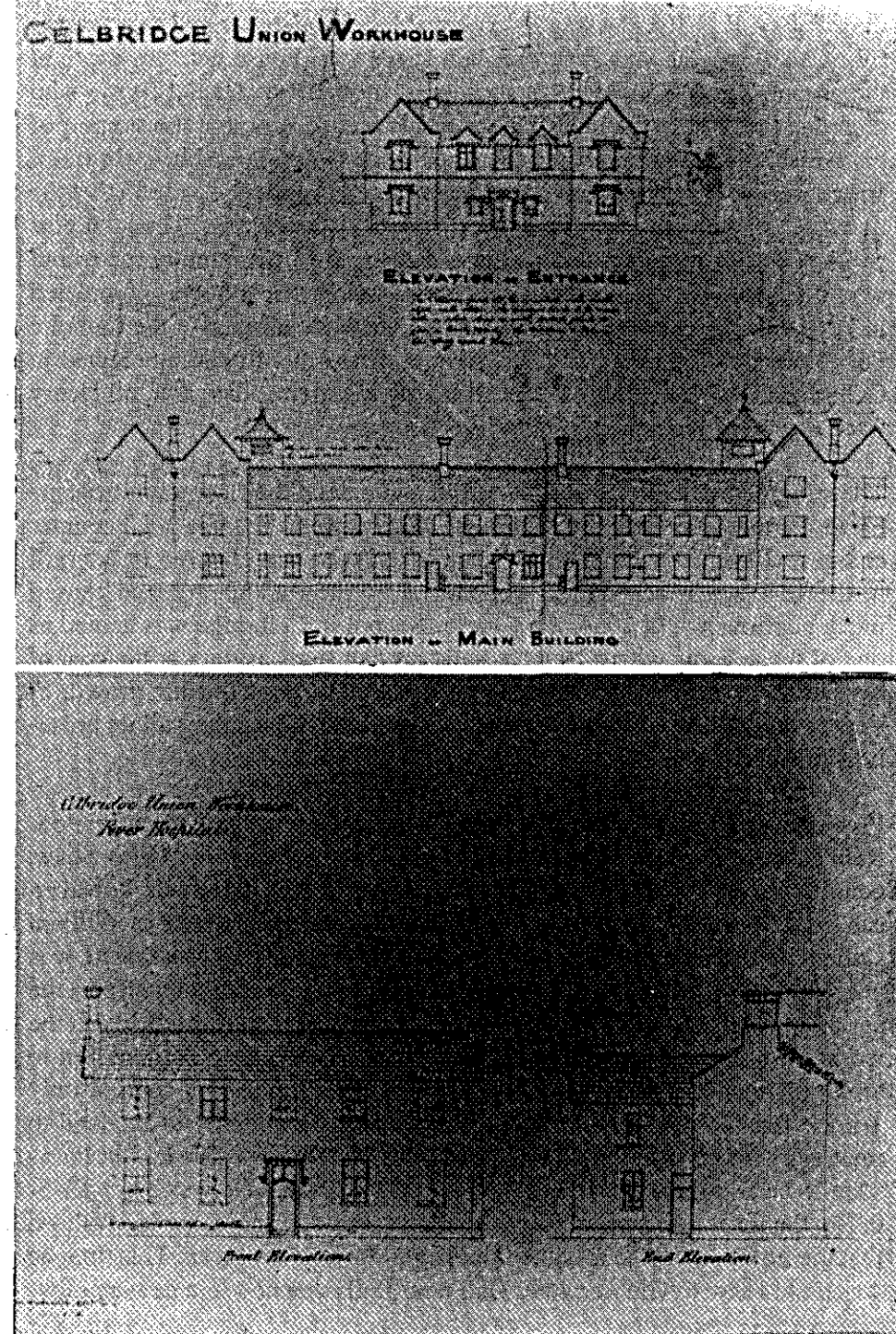
	St. Patrick's Church		Christ Church	
	Marriages	Baptisms	Baptisms	Burials
1844	22	91	17	11
1845	27	118	13	10
1846	27	125	8	6
1847	17	75	6	10
1848	15	87	12	8
1849	27	104	7	10
1850	26	92	3	12
1851	22	109	10	6

It is obvious that the number of burials entered in the registers in no way reflects the numbers who sought assistance, to bury their dead, from the Celbridge Poor Account. Burials in the church road graveyard - commonly call the Protestant Graveyard - had regulated burial charges: for registering a Burial 1/1, breaking ground in the graveyard 2/2, charge for erecting a head stone £2-5-6.

It has to be assumed therefore that many of the dead poor from the town were buried in the workhouse graveyard, hence the stigma of "A Paupers Grave". Workhouse staff who died, masters, matrons, porters and bakers were buried in the Church Road graveyard.

Deaths registered in the years 1843-1851 included, a daughter of the Rev. Samuel Greer, three sons of Henry Grattan, two sons of Rev. Robert Pakenham, Col. Michael Connolly aged 62 and his brother Arthur, Doctor Madden and his son Charles also a Medical Doctor, died in 1850 and 1851 respectively, having served the people of Celbridge all through the famine period. Many of the dead in the Church Road graveyard were English operatives in Shaw's mills in Celbridge and in Temple Mills. Those mills gave useful employment during the famine years. Mr. Giles Shaw refurbished the old flour mill in Celbridge in 1846 and supplied flour at a cheap rate to the poor. Thomas Connolly provided relief by having the building in the graveyard which contained the Connolly Mausoleum re-roofed. His farm workers old mud cabins in Kilwogan were thrown down and solid stone houses built. The Castletown staff at this period numbered 32 outdoor workers and 11 servants.

No documentary evidence is available for the relief of the Catholic community for the famine years, but no doubt they were well taken care of as



the P.P. Rev. P. O'Rourke was a very capable administrator and very watchful of his flock. He was R.C. chaplain at the workhouse until his death at the age of 72 in 1856. He was succeeded by the Rev. Daniel Byrne who recorded that due to the munificence of his predecessor and the support of his parishioners particularly the Langdales of Celbridge Abbey, Rourkes, Broes and Judges all shopkeepers, he was able to announce in 1865 that the new R.C. church was then completed and all debts cleared. The total cost of £4,869-17-4 gives some indication that the R.C. community recovered very quickly after the famine. The Abbey National School was completed in 1849 on a site donated by Mr. Langdale; he was chairman of the Catholic Poor Schools Committee and this was the first school building erected in Celbridge. Mr. Langdale was husband of Henrietta, daughter of Henry Grattan, son of the patriot Henry.

The struggle by both churches to retain and extend their communities surfaced in the years after the famine. There were charges and counter charges. Giles Shaw ran a small school for Protestant children in the mill in the 1840's. His school was denounced by the R.C. church and caused much controversy. In 1858, the Charter School in Celbridge was named as one of the schools where "the Catholic orphan finds asylum at the cost of his faith". In 1861 the Protestants complained of the "Terrible growth of Popery and falling off of pure Protestantism, notwithstanding all its proselytising schemes".

Five converts to the faith of the gospel are named in the Celbridge Poor Relief Accounts. Mrs. Maynard of Cheltenham, a sister of Giles Shaw, contributed £6 for their relief. The behaviour of one individual however, casts doubts on the sincerity of the others. The regular request of William Cullen for assistance and the pattern of his behaviour suggests that he was one of the travelling people. He returned to Celbridge annually in the springtime and applied for relief. At first, he stayed locally, probably in the workhouse for four months and got cash to buy clothes to prepare him to seek employment in Dublin. He needed travelling expenses and got only 1/6. He then devised a better plan, he was taking his family to England to seek work as he had been turned off from his employment in Dublin as soon as he became a convert to the faith of the gospel. He was given £1-5-0. But the following spring he was back in Celbridge again, having realised that the further away he travelled the larger the amount given. This time he was on his way to Glenfarnham Hall near Ballyshannon to a new employ-

er and got 12/6. On his next visit he claimed that he had got work in Enniskillen and received 10/-. Finally Rev. Pakenham took him in charge and found work for him in the Rectory in Straffan. He needed a table and stools for this move. However, he was on the road again after a year and got 2/6; he was moving his family to Dublin.

William Cullen did not however, come to Celbridge for the Protestant Soup. All the soup made in Celbridge came from meat purchased from the butchers in the town. As named in the Rev. Greer's Poor Accounts, they were all R.C.

## SOURCES:

Co. Kildare House Books P.R.O.

Castletown House Papers.

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Catholic Church Annals National Library.

# ATHY AND THE GREAT FAMINE

FRANK TAAFFE

In a letter to a local magazine in March 1838 an unidentified correspondent referring to Athy claimed<sup>1</sup>. "that there is not a town in Ireland so completely neglected .... during the late and present inclement season when sickness and starvation visited alike the able bodied and aged poor there were no humane individuals to step forward to adopt some mode of relief by instituting public works or other useful things which would even partially mitigate their sufferings."

Towards the end of his letter the writer, who was obviously a resident of Athy, invited his readers.<sup>2</sup> "to visit us through our workdays and ramble through our deserted streets and see the able bodied labourers at our corners, hoards of beggars at our doors, disease and famine in the hovels of the poor."

Such was a description of Athy in 1838, the year the Irish Poor Relief Act was passed.

The housing conditions of the time were recorded in the 1841 Census Returns which showed that the 4,698 inhabitants of Athy consisting of 1,005 families were living in 790 houses. The classification of the towns housing stock indicated that 147 houses or 18.6% of the total consisted of mud cabins with only one room. These were regarded as unfit for human habitation. Another 318 houses or 31.8% of the houses in Athy were of a better description of cottage built of mud but with two or more rooms with windows. Comparable figures for County Kildare showed that 34.6% of the population lived in one roomed mud cabins while 48.4% lived in mud cabins with two or more rooms. This put County Kildare in 11th place in a

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table of the 32 Counties of Ireland in terms of the quality of its housing. The worst accommodation was to be found in County Kerry where 66.7% of that County's population lived in one-roomed, mud-walled cabins.

The 1841 census returns also showed that there were 3,104 holdings in County Kildare comprising 5 acres or less. Only Counties Carlow, Wicklow and Dublin had a lesser number of such holdings while the figure for Counties Mayo and Galway were 33,790 and 27,992 holdings of five acres or less. Burke in his paper<sup>3</sup> "*The extent of the potato crop in Ireland at the time of the Famine*", gives comparative figures for each County showing the acreage under potato. In County Kildare only 8.2% of the arable land was given over to the potato crop. This compared with 28.5% in County Cork and 27.5% in County Waterford while a figure of 22.8% was recorded for County Mayo. Indeed, County Kildare had the smallest area of arable land devoted to potato production of all the Irish Counties. The Devon Commission Report published in 1848 made the following observation in relation to the standard of living in rural Ireland<sup>4</sup>

"we noticed with deep regret the state of the cottiers and labourers in most parts of the country for the want of employment .... in many districts their only food is the potato, their only beverage water, their cabins are seldom protected against the weather and the bed or a blanket is a rare luxury.

It was against this background of poverty that the Irish Poor Relief Act of 1838 based on the recommendations contained in the Reports prepared by George Nicholls between November 1836 and May 1838 was enacted. Its purpose was to put in place a system of pauper relief to be provided within Irish workhouses. The country was to be divided into 130 Poor Law Unions, each with workhouses. Athy was chosen as the location of one such workhouse catering for the Athy Poor Law Union area and a population of 47,912. Its area included the Electoral Divisions of Athy, Ballyadams, Ballybrack, Castledermot, Davidstown, Dysertenos, Kilberry, Killabban, Monasterevin, Moone, Moyanna, Narraghmore, Stradbally and Tullamoy. The workhouse in Athy which was built to accommodate 360 adults and 240 children admitted the first paupers on the 9th of January 1844.

297 paupers were registered in Athy workhouse in November 1844 and their numbers fell during the following summer. On the 9th of September 1845 the Dublin Evening Post reported the appearance of potato blight in

Ireland. As a precaution local Magistrates and Constabulary were requested to report on the progress of the potato harvest. On the 19th of September the Constabulary from Athy reported: "there is no appearance of the potato blight in the area".

On the 19th of October a further report from Athy stated.<sup>6</sup> "disease has appeared in several fields ... at present it is confined to those sown in drills."

On the 10th of November 1845 Dublin Corporation agreed to send an address to Queen Victoria concerning the potato blight and the hardship which was expected would befall the Irish people. Within days a Relief Commission for Ireland representative of various Government departments was meeting to discuss the situation. Arrangements were made to purchase Indian meal in America for shipment to Cork Harbour where it arrived in January 1846. Food depots were established throughout the country, generally chosen for their accessibility on the canal system. Athy was one of the distribution centres for the midlands from where the Indian meal was sold to local relief committees for subsequent resale when retail prices were excessively high. These food depots were to close the following August.

Athy workhouse had slightly fewer inmates in November 1845 than it had twelve months previously. Of the 269 inmates recorded only two were able bodied males while 38 were female adults and the rest children. Clearly the failure of the 1845 potato crop had minimal effect in the south Kildare area. Kildare, with 85% of its area classified as arable land had the smallest area given over to potato growing of all the Irish Counties. The potato blight, no matter how widespread, would be expected to have less an impact in County Kildare than elsewhere in Ireland. If only part of the 1845 potato crop in the Athy area was affected by the blight as early reports indicated, then clearly nothing akin to famine conditions could be expected in the South Kildare area. The workhouse occupancy rate for Athy in the second half of 1845 would tend to confirm that conditions in the town and surrounding countryside were not such as to warrant the taking of extraordinary relief measures in South Kildare following the partial failure of the potato crop in 1845.

This may also have been due in part to the building of the Great Southern and Western Rail line to Carlow which gave much needed employment in

the Athy area throughout 1845 and during the first half of 1846. The original intention was to build the railway line from Dublin to Cork with a branch line to Carlow. However, the branch to Carlow was first built, and the 56 mile track from Dublin to Carlow which passed through Athy opened on the 4th of August 1846. The contractors William Dargan and William McCormick employed a large workforce and it was local men "who had never handled a pike or a shovel, never wheeled a barrow and never made a nearer approach to work than to turn over a potato field with a clumsy hoe"<sup>8</sup> to whom they gave employment.

A letter written by William Taylor, Secretary of the Great Southern and Western Railway to Dublin Castle on the 25th of September 1846 hints at difficulties experienced by the Railway Company during its building work in the Athy area.<sup>9</sup> "I beg to inform you that the object for which the additional police force was required at Athy has been effected and the works of the Company quietly completed in the town in consequence of their presence there. I have now to convey the thanks of the Directors for the prompt assistance rendered to them by the Government on this occasion and to state that the attendance of this additional force being no longer necessary at Athy it is the wish of the Company that they may be withdrawn."

Was it a case of too many hungry men seeking work and proving disruptive when not taken on or was there a more sinister reason which necessitated the extra police? To what extent the railway construction work of 1845 and 1846 helped to alleviate local hardship cannot be now assessed but it can reasonably be assumed to have had a significant effect in the South Kildare area. It may well be the reason why the workhouse numbers in Athy were at a low level throughout 1845.

Following the failure of the potato crop in 1845 the Government brought in a Bill to facilitate the employment of the labouring poor on Public Work Schemes for a limited period. This passed into law in March 1846. It provided for public works for relief purposes to be approved by the Board of Works on applications submitted by the Grand Jurys. The Treasury would advance 50% of the cost of the schemes with the balance to be financed by local rates. Relief works consisting generally of road works or river drainage schemes were soon in operation throughout Ireland. Unemployed men otherwise unable to buy food for their families now had the opportunity to earn some money. However, it was shortlived as in July the Treasury

directed the relief works to cease in order to release men for the forthcoming harvest.

On the 3rd of June 1846 potato blight was again noted in County Cork. It was however not until August that it became clear that the blight was more severe than that experienced the previous year. A report from Athy Board of Guardians confirmed that the blight had reached all Electoral Divisions within the Poor Law Union area. The Relief Work Scheme was reactivated in the Autumn of 1846 but instead of a flat wage rate of about 10d. per day it was proposed to pay labourers on a piece rate basis. Obviously designed to encourage greater productivity amongst the labouring poor employed on the Relief Schemes it resulted in inadequate wages as food prices soared during the latter half of 1846. Delays in implementing the Relief Work Scheme caused further problems in some areas and on the 18th of September when approval for public works was still awaited the local Constabulary in Athy reported that the people of the town had: "pawnd everything and cannot bear it much longer".<sup>10</sup>

Returns from the two local pawn shops in Athy show that 49,953 items were pawnd in 1845 and that one year later 75,545 items with a value of £9,198 were pawnd. Clearly the level of hardship and distress of the local townspeople had increased dramatically over that twelve month period.

Some of the food depots closed down the previous August were reopened but only in the western counties where the effects of the famine were particularly severe. The British Relief Association founded in January 1847 however opened a number of food depots in the Midlands locating one such depot in Athy. It was the only food depot in Counties Kilkenny, Carlow, Laois and Kildare.

Admissions to the local workhouse in Athy increased during 1846 and in the last week of November 616 inmates were registered. As the local workhouse was the only place where relief could be obtained its admission records are a valuable indicator of the level of distress in the South Kildare area. The workhouse, built to accommodate 600 was now overcrowded but it was to receive even more inmates before additional accommodation was provided. In the week ended the 5th of December 1846 three inmates died. Seven more inmates died the following week when the numbers in the workhouse had risen to 652. They were to reach 737 in the week following

Christmas 1846 but dropped to 652 in the first week of January 1847.

In November 1846 the Society of Friends commonly called Quakers established their Central Relief Committee. This committee initially concentrated its funds and energies on the opening of food kitchens throughout the country. Fr. Thomas Greene, C.C., Athy, received a grant of £15 from the Central Relief Committee for the poor of Athy town. This represented the only financial contribution made by the Quaker Committee to the people of the town. As the Central Relief Committee distributed approximately £200,000 in Ireland during its famine relief operations the small payment to Athy is a useful even if not a definitive indication of the extent of distress in the area compared with other parts of the country in the years 1846 and 1847.

On the 9th of January 1847 the local Board of Guardians was advised by the Poor Law commissioners to review the list of inmates.<sup>11</sup> "there appearing to be many women and children in the workhouse whose husbands and fathers are supposed to be at work in the area".

The Medical Officer, Dr. Thomas Kynsey advised that the 652 inmates were safely accommodated in the building which was originally built to house 600. In December 1846 eighteen inmates died in the workhouse. The following month sixty inmates died even though the total inmate population had not increased. It is possible that a typhus epidemic which occurred throughout Ireland in January 1847 accounted for a large number of these deaths.

In the returns for the 27th of February 1847 Athy Board of Guardians advised that it provided accommodation for an additional 30 inmates by fitting up for fever patients sheds formally used as straw and turf stores. One month later additional accommodation for 50 more inmates had been arranged by appropriating existing sheds in the boys and girls wards for use by children under four years of age. There was no substantial increase in Athy workhouse numbers during this period but clearly the Board of Guardians anticipated further increasing demands for indoor relief. On the 10th of April 34 additional inmate places were provided increasing the workhouse accommodation limit to 714 inmates. Within seven days the inmate intake exceeded 700. That same week ten persons died in Athy workhouse. During the first four months of 1847 the total number of work-



house inmates in Athy varied between 583 and 704 and deaths averaged 10 per week.

The Public Works Relief Scheme, reactivated following the 1846 potato failure, was closed down in March 1847. On the 26th February 1847 the Temporary Relief of Destitute Persons in Ireland Act which provided for the operation of soup kitchens by local relief committees was passed. As the name implies this was a temporary measure only, while a radical reform of the Poor Law System was awaited later in the year. Within the Athy Poor Law Union area soup kitchens were operated in twelve of the fourteen electoral divisions. They were opened in Monasterevin and Narraghmore on the 26th of April, in Castledermot, Moone and Ballyadams on the 9th of May and in Athy town on the 6th of June. The local relief committees which managed the soup kitchens consisted of Justices of the District, local Members of the Board of Guardians and one person nominated by the Relief Commissioners. In Athy the relief committee included Fr. James Lalor, P.P., Rev. Frederick Trench, Rector, Captain Lefroy, Chairman of the Board of Guardians and Robert Browne Esq, Inspecting Officer of Athy Union. Funded by the Poor Law Union of Athy each relief committee was entitled to give free rations to destitute, helpless persons and to destitute able bodied persons having little or no land. For those classified as able-bodied but receiving insufficient wages a small charge was made for the rations provided.

The food dispensed from the local soup kitchens was strictly rationed. Adults received 1½ lbs. of bread or 1 lb. of biscuits or 1 lb. of meal or flour. If a boiler was available to the relief committee one quart of soup thickened with a portion of meal was provided with 6 oz. of bread, biscuit or meal. Children under nine years of age received half the adult ration.

In a circular letter of 10 March 1847 the relief committees were instructed that<sup>12</sup> "a considerable portion of the nutriment should be administered in a solid or moderately consistent rather than in a very fluid form"

On 11 May another circular issued as a reminder to the relief committees that the earlier advice was all<sup>13</sup> "the more necessary to be attended to in the approach of warm weather when soup containing a large proportion of vegetable matter is so liable to ferment and become sour".

The Board of Health suggested that instead of a quart of soup and 6 oz. of bread, each person should be given one pint of soup and 16 oz. of bread as daily rations on soup days or a ration of bread or stirabout where soup was not given out. The stirabout was made of oatmeal or a combination of oatmeal with Indian corn or rice. A week before the soup kitchens closed in Athy the High Sheriff for the County wrote to Dublin Castle seeking a proper force of troops and constabulary in the town "to preserve the peace and good order"<sup>14</sup> He was particularly concerned at the state of excitement generated by the elections to the Town Commissioners scheduled to commence "by proclamation on Saturday next at 10.00 o'clock."<sup>15</sup> There is no record of a response to his request.

During the period to the 15th of August 1847 when all soup kitchens in the Athy Poor Law Union area were closed the highest number of persons supplied with food on any one day was 16,365. This represented 34% of the total population of the Union area. 11,362 persons or 23.7% of the areas population were still receiving food at the local soup kitchens when they were closed in August. Within Athy Poor Law Union the highest percentage dependency on the soup kitchen rations was in the Ballyadams Electoral Division where it was almost 100%. In Athy Electoral Division with a population of 13,828 the highest recorded number to receive help at the soup kitchen on any one day was 3,058 or 22.1% of the population. The Relief Commissioners advanced a total of £7,359.4.2 to the Athy Poor Law Union area under the soup kitchen legislation which included the sum of £794 for a temporary Fever Hospital. The hospital approved in September 1847 was to accommodate 100 patients with a staff of four nurses and two wardsmaids.

On the 1st of June 1847 the Relief Commission issued a circular advising its intention to reduce stores retained in its food depots by distributing the food through local Relief Committees during the first two weeks of July. The expressed intention was "in order to leave the trade of the country to take its ordinary course"<sup>16</sup>

The British Relief Association store in Athy was subject to this order even though it was strictly speaking not a Government depot.

In July 1847 the Relief Commissioners indicated their intention of discontinuing advances under the Temporary Relief of Destitute Persons Act at

about the expected time of the harvest in August. The soup kitchens would accordingly close. Thereafter full financial responsibility for relieving the destitute poor would fall on the local Boards of Guardians. At the same time the Irish Relief Extension Act was passed empowering the Boards of Guardians to give outdoor relief for the very first time. This enabled the Boards to give relief in or out of the Workhouse to:-

- (i) Destitute poor who were permanently disabled from labour by reason of old age, infirmity or bodily or mental defect;
- (ii) Destitute poor disabled from labour by severe sickness or serious accident;
- (iii) Destitute poor widows having two or more legitimate children.

In exceptional circumstances the Boards of Guardians could give outdoor relief other than in the three cases cited but such relief was limited to a period not exceeding two months.

Under Poor Law legislation landlords were responsible not only for their own Poor Law Rates but also for those of their tenants whose land valuation was less than £4. This was a disagreeable imposition for landlords whose tenants were not always in a position to pay their rents. As a consequence landlords who experienced increasing rate demands to fund the Boards of Guardians relief measures moved to evict tenants who were in arrears of their rent. Landlords also sought to recoup the additional rates they were required to pay to fund the relief activities of the Board of Guardians by increasing the rents of their tenants on small holdings. It seemed that the Poor Law measures designed to give relief to the destitute poor in turn created a situation which put many families on small holdings at risk.

The Quarter Acre or Gregory Clause in the Irish Relief Extension Act was another measure which operated to disadvantage small tenant farmers. Inserted at the suggestion of the Dublin M.P. William Gregory the clause limited outdoor relief to persons with holdings not exceeding quarter of an acre. Inevitably some families unable to survive were left with no alternative but to hand up their small holdings before they became eligible for relief. How frequently this occurred in South Kildare is a matter of specu-

lation. What is of interest is that in 1851 the Duke of Leinster, having succeeded in consolidating large tracts of his land in the Athy area was in a position to advertise in Scottish newspapers for Land Stewards offering them substantial farms with new dwellinghouses in South Kildare. The land clearances which facilitated this could have resulted from emigration, voluntary or enforced handing over of small holdings, deaths during the famine period or evictions. The current research does not permit me to offer any definite explanation.

The potato crop of 1847 was free of disease but because of the potato blights of 1845 and 1846 only small quantities had been sown. The harvest, while healthy, was small and clearly insufficient to feed the people. Substantial claims for outdoor relief were expected from the 15th of August 1847, the implementation date of the Irish Relief Extension Act. Athy Board of Guardians appointed seven Relieving Officers to examine applications for outdoor relief, to visit the homes of the applicants and report on their health and ability to work. Details of monies disbursed by the Treasurer of Athy Union indicated a growing level of outdoor relief in the area. He disbursed £42 in August, £333 in September, £698 in October, £705 in November, £1,264 in December and £1,472 in January 1848.

In a letter dated 29th November 1847 the Board of Guardians were advised by the Poor Law Commissioners that they were required to make provisions for relief of all destitute persons in or out of the workhouse. They also advised that the consideration whether a destitute person had or had not previously been a resident in the area could not affect that persons claim to relief. Clearly the movement of destitute people around the country was causing a problem for some Board of Guardians and one can only assume that Athy workhouse experienced difficulties similar to Carlow workhouse which found itself catering for 100 starving paupers who had arrived by train from Dublin, their fares having been paid by Dublin Unions anxious to rid themselves of country paupers.

In January 1848 the Poor Law Commissioner Office in Dublin circularised the Boards of Guardians reminding them that every able bodied male receiving relief had to work for eight hours a day. Stone breaking was considered a suitable form of employment for such people.

The ever increasing death toll and the need to provide coffins for intern-

ments created further demands on the finances of the country's Boards of Guardians. This resulted in the Poor Law Commissioners issuing a circular letter advising that coffins for outdoor relief recipients could not be provided by the Boards but instead should be financed by the local Church Wardens at the expense of each Parish. In Athy for many years prior to the famine the local Select Vestry of the United Church of England and Ireland had provided £10 each year for Parish coffins. However no such provision was made after 1838. It is not unreasonable to assume that many who died outside the workhouse during the famine were buried without coffins as a consequence of the Poor Law Commissioners decision. The attitude of the Commissioners was in contrast to their instruction of the previous year when the Board of Guardians were advised that the expense of coffins, internments, whitewashing, cleansing, etc., could be defrayed by the local relief committees out of the soup kitchen funds.

A dramatic increase in the numbers seeking outdoor relief prompted the Board of Guardians on the instructions of the Poor Law Commissioners to publish and display posters listing the names of persons receiving assistance. The details were to include not only the name of the person but also the numbers in his or her family, the date admitted to the Workhouse and if on outdoor relief the date relief started. Posters were to be displayed at the usual places for public notices and in the Constabulary Barracks of the area. Clearly the dignity of those on relief was of little relevance to the Board of Guardians when considering matters affecting the Union rate payers.

During the Autumn of 1847 Athy Board of Guardians were moved to open an auxiliary workhouse in the town as the numbers seeking admission to the overcrowded workhouse increased daily. By taking over a row of small houses in Barrack Street they increased the intake potential of the workhouse to 970 inmates. During the week ended the 8th of January 1848 1,058 persons were resident in Athy workhouse while 543 persons received outdoor relief. Within a month these figures had increased to 1,189 in the workhouse and 1,552 on Outdoor Relief. The workhouse occupancy rate reached 1,254 in the week ended the 26th of February 1848 but thereafter decreased gradually until 886 inmates were recorded in the first week in July. During the same period the numbers on Outdoor Relief increased, and 2,807 persons were receiving help on the 5th of August 1848.

The possibility of the hungry distressed population exacting retribution on the more prosperous citizens was always of concern to those who had an eye on developments overseas. The rise of the Chartists in England and the Proclamation of the French Republic were seen as encouraging developments for the Young Ireland movement. No wonder then that John Butler, Justice of the Peace for Athy wrote to the Lord Lieutenant on the 2nd of April 1848:<sup>17</sup> "As the only resident Magistrate in this town I beg leave to state to your Excellency that a few days ago the troops quartered here were withdrawn and the town left to the protection of a few police. I beg to refer that this is a County town with a gaol and nearly 100 prisoners in it, sixteen of whom are under sentence of transportation and only the Governor and three turnkeys to guard them. There are two banks in the town, a barrack for either cavalry or infantry and not a soldier. In my younger days I fought and bled for my King and country and now tho in my 70th year if unfortunately necessity required it I would again ..... but I do not like my native town in these alarming times to be left to the protection of ten or a dozen police men."

His plea fell on deaf ears as did a petition from the "inhabitants of Athy" submitted by John Butler and B.L. Lefroy on the 25th of July which read:<sup>18</sup> "In consequence of the defenceless state of this town and neighbourhood we the undersigned inhabitants beg leave respectfully to suggest the necessity of your calling upon the Government to supply a depot of arms and ammunition for the protection of our lives and properties".

The petition first presented to the local Magistrates was forwarded to Dublin Castle with a covering letter in which it was suggested that arms numbering 400 with ammunition would be sufficient. Athy was to remain quiet despite the happenings in Widow McCormack's cabbage patch in Ballingarry later that month. A people weakened by hunger and despair would not need troops to maintain public order.

The concern of the authorities in relation to the 1848 potato crop showed itself in a letter from Athy on the 10th of October 1848 when it was reported that two sisters.<sup>19</sup> "Bridget and Anne Cosgrove were brought before Athy Petty Sessions on a charge of pulling potatoes in the month of August last."

Clearly the local people were prohibited from taking up potatoes too early thereby reducing the prospect of a good harvest. The Irish potato crop of

1848 was again hit by blight but despite this the workhouse inmates continued to decrease and in September 560 inmates were registered with 697 on outdoor relief. Within a month persons on Outdoor Relief were reduced to 4 while there was a slight increase to 752 inmates in the workhouse. Thereafter the workhouse was to bear the brunt of the relief measures in South Kildare, perhaps indicating a decision by the Board of Guardians to limit the application of outdoor relief and requiring those seeking relief to enter the workhouse.

Throughout the first six months of 1849 the Workhouse numbers in Athy rose steadily necessitating the provision of additional occupation. This was achieved by renting Canal Company Stores at Nelson Street initially to provide increased accommodation for 1,120 then 1,330 and finally 1,510 paupers. In June 1849 the workhouse had 1,528 on its rolls, the highest number ever recorded. That same month 1,102 persons were on Outdoor Relief. The level of support still required in the fourth year of the Famine indicate that conditions in South Kildare had deteriorated each year since the commencement of the Famine.

The harvest of 1849 brought a dramatic improvement. In September the workhouse population had fallen to 735 and those on outdoor relief now only totalled 6. The numbers for the rest of the year showed no great variation certainly insofar as outdoor relief was concerned. The workhouse numbers however did show steady increases in numbers up to February 1850 when 1,196 were admitted. Thereafter the numbers fell. The Famine had run its course in South Kildare, but its legacy was to remain for a long time thereafter.

The potato failures of 1845 and onwards had their gravest effect on families with young children. It was no wonder then that the majority of the workhouse inmates in Athy were children. Many were orphans or had been abandoned in the workhouse by parents who could no longer feed them. They were destined to remain a charge on the Poor Law Union, a prospect which did not commend itself to the local landlords. In March 1848 an Orphan Emigration Scheme was introduced by the Government in an attempt to reduce the number of children remaining in Irish workhouses. Boards of Guardians were required to put forward suitable orphans between 14 and 18 years of age to participate in an emigration scheme to Australia. The Boards would be responsible for the cost of clothing the

young orphans and sending to Plymouth from where they would be shipped to Australia. By the time the first group of orphan emigrants sailed from Plymouth on the 4th of June 1848 it had been decided to confine the scheme to young females.

Athy Board of Guardians agreed to utilise the Orphan Emigration Scheme in an attempt to reduce the numbers of children in its workhouse. On the 26th of February 1849 a meeting was held in Narraghmore School, chaired by a member of Athy Board of Guardians. Its purpose was to discuss the raising of a special rate on the Narraghmore Electoral Division to finance the sending to Plymouth and onwards to Australia of a number of young girls from the Narraghmore area who had been inmates in Athy workhouse for the previous two or three years. The meeting agreed to the proposal, one speaker declaring that unless the workhouse inmates were encouraged to emigrate they would remain a burden on the community for another 50 years. At a subsequent meeting of Athy Board of Guardians, chaired by Captain Lefroy, a group of 20 females who had been selected from among the workhouse children to emigrate under the Orphan Emigration Scheme were introduced to the Board. A Report of the meeting noted <sup>20</sup> "Their appearance both as to good looks and comfortable clothing spoke well for the care they had received in the workhouse. Captain Lefroy addressed a few appropriate observations to them. 'They were going', he said, 'to a foreign country, provided with every requisite for their comfort and a more favoured land than their own having been selected for them, they had the best chances of independence and happiness if they discharged their duties with honesty industry and zeal .... they should feel grateful for the kindness they had received in the house and he trusted the accounts from Australia would be always in their favour'".

The report concluded with a description of the girls withdrawing from the meeting with "many respectful courtesies.

Another 17 young females were sent out to Australia from Athy workhouse before the Orphan Emigration Scheme finished in April 1850. The numbers involved made little or no impact on the overall workhouse numbers in Athy and children under 15 years of age were to constitute an overwhelming majority in the workhouse until the introduction of the boarding out system for children in 1862.

Adding to the problems of the local people was an outbreak of cholera which occurred in December 1848. The first cholera case recorded in Belfast on 2 December involved a man who had arrived<sup>21</sup> from Edinburgh where cholera had appeared the previous October. On 25 June 1849 the first cholera case was noted in Athy and by 29 September 27 cases were recorded and 11 local cholera victims<sup>22</sup> had died. A temporary cholera hospital was opened in the town and funds intended for the relief of famine had to be diverted to dealing with the cholera epidemic which remained a threat to public health until the following year.

Not every town in County Kildare was affected by cholera. Naas, for instance, remained free of the dreaded disease. From 7th June to 3rd October 1849 141 cholera cases occurred in Maynooth<sup>23</sup> with 47 deaths, while not a single case was recorded in Kilcock only 4 miles away.

Cholera, which thrived in the unhealthy overcrowded conditions to be found in the narrow lanes and courts of urban settlements had first arrived in Athy in 1834. At that time the Treasury had advanced the sum of £20 to the Select Vestry of the local Church<sup>24</sup> which had responsibility under the Vestry Act of 1772 for public health in the town. The cholera outbreak in Athy in 1849 was more serious than the previous occurrence adding fear to the distress and hunger of the local people.

While cholera deaths were recorded one wonders how effectively deaths caused by the cholera outbreak and those occasioned by malnutrition and/or other disease were distinguished. In the 1851 census details of deaths in hospital and sanitary institutions in the period 6th June 1841 to 31st March 1851 were detailed. For Athy the opening of the workhouse in January 1844 marks the effective commencement date for the census figures giving a period which apart from the initial one and a half years largely coincided with the famine years. During that time a total of 1,205 paupers died in Athy workhouse and the local Fever Hospital.

The town's population which in 1841 numbered 4,698 had fallen to 3,873 in 1851 which latter figure excluded the inmates of the workhouse. This represented an actual loss of 825 persons or a 17.5% decrease. Between 1831 and 1841 Athy's population had increased by 4.5% and if one assumes a similar increase for the ten years to 1851 the town population would have reached 4,909 at the end of that period. The famine can there-

fore be seen to have caused a notional fall in Athy's population of upwards of 1,036 persons or a 22.5% decrease. Of course not all of these losses resulted from famine deaths or disease. Emigration to America and England and migration to Dublin city where the population increased during the famine years no doubt accounted for some of the decrease in the towns population. The exact losses attributable to the different factors which contributed to the diminution of the towns population cannot now be determined.

The population for Athy Union area fell by 10,701 in the ten years to 1851. Within that part of the Union area in County Kildare the actual decrease was 19.04% while in the County Laois areas of the Union the actual decrease was a staggering 28.26%. Almost every Electoral Division within the Athy Poor Law Union area suffered dramatic population losses between 1841 and 1851. The one exception was Athy Electoral Division which in 1841 had a population of 6,752 and ten years later a population of 6,720. The explanation is probably two-fold. The siting of the workhouse itself in the town brought up the population numbers while the poor from the outlying areas of the Union understandably tended to congregate in the immediate areas around the town where relief was more easily obtainable.

Excluding the Ulster Counties and County Dublin which showed a population increase County Kildare incurred the third lowest percentage population loss between 1841 and 1851. It lost 16.39 % of its population, a loss similar to that experienced by County Waterford, while Louth showed a loss of 16.05% and Wexford 10.83%.

An examination of the Minute Books of Athy Town Commissioners<sup>25</sup> for the years of the famine shows no reference whatsoever to distress, disease or famine in the town. This might suggest that for whatever reason the plight of the poor people did not figure prominently on the political agendas of the day even during the Local Elections of August 1847. It might also indicate the possibility that local distress was on a scale no worse than that experienced in the past. I do not accept this as there is nothing to lead us to believe that the distress encountered in Athy during the famine years was experienced on a similar scale either before or since.

The absence of any famine related references in the town Commissioners Minute Books coupled with the holding of a Town Council Election during

"Black 47" may not be especially significant given the fact that the Board of Guardians were charged with responsibility for the workhouse and outdoor relief.

The decline in the population, the rise in the workhouse numbers such as to necessitate the opening of two auxiliary workhouses and the huge numbers fed at the soup kitchens all point to widespread distress in South Kildare during the famine years.

That there was a workhouse in place in Athy before the potato blight struck undoubtedly served to enable the authorities to respond to the emergency in a manner which kept down the number of deaths from disease and starvation. Another important factor was Athy's location amongst the richest arable lands in Ireland and the existence of local landlords sufficiently well off to fund the activities of the Board of Guardians as first they provided relief in the local workhouse and later outdoor relief in the homes of the people in need.

Athy returned to a degree of normality with the success of the 1849 harvest. By January 1853 the Leinster Express could report that civil cases in the quarter sessions in Athy were unusually light. While criminal business, comparatively speaking, was also light. At those sessions Mary Farrell and Sarah Cummins who had survived the famine were each sentenced to seven years transportation for arson. Other survivors of the Great Famine James Kelly, a hedge school master, was also transported for forging the signature of Fr. Dunne P.P. of Castledermot while Mary Dobson and her daughter Mary received a similar penalty for sheep stealing. The country indeed had returned to normal.

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# FAMINE IN KILDARE AFTER THE GREAT FAMINE

GERARD MORAN

It is generally assumed that the Great Famine of 1845-50 was the last major period of distress and destitution which affected the south and east of Ireland. Most economic and social historians such as Cormac O Grada and Tim O'Neill acknowledge that the west of the country continued to totter on the edge of a major subsistence crisis and famine-like conditions resurfaced in this region on a number of occasions, as in 1859-63, 1879-82 and during the 1890s. It would be incorrect to state that the Great Famine ended the spectacle of distress in County Kildare for there were occasions as in 1859-63 and 1879-82 when the memories of the crisis of the 1840s resurfaced.

The Great Famine brought about major changes in Kildare society, the most significant being its decline in population. This was not exceptional as all Irish counties experienced a fall in their populations in the second half of the nineteenth-century. Between 1841 and 1881 the Kildare population fell from 114,488 to 75,804, a decline of 38 per cent. The only parts where this trend did not manifest itself were the larger towns of Naas and Newbridge, where the fall was negligible or where the population actually rose.<sup>1</sup> Population decline continued to be a major problem in Kildare down to the mid-twentieth century and an increase in population was not recorded until 1946. Indeed, by the 1936 census the population was only half what it had been before the Great Famine.

The crises that affected Ireland in the second half of the nineteenth-centu-

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ry were precipitated by bad weather in particular heavy rains which had disastrous consequences for agriculture. Jim Donnelly's work on the destitution of the early 1860s shows that high rainfall levels were responsible for the distress, while Tim O'Neill draws the same conclusions for the situation in the 1890s.<sup>2</sup> The crises were greatest in those areas which had a high dependency on potatoes and turf, as these were most affected by the excessive rains. Consequently destitution was greatest in those regions where the communities survived on a knife-edge and where the slightest change in this balance could lead to a catastrophe. While the situation in County Kildare was better than in many other parts of the country, there were instances when it was also affected by the distress that affected the country. As one recent commentator of Irish poverty has indicated, 'economic distress is a subjective concept and its definition varies in place and time'.<sup>3</sup> It was accepted that the west of Ireland was in economic distress in relation to the then current living standards. As those standards were low, distress was serious in absolute terms. Thus, the people in Kildare became alarmed in 1859-64 because of the plummeting value of cattle, caused by the incessant rains which retarded grass growth.<sup>4</sup> However, while it caused major problems for most grazing farmers in the county, it never reached the crisis of 1845-50.

A feature of distress in the second half of the nineteenth-century was that the Great Famine of 1845-50 was used as a yardstick to monitor their destitution and poverty. No attempts were made to compare their situation with other periods of destitution. However, these periods of destitution were overshadowed by other events and consequently the scale of the problem was played down. The Fenian activities overshadowed the crisis of 1859-64, as the Fenians attempted to ensure that all other issues were secondary to that of national independence. Again the distress of 1879-82 was overshadowed by the Land League activities and especially after the Spring of 1880 when the agitation was transformed from a small tenant farmer western based movement to that of a large farmer organisation. The next major crisis of 1890-1 was engulfed by the events of the Parnell case and the split in the Irish Parliamentary party. Thus while Irish distress and poverty was never far away it tended to be minimised by other events.

By 1879 the majority of people in Kildare did not encounter acute destitution, and their position had improved quite substantially since the Great Famine.<sup>5</sup> The factors which brought about the crisis in the west of Ireland

cannot be attributed to the distress in Kildare. A combination of the potato crop failure, declining returns from the manufacture of kelp and low seasonal migration remittances were responsible for the endemic destitution and poverty in Connacht, but these were not responsible for the problems in Kildare. Kildare was not dependent on potatoes or even from money earned outside of the county. By the 1870s two-thirds of the land was devoted to pasture and only 7% was under potatoes. Also, it did not encounter competition from imported American cereals, as little of the land was devoted to tillage, only 1% being under wheat. However, while these issues did not create problems for the county in general, some parts of Kildare were reliant on the potato. Those sections of society who were most dependent on the potato - the small farmers and labourers - were most vulnerable to changes or any threat to agriculture.

While the graziers were affected by declining cattle prices in the 1876-9 period, falling by about 12% largely due to insufficient fodder and even that which was saved was of a poor quality, they did not suffer to the same extent as the small holders and agricultural labourers. The large farmers had savings which cushioned the effects of low prices, but the small farmers and labourers did not have this fall back. For the Kildare small holders the potato was still an important part of their survival as was evident from relief committee reports in places like Fontstown and Robertstown. They could not overcome the difficulties of one crop disaster, not to mention the three that occurred between 1877 and 1879. Small farmers did not personally consume all of their potato crops, the surplus being used to feed pigs and poultry which were then used to pay the rent. However, it still had an important role in their lives. Thus the decline in the potato yield in 1877 to 2.2 tons per acre, and 3 tons in 1878 and 1.6 tons in 1879 was a major calamity for these groups.

The cause of the problem in 1879 was the wet summer. In the six month period up to the end of September it had rained for 125 out of the 183 days.<sup>6</sup> It was virtually impossible to save the crops, and in particular the potato and hay crops. The hay crop for 1879 was 1.8 tons per acre, but it was not well saved and was of poor quality.<sup>7</sup> The events of the 7th and 8th September created the problems in Kildare. Up to that point reports from all over the county stated that the crops were promising and a reasonable harvest was predicted. However, the 7th and 8th September saw heavy rains which ensured the crops could not be saved.<sup>8</sup> In parts of Athy union

the general harvest was so poor that hundreds of acres of crops remained uncut. Frederick MacCabe, the Local Government Board inspector whose area included Kildare, reported on 11 October that the potato in his area was deficient and much injured by disease, and estimated the yield would not be more than half the normal amount.<sup>9</sup> In Naas, while the potatoes gave a fair return, one half were unfit for human use and would not last until Christmas: while in Robertstown only one-sixth of the crop could be used and only feed the poor for three months. In Kildare, one-third of the potatoes were diseased.<sup>10</sup> The turf crisis exacerbated the problem. The labouring and small farmer groups were hardest hit. In Athy and Naas it was only half what it had been the previous year, while in Robertstown it was only one-third and in Kildare one-quarter. It was reported from Robertstown that, 'Labourers and small farmers will not be able to obtain or purchase a supply of fuel sufficient to carry them on until the next turf crop is saved' and the crop would only last for four months.<sup>11</sup>

Distress was most acute amongst the labouring class in places like Kilmeague where they depended on daily labour and in particular turf making. The difficulties with saving turf and the stopping of the Rathangan drainage works meant that 500 people were destitute and needed relief. In Fontstown there were 48 families, mostly small farmers from Rathconnell, in severe poverty.<sup>12</sup> It showed up the precarious situation which some of the Kildare population lived under. It also resurrected memories of the Great Famine to a county which had escaped most of the hardships of the 1850s and 1860s.

In examining the distress of 1879-82 it is important to note that there were people who were perennially destitute and even during periods of agricultural prosperity, as with the early 1870s, found it difficult to survive. Others were victims of the periodic economic downturns and had to resort to the private charities and the workhouses to overcome their temporary deprivation. These were the small farmers, agricultural and urban labourers, tradesmen and artisans. Crises such as 1879-82 brought them to the edge of despair. One criteria for examining the levels of distress is to look at the situation in the workhouses during this period. The poor law in Kildare was divided between three unions: Athy, Celbridge and Naas. While the landlords controlled the boards of guardians in Celbridge and Naas in the late 1870's, they had no power in the Athy union. John LaTouche was chairman and Major Burrows vice-chairman of Naas guardians and the duke of



Leinster was chairman and Colonel Vasey vice-chairman in Celbridge, but none of the major landowners controlled Athy board of guardians; its chairman F.M. O'Connell was a small landowner, having less than 500 acres, and Daniel Whelan, the vice chairman, had no connection with land. Athy was the exception rather than the rule in terms of what group controlled the board of guardians.<sup>13</sup>

By October 1879 the numbers seeking admission into the workhouses increased as the difficulties with the harvest became apparent. Those wanting to enter the Naas workhouse were destitute even at the best of times. When Peter Murphy applied for admission to the Naas workhouse in October 1879 he said that he would work for 5d, but employment opportunities were few because of the wet weather. At the same time, the authorities were convinced that many did not deserve relief.<sup>14</sup> While most people were loath to enter the workhouse, others used it whenever they were destitute and had nowhere else to turn to. These were mainly labourers and small farmers. Dr Chaplin summed up the attitude of the masses to the workhouse when he told the Naas guardians: "The people will die before they go into the workhouse. No man has tried to do more to get them to go in than I have done, but I can't".<sup>15</sup> By December 1879 there were 388 people in Naas workhouse, up from 316 in 1876, while in Athy the numbers increased from 248 in 1876 to 345 in 1879. Many were urban artizans who in the late 1870's travelled round the countryside in search of work and eventually became a burden on the poor laws. Many urban dwellers did not experience any benefits even during periods of prosperity. It was stated that the labouring classes in Newbridge, Mullingar and Mountmellick would always be poor because the numbers seeking work exceeded the demand.<sup>16</sup>

The attitude within the boards of guardians to the distress is also intriguing as can be noted by the discussion in the Naas poor law union<sup>17</sup> in the autumn of 1879. Despite evidence of widespread destitution the guardians were reluctant to sanction aid. Some of the landlord representatives, in particular G.P. Lattin Mansfield, argued that there was no distress and added that the usual amount of turf was being brought into Naas for sale, a point disputed by the tenant representatives on the board. While the turf supply in Naas union was critical, the landlords' attitude was similar to that of their colleagues in other areas. They feared that if they acknowledged the distress it would result in an increase in rates.<sup>18</sup> Mansfield personified this

point, objecting to the people being aided inside the workhouse and claiming that many were refusing to work unless they got a certain wage. He argued that as it was a buyer's market the people should take whatever was being offered.<sup>19</sup> Even at the height of the distress the Naas guardians attempted to reduce the number of able-bodied males in the workhouse by sending them to the relief works at Castlemaine, where the wages were 3/- a week.<sup>20</sup> The Naas guardians were only prepared to intervene if they did not have to bear the costs. They wanted the Local Government Board to pay for the increased expenditure that was needed. Their actions in curtailing the level of poor law relief can be noted in the average daily number of paupers in their workhouse between 1879 and 1882: declining from 366 in 1879 to 349 in 1881. This was when the numbers were increasing in the other unions: from 166 to 182 in Celbridge and from 325 to 388 in Athy.<sup>21</sup> [See Appendix 1] Even the attempts in November 1879 to get the Board of Works to extend its operations to Celbridge and Naas unions failed because the guardians were not prepared to support the initiatives.<sup>22</sup>

The attitude of the Naas guardians may be partly explained in that the union was not scheduled by the Local Government Board, which meant the Dublin authorities did not feel there was widespread distress in the union.<sup>23</sup> Both Athy and Naas made unsuccessful attempts to be scheduled in early 1880 after the government had conceded there was destitution in the country, especially among the unskilled labourers and they agreed that they could be used in fencing, levelling and repairing the roads. The position in Kildare and in the rest of Leinster can best be summed up by the *Leinster Express* editorial of 15 November 1879: "We are, no doubt, in the face of trying times, but no superhuman effort will be necessary to avert a calamity such as we passed through in 1848. A cautious administration of local taxation will greatly assist us to tide over the difficulties. Some temporary assistance from the Imperial exchequer there is every reason to believe will be required, but the extent to which assistance will be necessary will not impose any perceptible burden on the Imperial taxpayer."<sup>24</sup>

The situation in Naas was similar to many other unions in the east of the country. While widespread poverty was not evident, the towns of Kildare, Naas and Newbridge and the rural areas of Robertstown and Usk had genuine destitution. Differences emerged between the unions regarding the cost of keeping the paupers. Athy was one of the highest rated unions in the country, a situation which many ratepayers criticised. Even during pros-

perous times the average weekly cost of providing for an inmate was higher than any of the poor law unions along the western seaboard: being 4/11 per week in the year up to September 1879. This was when the cost in Newport was 3/5, Oughterard 3/7 and Swinford 2/11, regarded as the most destitute unions in the country.<sup>25</sup> Ratepayers objected because Naas union had a much lower rating. In 1879, the Naas guardians went to great lengths to reduce its outdoor relief expenditure which had been increasing dramatically: from £250 in 1861 to £1,266 in 1876 to £2,200 in 1878. One measure was to cut back on the groups who although eligible for relief were felt not to need it. At one meeting eight people were struck off the outdoor relief lists in Newbridge and three in Ballysax East, while others had their relief reduced.<sup>26</sup> The guardians were just tinkering with numbers, for when they came to the Robertstown division, regarded as the poorest in the union, they reduced the amount of aid to a number of people, but others equally destitute had to be added to the lists. In some instances the assistance had to be restored to its original level.<sup>27</sup> Variations also existed within the unions. Within Naas union, only four inmates came from the Blessington area, largely because the local-landowner, the marquis of Downshire, assisted his tenants and gave the local tradesmen and artisans employment.<sup>28</sup>

The level of distress within Kildare can be noted in the average number of days which each pauper was relieved in the workhouses between 1879-82. In Athy, this figure was 37 in 1879 and it declined to 26 days in 1881 and 1882. In Naas the figures were 30 days for 1879 and 21 days in 1881-2, while in Celbridge it was 54 days for 1879 and 33 for 1881.<sup>29</sup> [See Appendix 1] These indicate that people used the workhouse during periods of greatest destitution and left as the economic situation improved. As the quarter acre clause was in operation, which refused relief to tenants with more than one-quarter acre of land, it transpired the rise in the workhouse population came from the urban areas. Kildare was gradually becoming urbanised, with 13,813 or 18% of the population living in the five main urban centres of Athy, Maynooth, Kildare, Newbridge and Naas in 1881.<sup>30</sup> By March 1880 there were 152 receiving outdoor relief and 53 workhouse inmates from the Athy town and 9 indoor paupers and 42 on outdoor relief from Monsterevin.<sup>31</sup> An examination of the numbers receiving outdoor relief in the unions in Kildare provides a better indication of the overall pattern of destitution. While those with more than a quarter acre of land could not receive outdoor relief, their wives and children could do so if they were

destitute. During 1880 20% of the county's population were aided by the poor law. June 1880 saw the greatest distress with nearly 1,300 being assisted in the county, compared to 970 for the same period in 1878. Nearly 4% of the population were dependent on the poor law with 2% receiving outdoor relief. Athy was the most distressed union with 584 people receiving outdoor relief compared to 411 in 1878. More moderate increases were recorded in Celbridge, from 151 to 189 and in Naas from 416 to 454.<sup>32</sup>

The government's response to the crisis was not very inspiring and no immediate measures were taken to avert the difficulties facing the small farmers and the labourers. Their only proposals were an order to the Local Government Board inspectors to issue a second report in October as to the state of the various crops, and in August 1879 to establish a commission to inquire into the depressed state of agriculture. However, this commission, the Richmond Commission, only issued its report on 1 January 1881, long after the worst of the crisis had passed. At first, the government wanted the poor law to look after the relief operations and only in January 1880 were additional measures introduced whereby landowners could borrow from the Board of Works for relief operations. No Kildare landowner availed of this offer.

The existence of distress in County Kildare in late 1879-80 was overshadowed by the destitution in the west of Ireland. Once the reports appeared in the newspapers highlighting the widespread poverty and starvation in Galway, Mayo and Donegal Irish and foreign newspaper correspondents rushed to Connaught to record what appeared to be another famine. Many reporters competed for the spectacular story of poverty and want and ignored the situation in the rest of the country. Even the Freeman's Journal, the principal nationalist newspaper in the country, adopted this approach and its special correspondent, William O'Brien, sent back reports of famine and starvation from Mayo and Galway, while neglecting the situation in Kildare town, Naas and Newbridge. The plight of these people was overshadowed by the threat of famine in the west.

A difficulty which the Kildare authorities had to contend with was the extent of distress in the county. While it never experienced the destitution that was witnessed in Connacht, compared to the early 1870s it was distressed. However, the divisions within the poor law unions meant that often decisions as to whether they should apply for special aid or whether to have

the union scheduled as distressed were delayed or never pursued. In such circumstances the poor and destitute were the only losers. It is thus easier to ascertain the level of poverty in the western counties as much of this relief came from the private relief organisations and they published accounts as to their expenditure and income. The level of relief in Kildare is more difficult to quantify as much of its source was private donations to local relief organisations who did not keep detailed accounts. In the west starvation was the problem. Consequently, much of the relief organisations' resources was spent on feeding the people. This did not occur in Kildare where the relief money was targeted on schemes which would benefit the whole community, while at the same time giving employment to those sections of the community most in need, the small farmers and the labourers.

That Kildare never experienced chronic distress can be noted from a number of points. First, only six parishes in the county applied to the principal national relief organisation, the Mansion House Relief Committee, for assistance compared to virtually every parish in counties Galway, Mayo and Leitrim. The Mansion House Relief Committee assisted 690 people in County Kildare - at Fontstown, Kilmeague, Kildare and Suncroft - the lowest number relieved in the country. It is minuscule compared to Galway (128,250), Mayo (114,854), Donegal (75,000) and Cork (75,150).<sup>33</sup> Second the aid which each of the Kildare committees received was small compared to those in Connacht. While the Kilmeague and Robertstown committees received £90 towards relief operations in their parishes, many of the committees in Connacht got up to £500. This is not to say those receiving relief in Kildare were not as destitute as their counterparts in the west, but they were not as numerous. A bad harvest or lack of employment opportunities had the same impact in both regions. What was forgotten was that poverty and destitution were part of the day-to-day existence in Mayo, Connemara and West Donegal, whereas it was a new experience in Kildare. Private committees and the guardians could and did make collections for the relief efforts in their areas which was then used to help the local destitute.

The relief operations in this period must be regarded as the success of private individuals and charity rather than government action to tackle the distress. Clergymen, farmers, town commissioners, shopkeepers and professional people comprised the local committees and they were primarily responsible for helping overcome the destitution in their areas. Relief com-

mittees were established which had no direct contact with the Mansion House Relief Committee, as in Athy, Naas and Newbridge. There was a need for such committees the Athy organisations, stating that out of 80 houses that they had visited, only six had beds and nine had blankets.<sup>34</sup>

Unfortunately it took time for the local relief committees to begin their operations. Dr Gregory Sale wrote that there was much distress around Kildare town and that five men had called to his dispensary on 27 January stating that they were unable to obtain work and their families were destitute.<sup>35</sup> Sale said that he was not aware of any relief operations in the town at that point of time. The slow start in Kildare contrasts with the situation in the west where local relief committees were formed in the autumn of 1879 as the distress became apparent.<sup>36</sup> The delay in Kildare must be attributed to the fact that large scale distress had not been witnessed in the county since the Great Famine, whereas Connacht had experienced severe destitution in every decade since 1850. Thus when the potato failed in 1879 relief committees were quickly formed in the west to deal with the crisis. Another factor was the late formation of Land League branches in Kildare. The first branch was not set up until February 1880, five months after they had come into existence in Connacht. The western branches secured money for the relief operations within their parishes. The Land League was never comfortable with its function as a relief agency. Nevertheless it gave assistance to the distressed parts of the country, but the membership in County Kildare was made up of that class which was not severely distressed.<sup>37</sup> This was probably the reason for the movements negative attitude towards the relief of the smaller farmers and labourers. These groups were tolerated at demonstrations, but no effort was made to accommodate their grievances. While the distress helped initiate the land agitation in the west, this did not happen in Kildare.<sup>38</sup>

The Mansion House Relief Committee, which was established by the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Edward Dwyer Gray, on 2 January 1880, was the only national agency to provide relief for the people of Kildare. Certain guidelines had to be adhered to before it would give out aid. Local Catholic and Protestant clergymen, the chairman or vice-chairman of the local board of guardians, the chairman or vice-chairman of the local dispensary committee and the local medical officers had to be members of the local committee. In Kildare, the four committees who received help from the Mansion House Relief Committee were composed of 11 Catholic clergymen, 6 other

clergymen, 4 doctors, 5 poor law guardians and 37 laymen.<sup>39</sup> This balance ensured that the committees represented all sections of the local community and gave a true picture of the destitution. Otherwise exaggerated claims as to the distress could be made.

**COMPOSITION OF RELIEF COMMITTEES WORKING WITH THE MANSION HOUSE RELIEF COMMITTEE IN KILDARE AND IRELAND, 1879-80.**

	Catholic Priests	Other Clergymen	Medical People	Poor Law Guardians	Lay People	Total
KILDARE	11	6	4	5	37	63
IRELAND	1,319	747	462	991	4,147	7,666

In most instances the people first approached their clergy seeking help. They feared if they made representations to the poor law guardians and relieving officers that they would have to go into the workhouses for relief.<sup>40</sup> At least their clergy could intercede on their behalf and hopefully secure relief. Also, the priests were aware of the plight of their parishioners and could act as honest intermediaries when dealing with the authorities. The clergy were possibly the only group that the poor trusted. Their practical role in Kildare and other parts of the country can be seen in their participation in the local relief committees and in the distribution of aid. They became an indispensable component in the relief operations.

The work of the Rathangan Relief Committee gives a good insight into the operations of the local relief committees. It covered an area of 16 sq. miles and assisted 500 people, mainly small farmers, whose harvest had failed. Rev. Gerry L'Estrange, the Church of Ireland rector, was its chairman, and the Catholic curate, Fr O'Leary, was its treasurer. While the local parish priest, Fr Nolan, was not on the committee because of poor health, the Mansion House Relief Committee in Dublin would not advance money until it was informed why he was not a member.<sup>41</sup> The committee temporarily overcame their difficulties by private subscriptions within the parish which totalled £90, but in April it implored the Mansion House Committee in Dublin for help saying: "The distress is growing more intense and more alarming, as we have received no help from any public fund and our private and local resources are completely inadequate to meet the dire distress prevailing."<sup>42</sup>

Another parish with widespread distress was Robertstown where the local relief committee was unable to deal with the crisis. In February the region was divided into two areas with an additional committee established in Kilmeague to look after the 500 destitute people in Kilmeague and Feighcullen, under the chairmanship of Rev. John Farrell, P.P. The Robertstown committee dealt with Newtown Donore, Prosperous, Blackwood and Graigues.<sup>43</sup> Fr Farrell and the local rector, Rev. G. Garrett, stated that the relief committee had been set up because the Robertstown committee left many parts of their parishes without relief. It was also alleged that money given to the committee members for distribution among the poor was never received by the committee, instead being passed on to the poor law guardians for distribution. However, the primary motive for the breakup of the Robertstown committee, according to Fr P. Kinsella and Fr Nellis of Robertstown, was because of the involvement of Rev. Cotton. Cotton had published offensive tracts on religious subjects and was the director of the Carogh Orphanage in Robertstown, which was alleged to be a proselytising agency.<sup>44</sup>

It is not possible to ascertain the exact amount that was provided for relief operations in Kildare. While the Mansion House Relief Fund and to a lesser extent the Land League provided money for relief none was made available by the Duchess of Marlborough Committee or the New York Herald Relief Fund as all of their resources were directed to the west of Ireland. The Mansion House Relief Fund provided only £144 for relief operations in Kildare compared to £61,000 for Mayo and Galway. Nevertheless, this was tacit recognition of the existence of destitution within the county. Contributions also came from within Kildare, but it is difficult to quantify how much was collected. As it was the distress was overcome by a combination of local efforts and small allocations from the central relief organisations.

While the plight of the small farmers and agricultural labourers was acute, that of the urban dwellers was just as severe and more prolonged. The tenants' refusal to pay their rents had a knock-on effect on the whole community with the labourers and urban tradesmen suffering most.<sup>45</sup> In Celbridge the closure of a large paper mill, making 600 workers redundant, exacerbated matters.<sup>46</sup> It was generally agreed that Kildare town was the centre of the distress in the county. By February 1880, 72 townspeople were receiving outdoor relief, accounting for nearly 15% of the total on outdoor relief

in the Naas union. Fr J. Nolan, P.P., chaired a meeting in the town on 2 February which called for works to overcome distress in the town. He stated: "We are in the midst of a period of misery and distress, rapidly drifting to absolute want, with a moral certainty that the darkest hour is yet before us. Nor is this state of affairs confined to any one area."

He highlighted the great poverty in the town, and alleged that newspaper reporters and others had overlooked it as they rushed to the west.<sup>47</sup> Some local people regarded the crisis as a way of solving the town's inadequate water supply problem: the town being dependent on four pumps. A supply would cost £4,000 and many of the town's destitute and unemployed could be given work. Quick action was needed but the Naas guardians felt the proposal would be too expensive and instead opted to carry out a report. The opportunity to take decisive action was lost.<sup>48</sup> A relief committee was established with Frs Nolan and Sheridan in charge and it called on the guardians to establish relief works in the town, especially for labourers.

Urgent intervention was also needed in Naas, where the town commissioners agonised over the provision of £30 for the improvement of the Fair Green. The Naas relief committee, which included Archdeacon de Burgh and the parish priest, Fr T. Morrin, gave £30 to the project, but only if the town commissioners provided a similar grant. They stipulated that the contractor would have to employ local labourers. The commissioners anguished over what to do as they were already £50 in debt and feared such unauthorised expenditure could result in each commissioner being personally responsible for the payment. Nobody mentioned the principal objective: the provision of much needed employment for the local poor. Eventually the town commissioners agreed to the funding and 25 labourers were given work.<sup>49</sup> It must be noted that the relief committee rather than the elected authorities initiated the scheme. The committee spent £155 on relief measures in Naas during the spring of 1880, but it never appealed to any of the national organisations for aid, partly because it preferred to secure its funding from the local inhabitants, landlords, and gentry. The attitude is best summed up by Rev. R.D. Skuse who opposed the motion to seek aid from the Mansion House Relief Committee saying, "...it would be a shame to let it go to the public that Naas would look elsewhere for help".<sup>50</sup>

There was little liaison between the private relief committees and those

agencies who were legally bound to look after the poor and destitute. Most of the private relief committees tried to secure subscriptions to overcome the destitution in their areas. They only sought assistance from the poor law guardians and the national relief organisations when their own resources were exhausted and they were no longer able to help the poor, as with the Fontstown and Kildare relief committees. This contrasts with the situation in the west of Ireland where there was close co-ordination between the public and private agencies.<sup>51</sup>

Distress was at its height in April-May 1880, but the public's attention was diverted to other events. In March-April the country was in the grip of a general election and the subsequent power struggle between the whigs and advanced section of the Home Rule party. This was partly because those who were suffering most - the labourers and small farmers - did not have the vote. No mention was made of their plight at any of the election meetings in the county. The local newspapers for the March-April period has virtually no information on destitution in the county. However, the correspondence of the Mansion House Relief Committee for this period indicates an increase in distress from all parts of the country, including Kildare. Between November 1879 and April 1880 the Irish Chief Secretary received 166 memorials from all parts of the country, including Naas and Athy, calling on the government to introduce relief works especially for the town labourers.<sup>52</sup> That Kildare never encountered the full force of the crisis was perhaps summed up by a Naas poor law guardian, Mr O'Malley: 'Kildare is so near the smoke of Dublin that we won't feel the shoe pinch here till the very last'.<sup>53</sup>

No landowner in Kildare applied for loans under the Relief of Distress Act of 1880, yet they played a role in the relief efforts. Landlords from seventeen counties applied for money to carry out estate improvements so that they could provide their tenants with employment.<sup>54</sup> This is not to say that Kildare landlords did not provide relief works for their tenants. Landowners, like the duke of Leinster, did assist their destitute tenants, primarily by giving employment. Drainage, road making and other schemes were undertaken at Carton House, Athy, Castledermot, Rathangan and Maynooth for those who needed work, prompting one recent analyst to argue that this intervention helped quell any agrarian agitation within the county in 1879.<sup>55</sup> By and large landlords took a cautious approach to relief. The Kildare baronial sessions spent only £339 on the construction of new

roads within the county.<sup>56</sup> New roads gave worthwhile relief to the unemployed and also provided long term benefits for the local community. Many proprietors were aware of the difficulties which their tenants endured, but this concern was overshadowed by their annoyance with the Land League agitation, especially when the league became a major force in the county from the late spring of 1880. They realised that many small farmers were unable to pay their rents, but while others could they were intimidated into withholding it. Landowners like the duke of Leinster preferred to help their small holders through relief works than through rent abatements, although during the initial stages of the distress in late 1879 many including the duke, Rev. Frederick Fitzgerald and Rev. T.J. Rawson in Kilcullen, the marquis of Drogheda, James William Mitchell of Ballinure and Michael Walsh of Newtown House, Moone, gave rent reductions of between 20 and 30%.<sup>57</sup> However such reductions must be taken in perspective. As Samuel Clark points out a rent abatement of 39% would only have reduced a farm family's expenditure by less than 5%, hardly sufficient in the light of the difficulties which families were experiencing in their agricultural fortunes.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, the rent abatements did not have the effect of appeasing the land agitation in the county in 1880.

The main focus of the government's national relief strategy during 1879-82 was the provision of seed potatoes. The major problem facing the guardians in Kildare was not the alleviation of immediate want, but rather how to ensure that the people would have potatoes and oats for the following year. Few parts of the county faced chronic destitution, but most regions had no seed potatoes. The correspondence of the boards of guardians and the relief committees indicate that the small farmers had no potatoes to plant. It was estimated in Athy union that if seed potatoes were not handed out, two-thirds of the land reserved for the crop would go unplanted. A similar scenario existed in the west of Ireland and the authorities responded with the Seed Supply Act in March 1880. Interest free loans were made available to the poor law unions to purchase seed potatoes and to distribute them to farmers. Under the act all of the electoral divisions in Athy and Naas, and six of the divisions in Celbridge - Balraheen, Cloncurry, Donadea, Kilcock, Rathcoole and Saggart were scheduled.<sup>59</sup> The constabulary were to ensure that the land was ready for planting and this was carried out in conjunction with the local guardians. However, there were inconsistencies. People under a £4 valuation only received enough seed to sow a quarter acre with potatoes. People who planted land under conacre, in particular labourers,

were excluded from the act. This caused much debate in Athy union.<sup>60</sup> Also, farmers who received seed potatoes had to repay the loan, even though many were under the £4 valuation and as time was to show were unable to make the repayments. In August, Robertstown and Lacken in Naas union were exempted from paying the seed loan because of the poverty of the inhabitants. In the end, Naas union got £2,287 and Athy £2,173 under the scheme. Athy had sought £4,270. [See appendix 2]

While the act achieved its objective of preventing a full scale disaster in the autumn of 1880 it was not without its difficulties. In Athy, a large proportion of the seeds were of a poor quality and not resistant to blight. Few potatoes were supplied to Monasterevin because of a misunderstanding between the Athy poor law guardians and the potato supplier, Mr Anthony. He had been asked to supply 100 tons of potatoes, but had thought only 100 barrels were required. The potatoes were stored and distributed in Athy, and none were sent to Monasterevin. By the time the mistake was uncovered it was too late to secure an alternative source on the open market.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, the 1880 Seed Supply Act was important in ensuring that Kildare did not encounter the same scenes of poverty and distress as had occurred in 1879-80.

However, the continuing conflict between the Land League and the landlords did have further repercussions for the labouring groups in 1880-1. The winter of 1880-1 saw the labourers facing further hardships primarily because of the non-payment of rents.<sup>62</sup> Even though the 1880 harvest had been good the farmers did not pass on the benefits by giving employment to the labourers. Instead they paid off the debts that they had accumulated between 1877 and 1880. The situation was exacerbated by the duke of Leinster's decision to make 200 of his labourers redundant, largely because of the Land League's demands for a reduction in rent and their refusal to pay rents. This led to an increase in the numbers seeking relief in Athy and Celbridge.<sup>63</sup>

The severity of the winter of 1880-1 meant that most of the labourers in Athy could not get work and 300 were destitute. They were the last group to secure the benefits from the upturn in agriculture. The Athy relief committee was reestablished in early 1881 headed by the chairman of the town commissioners, Mr Minch, and including town commissioners, clergy and other professional people. During the winter of 1880-1 it collected £125

through private subscriptions and work was provided for 50 unemployed men. A register of people who could provide jobs was drawn up and during January and February 1881 the committee met at 6 pm each day and gave out relief and assigned jobs.<sup>64</sup> A deputation was also sent to the local guardians seeking special relief works. Part of the problem, not alone in Kildare but throughout the country, was that the guardians were unable to give the able-bodied outdoor relief. They could only be helped in the workhouse, despite the fact that many were only experiencing temporary distress. The local relieving officer had to ascertain who should be relieved, but the master in Athy did not have room for any able-bodied men. The guardians passed a resolution stating: "That the distress felt in Athy and vicinity by the unemployed poor is so great as to call for prompt action on the part of the board to use any extreme powers which the Local Government Board can sanction, the more so as there is not room at present in the workhouse for able-bodied men."<sup>65</sup>

The situation was partly relieved by the construction of a sewer, financed by a grant made available under the Relief of Distress Act, and a temporary scheme whereby able-bodied males were employed breaking stones at the quarries of Woodbine and Roundhills.<sup>66</sup>

The people in Kildare town also called for public works in 1881 so that the local labourers could be employed. There was a general consensus that the granting of relief would not end the crisis. Relief works were required as they gave employment and benefited the whole community. One of the resolutions adopted at the meeting in Kildare on 16 January called for the commencement of the sewage works so that local labourers could be employed.<sup>67</sup> While the Naas guardians were sympathetic to the appeal they still were divided as to who would finance it. Not until March 1881 did they agree to undertake the work, but only after the contractor, Mr Southwell, agreed to reduce his tender by £20. In addition all local labourers had to be employed.<sup>68</sup>

In the immediate years after 1881 Kildare never again experienced the distress and poverty it had witnessed between 1879 and 1881. This was largely because of good harvests which benefited all sections of the community. The harvest of 1882 in Kildare and the surrounding counties was better and more abundant than in most other parts of the country. This was despite the generally wet weather in June and July. The only crop which suffered

greatly was the potato, especially those other than the champion, but the wheat, oats, barley and hay crops were quite abundant.<sup>69</sup> During the crisis of 1882-3 none of the Kildare poor law unions were regarded as being distressed.

In examining the situation in County Kildare between 1879-82 it must be pointed out that while there was distress there was no starvation. While some commentators stated that starvation existed, this must be put down to exaggeration. Even the local relief committees were prone to overstate the distress. This can be largely attributed to the manner in which other districts were receiving relief. If an area was not forceful about its case it risked getting no assistance. This can be noted by the statement of Baron de Robeck at the Naas poor law union meeting in February 1880, 'We might not want the money so much as other places, but still if we got it at this low rate of interest...'<sup>70</sup>

While the crisis of 1879-82 never reached the levels of the Great Famine, it nevertheless was a stark reminder of what had happened 30 years earlier. The distress showed that there were social groups who existed on a knife-edge and had to contend with periodic crises. One group fared worst of all and they were the unskilled urban sections - in many ways the forgotten sector in nineteenth-century Ireland. It also shows up the interdependence between town and country in Ireland. A crisis in agriculture was very much felt by all sections not alone those who lived in rural Ireland. However, those in the towns were the last to benefit from any agricultural upturn. Even within the county there was great regional variations as to distress, with people in Robertstown and Fontstown being worse off than those in Celbridge. The government's attitude to distress had not really changed since the time of the Famine: it was left up to the poor law and private charity to cope with the crisis. Thus while Kildare may not have experienced the full ravages of the subsistence crisis of 1879-82 it was not totally isolated nor insulated from the full effects of an agricultural downturn.

## REFERENCES

1. See W. E. Vaughan & A.J. Fitzpatrick (eds), *Irish Historical statistics: population 1821-1971* (Dublin, 1978), pp 6. 30-1.
2. See J.S. Donnelly, 'The Irish agricultural depression of 1859-64' in *Irish economic and*

- social History* iii (1976), pp 34-6; T.P. O'Neill, 'The food crisis of the 1890s' in E. Margaret Crawford (ed), *Famine: the Irish experience 900-1900* (Edinburgh, 1989), p.177. In the first nine months of 1890 the total rainfall was 20.8 inches.
3. O'Neill, op. cit., p.176.
  4. See Donnelly, op. cit, pp 41-2.
  5. For the situation in the adjoining county of Queen's Co. see J.H. Carter, *The land war and its leaders in Queen's Co. 1879-82* (Portlaoise, 1994), pp 1-20.
  6. See N.D. Palmer, *The Irish Land League crisis* (rep. New York, 1978), p.65; At Blandsfort House near Ballyroan in the neighbouring Queen's Co. there had been an average monthly rainfall of 3.54 inches between April and September, compared to the normal 2.72 inches per month, see Carter, *Land war and its leaders in Queen's Co.*, p.2.
  7. The potato yield was 2.1 tons in 1878, 2.0 in 1877 and 1.8 in 1876. *Annual report of The Local Government Board for Ireland being the eleventh report under the Local Government Board 'Ireland' act* H.C. 1883 [C 3581] xxix, p.108.
  8. *Annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland being the eight report under The Local Government Board (Ireland) Act* H.C. 1880, xxviii [C 2603 1] pp. 60-1.
  9. *Ibid.*, pp 58-9.
  10. T. W. Grimshaw, *Special report on agricultural produce and fuel supply in Ireland, as ascertained by inquiries made in October 1879* (Dublin, 1879), p 32.
  11. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
  12. Dublin City Archives (D.C.A.), *Mansion House Relief Committee Fund*, Kilmeague, Robertstown, ch/1/338/10, questionnaire dated 3 Mar. 1880; Fontstown, ch/421/1-3, letters dated 30 & 31 January 1880.
  13. Thomas Nelson, *The land war in county Kildare* (Maynooth, 1988), pp 11-12; for the situation with the boards of guardians in this period see W.L. Feingold, *The revolt of the tenantry: the transformation of local government in Ireland, 1872-86* (Boston, 1984), pp.11-49.
  14. *Kildare Observer, Leinster Express*, both 4 Oct. 1879.
  15. *Leinster Express*, 7 Feb. 1880, p.6.
  16. See *Annual report of The Local Government Board for Ireland, being the ninth report under The Local Government Board (Ireland) Act*, H.C. 1881 xlvii [C 2916 1] p.89.
  17. *Kildare Observer*, 15 Nov. 1879, p.6.
  18. See Gerard Moran, 'Famine and the land war: relief and distress in Mayo, 1879-1882' in *Cathair na Mart*, v (1985), pp62-5.
  19. *Kildare Observer*, 6 Dec. 1879, p.3.
  20. *Ibid.*, 17 Jan. 1880, p.6.
  21. *Annual report of The Local Government Board for Ireland, being the eight report under 'The Local Government Board (Ireland) Act'*, H.C. 1880, xxviii [c 2603 i] p. 224; *Annual report...being the tenth report...*, H.C. 1882, xxxi [c 3112], p.90.
  22. National Archives, *Chief Secretary's Office, Registered Papers, 1879/22489*, dated 22 Dec. 1879.
  23. Only two poor law unions in Leinster were scheduled as distressed - Granard and Athlone - during the spring of 1880. *Correspondence relative to measures for the relief of distress in Ireland, 1879-80*, H.C. 1880 [c 2483], xii, pp 16-18.
  24. *Leinster Express*, 15 Nov. 1879, p.5.

25. *Annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland., being the eight report under the 'Local Government Board (Ireland) Act'*, H.C. 1880, xxviii [c 2603 i], pp 220-7.
26. *Leinster Express*, 5 July 1879, p.5.
27. See *Leinster Express*, 12 Jul., 19 Jul. 1879.
28. See Finlay Dun, *Landlord and tenants in Ireland* (London, 1880), pp 14-5.
29. *Annual report...for Ireland, being the eight report...*, H.C. 1880, xxviii [c 2603 i], p.224; *Annual report...for Ireland, being the tenth report...*, H.C.1882, xxxi [c 3111], p.90.
30. Vaughan and Fitzpatrick, op. cit., pp 6, 30-1. The growth of the towns in Kildare in the post-Famine period was largely to act as service centres for the rural communities engaged in the livestock industry. The growing levels of money which farmers had up to the 1870s meant that this was spent in the towns, helping to provide employment. However, any adverse conditions affecting the farmers had severe consequences for the towns' people, see Donald E. Jordan, Jr, *Land and popular politics in Ireland: County Mayo from the plantation to the land war* (Cambridge, 1994), pp 157-8.
31. *Kildare Observer*, 13 Mar. 1880, p.6.
32. *Returns of the numbers in receipt of relief in the several unions in Ireland on 1 January, 1 March and 1 June in 1878, 1879 and 1880*, H.C. 1880 [420 sess. 2] lxii, pp 13-20.
33. D.C.A., *Mansion House Relief Committee, c/1/41/A*, Co. Kildare, numbers relieved by local committees.
34. See *Kildare Observer*, 26 Feb. 1881, p.5.
35. D.C.A., *Mansion House Relief Committee*. Kilmeague/Robertstown, ch/1/336/6, George Sale dated 29 Jan. 1880.
36. For the speed in which relief operations were undertaken in the west, see Moran, 'Famine and the land war, pt. 1', pp.60-1.
37. Nelson, *Land War in County Kildare*, p.5.
38. See Gerard Moran, 'Famine and the Land War: relief and distress in Mayo, 1879-81' in *Cathair na Mart*, vi (1986), pp.119-20; *ibid.*, "James Daly and the rise and fall of the Land League in the West of Ireland" in *Irish Historical Studies* (114) (Nov. 1994). This must be mainly attributed to the very limited demands of the western tenants - a reduction in rents which would help them feed their families.
39. D.C.A., *Mansion House Relief Committee ch/35*. Tables of composition of local relief committees.
40. In March 1880, The Parish Priest of Carbury, Fr. D. Fury, wrote to the Edenderry poor law guardians stating that there was great distress in parts of his parish 'in which some of the poor people stated they would 'eat grass' or die of starvation before they would give up their cabins and enter the workhouse'. *Kildare Observer* 20 Mar. 1880, p.3.
41. See D.C.A., *Mansion House Relief Committee*, Rathangan, ch 1/774/3, Fr E. O'Leary to Dublin committee, dated 11 Mar. 1880.
42. *ibid.*, ch/773/4, letter dated 3 April 1880.
43. See *ibid.*, Kilmeague, Robertstown, ch/38/1-3 letters dated 11 Feb. 1880.
44. *Ibid.*, ch/38/114. P. Kinsella to Mansion House, dated 4 Mar. 1880. Kinsella was not prepared, to make these allegations publicly, fearing a libel suit which he would not have the money to contest. His aim was to secure funds for the purchase of seed to be distributed in the Robertstown part of his parish.



45. For an example of how the tenants' refusal to pay their rents had a knock-on effect see Gerard Moran, *A radical priest in Mayo Fr. Patrick Lavelle: The rise and fall of an Irish nationalist, 1885-1886* (Dublin, 1994) pp. 160-1.
46. *Annual report of the Local Government Board...being the ninth report...* H.C.1881, xlvii [c 2926 i] p.105.
47. *Leinster Express* 7 Feb. 1880, p.5.
48. *Kildare Observer* 21 Feb. 1880.
49. *ibid.*, 13 & 21 Feb. 1880.
50. *ibid.*, 13Mar. 1880, p.5.
51. One of the few indications of co-operation was between the Fontstown relief committee and the Athy union over the distribution of seed potatoes in its area, see *Leinster Express*, 20 Mar. 1880.
52. See National Archives, *C.S.O.,R.P.*, 1879/19582-9, memorials on distress in Ireland.
53. *Leinster Express*, 15 Nov. 1879, p.3; *Kildare Observer*, 15 Nov. 1879, p.6. This attitude was also prevalent among the working classes in Dublin at this time who felt that the poor of the surrounding counties were coming into Dublin, working for lower wages and thus exacerbating the problems of the Dublin poor, see Fergus A. D'Arcy, 'Unemployment demonstrations in Dublin, 1879-1882', in *Saothar* 17 (1992), pp 15-16.
54. These landowners were mainly from King's Co., Longford, Wicklow and Wexford. See *Return of the names of landowners and sanitary authorities who have obtained loans under the provisions of "the Relief of Distress (Ireland) Act 1880" distinguishing those obtained at the reduced rate of interest showing the dates of application and of sanction, the amount of the loans, the description of works together with the dates of first advances and gross amounts of money issued on account of such loans; to the 31 day of December, inclusive, arranged by counties and baronies* H.C. 1881 (99) lvii.
55. This argument has been put forward by Nelson, *Land war in Kildare*, p.16. For an account of the duke of Leinster's relief work in Kildare see Dun, *Landlords and tenants in Ireland*, p.25. At Rathangan it was found that the wages provided was totally inadequate to support the families of labourers, D.C.A., Mansion House Relief Committee, Kildare town, ch/1/565/2 letter 11 Feb. 1880.
56. *Return of the total amount presented in each county in Ireland (County Dublin excepted) at the Spring assizes in 1880; and, of the number of magistrates and associated cesspayers respectively who attended the baronial sessions and the adjourned or opening sessions, previous to the Spring assizes in 1880 in each county (County Dublin excepted)*, H.C. 1882 [403 sess. 2] lxii, p.62.
57. *Leinster Express*, 1 & 15 Nov. 1879, 17 Jan., 28 Feb. 1880.
58. Samuel Clark, *The social origins of the Irish land war* (Princeton, 1979), pp 239-40; Jordan, *Land and popular politics in Ireland*, p.208.
59. *Return showing the unions and electoral divisions scheduled by the Local Government Board for Ireland under the Seed Supply (Ireland) Act, 1880*, H.C. 1880 [299 sess. 2] lxvii, pp 2-4.
60. *Kildare Observer*, 20 May 1880, p.5.
61. *Leinster Express*, 1 May 1880, p.3.
62. *Annual report of the Local Government Board...being the ninth report...*, H.C. 1881, xlvii, [c 2926 1] p.112.

63. *Leinster Express*, 1 Jan. 1881, p.5; *Annual report of the Local Government Board...being the ninth report...*, H.C. 1881, xlvii [c 2926 1], p.105.
64. *Leinster Express*, 22 Jan. 1881, 26 Feb. 1881.
65. *Leinster Leader*, 22 Jan. 1881, p.3.
66. *Kildare Observer*, 26 Feb. 1881, p.6; *Leinster Express*, 29 Jan. 1881.
67. *Leinster Leader*, 22 Jan. 1881, p.3; *Leinster Express*, 5 Feb. 1881, p.5.
68. *Leinster Leader*, 22 Jan. 1881, p.7; *Leinster Express*, 5 Mar. 1881, p.6.
69. *Annual report of the Local Government Board ... being the eleventh report ...* H.C.1881[ c 3581], xxix, pp. 66-7, 77-9.
70. *Leinster Express*, 7 Feb. 1880, p.6.

## APPENDIX 1

Numbers receiving relief in the Kildare Poor Law Unions up to the end of September, 1879-1882.

No's receiving relief in Naas workhouse outdoor			Average no. of days of relief for each pauper	Average daily no's of paupers in workhouse	Average weekly cost per head in workhouse
1879	4,492	1,386	30	366	3/9½
1880	5,445	1,319	24	364	3/8¾
1881	6,194	2,177	21	349	3/7
1882	6,097	1,354	21	351	3/10½

No's receiving relief in Athy workhouse outdoor			Average no. of days of relief for each pauper	Average daily no's of paupers in workhouse	Average weekly cost per head in workhouse
1879	3,226	707	37	325	4/11¼
1880	4,304	1,042	30	348	4/5¼
1881	5,369	1,530	26	388	4/4
1882	5,371	935	26	389	4/5

No's receiving relief in Celbridge workhouse outdoor			Average no. of days of relief for each pauper	Average daily no's of paupers in workhouse	Average weekly cost per head in workhouse
1879	1,126	546	54	166	4/7¼
1880	1,744	601	38	179	4/5¼
1881	2,017	838	38	182	4/5½
1882	2,012	1,354	21	351	3/10

Source: Annual Report of the Local Government Board for Ireland, being the eight report under 'the Local Government Board Ireland' Act. H.C. 1880, xxviii [c 2603 i], pp 220-7 Annual report of the Local Government Board ... being the ninth report ... H.C. 1881, xlvii [c 2926 i], pp. 170-177; Annual Report of the Local Government Board ... being the tenth report ..., H.C. 1882, xxxi [c 3111], pp. 8-92; Annual Report of the Local Government Board ... being the eleventh report ..., H.C. 1883, xxix [c 3581], pp. 230-35.

## APPENDIX 2

Amount made available to Naas Poor Law Union under terms of 1880 Seed Supply Act.

## Electoral Divisions:

Ballymore Eustace	£59/8/7
Ballysax East	£29/10/3
Ballysax West	£29/10/5
Burgage	£11/8/6
Carnalway	£37/9/4
Carragh	£56/10/8
Clane	£73/8/1
Donore	£52/13/7
Downings	£72/15/8
Dunmurry	£32/19/9
Feighcullen	£51/12/4
Gilltown	£3/15/6
Kilbride	£31/18/3
Kilcullen	£96/3/3
Kildare	£156/13/6
Kill	£20/18/9
Killasgue	£8/5/10
Kilmeague Nt.	£158/1/2
Kilmeague St.	£189/11/-
Kilteel	£19/1/3
Lacken	£265/10/8
Morrinstown Biller	£68/12/4
Naas	£32/19/10
Newbridge	£78/4/-
Newtown	£25/15/3
Old Connell	£152/12/1
Oughterard	£11/16/2
Pollardstown	£25/14/1 1
Rathernall	£83/10/9
Rathmore	£17/18/4
Robertstown	£146/19/4
Timahoe North	£176/9/3
Timahoe South	£9/10/6
Usk	£73/10/4

Total

£2,287/12/5

Amount made available to Athy Poor Law Union under Terms of 1880 Seed Supply Act.

## Electoral Divisions:

Athy	£66/13/1 1
Ballyadams	£64/8/5
Ballybracken	£159/11/1
Ballylinan	£129/7/9
Ballyshannon	£60/8/10
Barrowhouse	£35/6/7
Bert	£14/2/8
Birtown	£22/15/7
Castledermot	£30/5/9
Churchtown	£70/-/1
Curraghclone	£19/17/-
Dunmanogue	£18/5/3
Grangemellon	£37/8/-
Fontstown	£56/9/-
Harristown	£78/3/7
Inchaquire	£11/5/9
Kilberry	£90/4/10
Kildangan	£33/10/5
Killabin	£1/4/3
Kilrush	£27/8/10
Lackagh	£113/9/2
Luggacurran	£82/15/4
Monasterevin	£208/2/-
Moone	£6/2/10
Moyanna	£36/2/1
Narraghmore	£5/2/1
Nurney	£84/6/9
Quinsborough	£35/9/9
Rathaspick	£247/13/5
Skerries	£38/13/9
Stradbally	£1135/9/11
Tankardstown	£70/-/4
Timogue	£36/19/4
Vicarstown	£33/1/3

Total

£2,173/13/7

# RESPONSES TO FAMINE IN WEST WICKLOW

SÉAMAS Ó MATTIÚ

A rare insight into the progress of famine as it unfolded almost on a day by day basis, and the response of the local landowners to it, is obtained in the pages of the journal of Elizabeth Smith of Baltyboys, near Blessington in west Wicklow. While the journal provides a wealth of information into the social life of the Blessington area in the 1840s and the condition of the people, particularly Elizabeth Smith's own tenants in those difficult years, I would like to concentrate here on her view of the official response to famine as carried out by the local expressions of officialdom, the Naas Poor Law Union, the barony of Upper Talbotstown Grand Jury and the local Blessington Relief Committee as far as they come within her ken in the journal.

Elizabeth Grant was born in Edinburgh in 1797 and moved to the Smith family estate of Baltyboys shortly after her marriage to Henry Smith in 1830.<sup>1</sup> In 1840 she began to keep a journal and extracts for the crucial years 1840-50 have been published. When reading the journal it must be kept in mind that Elizabeth Smith differed from the vast majority of those of who she writes in nationality, religion and social class.

Very early in the journal matters concerning the affairs of the Naas Poor Law Union crop up. The Naas Union had been set up in 1839 and it took in two electoral divisions in west Wicklow Blessington and Boystown (Baltyboys).<sup>2</sup> These areas despite being in the county of Wicklow were geo-

graphically natural hinterlands of Naas and the decision to attach them to the Naas Union was a sensible one.

In March 1840 she reports that her husband, Henry, has been nominated to stand in the election for Poor Law Guardians. Their near neighbour, John Hornidge of Tulfarris, having got Henry to consent to his nomination is all in a bustle to have him elected as they are opposed 'by one Riley, set up by the priests'. Hornidge was trying hard to get Henry to canvass some respectable farmers in Lackan, but Smith is not inclined to stoop so low. His attitude is that 'if the blackguards elect him he will do his best for them but he won't solicit one of their most sweet voices. They all know he has consented to the nomination.'<sup>3</sup> Not surprising Smith lost the election. But he did become a guardian in subsequent years.

As early as 1841 she reported a failure of the potato crop which was a fore-taste of the disaster to come. On 27 October 1841 she wrote. "Bitter cold and dismal is the prospect before us, so early so severe a winter, no fuel, no harvest, corn still out and malting, potato crop a failure, what will become of the improvident poor of this country, in the Poor House some must be driven to take refuge but it won't contain a fourth part of the starving population and many will die rather than enter it and many, many a decent family will suffer bitterly and won't complain."<sup>4</sup>

The first reference in the journal to the beginning of the great famine appears four years later, again in October, this time 26 October 1845: "The month of October is running rapidly away, the weeks actually flying. The Col. has been very much occupied with plans for the prevention of such extreme distress as the failure of the potato crop threatens the poor with. Just in Baltyboys there seems to be no damage done but very near at hand this widespread disease has already attacked some large con-acre fields where the poor man's supply for the next nine months may without active measures speedily taken, fail him entirely."<sup>5</sup>

It can be seen that the first mention of blight is coupled in the same entry with organised efforts in the locality for the alleviation of its effects. Considering that blight was first noticed generally in the country in early September it can be seen that Smith and his neighbours had galvanised themselves into action with commendable alacrity.

By the end of October they were experimenting with using what she calls 'The farina, the nourishing part of the root' which was unaffected, by scraping it away, mixing the resulting starch with a half of wheaten flour to make bread. A number of the wealthier people in the area were involved with these experiments, amongst them Thomas Shehan, editor of the Dublin Evening Mail who owned a hunting lodge near Lackan. John Hornidge of Tulfarris brought her some bread made by Shehan which she declared delicious. This course of action had been recommended by the scientific commission set up by the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, to look into ways of alleviating the affects of the blight.<sup>6</sup>

Her husband Henry, who of course was a native, believed that the tenantry would be too lazy to make this change of food and toyed with the idea of opening a 'scraping manufactory' and a bakery to provide such bread. He went to see Mr. Owen, Lord Downshires agent in Blessington and found him willing to do anything to lessen the calamity.

Henry and their daughter Jane went around the estate to explain to the tenants how to use the farina, but met resistance from the old people who believed that it could not be wholesome despite an explanation of the structure of the root using an illustration of a honeycomb.

By March 1846 when the pinch of the partial failure of the previous year began to be felt she became much concerned by the high price of potatoes, which were sixpence a stone. She reckoned that a labourer would need nine shillings a week to feed his family, but could earn at best six shillings; this did not take into account other necessities such as rent, clothes, fuel and milk. What was ruining hundreds she claimed was 'managers' who were buying up all the flour and meal, selling it in the small quantities that the labourer could only buy at double the cost, and, if giving interest, charging usurious rates.

She returned to the question of 'huxters' again the following year. Because they gave credit the very poor found themselves all the time in debt to them. When paid for public work their wages were handed over to the gombeen men and a new debt contracted which never covered their families needs as food was six to ten pence a stone dearer from them than from the relief stores; so help was not percolating fully down to those on the bottom rung of the social ladder.

She discussed with her farm steward, Tom Darker, the best means of helping the poor which, when finalised, she would write down in order to be put into operation if distress visited them again.

On 23 March 1846 she reported that the local Blessington doctor, George Robinson, brought them the printed paper published by the government to teach the people how to use Indian corn flour. This remedy, among others, was contained in the findings of the Scottish chemist, Dr. Lyon Playfair and the English botanist, Dr. Lindley, who were part of the scientific commission. She ridiculed the part of the report which recommended the use of Dutch ovens and even griddles, items which the vast majority did not possess and talk of butter, yeast, eggs and new milk to paupers she considered a mockery.

She said that she herself could teach her tenants how to make porridge, pudding and cakes from maize which she had seen made at Pau, where the family lived occasionally. All said that the maize bread was delicious, but she again refers to the indolence of the people who would not bother with it unless actually starving, a condition she regarded now as a possibility as she reported famine on the plains which would soon reach the hills. With the purchase of maize and selling her husbands potatoes and meal at low prices her own tenants could be kept in food over the scarce months. She also decided to buy coal to sell as fuel was very scarce.

The action of the government to provide relief by public works did not meet with her approval. At the beginning of May 1846 she railed against both public works and railway works where the wage was two shillings a day; this given to people who had earned previously no more than a shilling was bad for the morals of the people, she believed, and 'all the disorderly women and profligates' were flocking to them.

An indication of how matters were beyond their own estate is glimpsed by a report of 27 May 1846 of a picnic on Blackamoor Hill, behind Lackan. Much of this area belonged to the archdiocese of Dublin and was let out on renewable leases to middlemen. As a consequence of having no resident landlord it was, she claimed, crowded with squatters and the effects of famine were severe. The saddest sight of her day was one the Doctor and young John Hornidge called me to look at - a little ragged frightened boy, the herd of some cattle grazing on these uplands who had collected on a

large stone the shakings out of the table cloth, and who was piling up crusts of bread with one hand and holding bare bones to his mouth with the other - the impersonation of famine.<sup>7</sup>

The effects of famine on such areas was brought home to her when she heard that when a meeting was held in Blessington by the local landowners in September two to three hundred people waited outside to hear what was to be done to help them. On the part of the landowners much dissatisfaction was expressed. They were unhappy with the recent Public Work Act under which drainage as well as roads could be undertaken but placing the cost on the electoral division rather than the barony at large. A number of the local landlords however did agree to give work to as many as they could on their own estates.

While she was reporting that their barony of Upper Talbotstown had cessed itself for £4,000 to provide immediate employment for the peasantry with such work as road-building, hill lowering and draining of swamps, the Col. decided to take advantage of the Board of Works scheme for draining land. Regarding such relief work she states that she did not believe that things were as bad as reported because she had heard that people were refusing to do task work, claiming daily wages instead; this to her mind showed that they were not really starving.

Her criticism of public works continued; she stated that many of her landowning neighbours were putting their tenants on public works including some whose holdings were above the value below which relief was limited. The shovellings and diggings' she regarded was less than useless with some roads actually made impassable by it.

In November 1846 she wonders about whether the government was right in declining to interfere with the markets: "Extraordinary cases require extraordinary treatment. Abstract principles are probably correct and in future years may work for good, but having never acted on them hitherto we are not prepared to receive them, and one shudders at stepping over mounds of graves in the experiments at this time. At the present prices it would require 21 shillings a week to support a labourer and his family - he earns 6, 7 or 8 shillings at the highest. What must be the result."<sup>8</sup>

The barony presentment sessions held on 4 Dec. provided the money need-

ed for continued public work. All, even tenants of up to thirty acres, families with savings and gombeen men would 'seize their share of what they look on as fair plunder.

However she said that she did now believe in the destitution cry as the workhouse was reported as being full. Dr. Robinson was reporting starvation to her from Hollywood and the more mountainous part of her own parish. There would be no doubt that soup kitchens would have to be set up after Christmas.

She had already found that rice liked by the people and she got in a supply and sold it at three pence a pound. Having found that they could buy it cheaper in England they ordered a supply from London to arrive in April 1847. By the first week in January a soup kitchen was up and running where milk and soup was given to their workmen and soup to the sick and aged each day at one o'clock. Each person on her list was given a quart every second day. The Blessington relief committee, as well as selling food at cost, on 11 Jan. opened general soup kitchens.

Her walks in the district at this time led her to the conclusion that the Irish landlords were in general not good. She claimed that she had plenty of evidence to put before parliament to damn them. It was their gross neglect of their responsibilities which was at the bottom of all the misery. Begging from England she regarded as humiliating. Her solution would be that involved estates should be sold; luxuries should be given up; absentees should bring their money home; the idlers should turn to work; all ranks should exert their utmost energies, should depend on themselves alone, for they do possess the means of relieving themselves. She had enough insight to see that the consequences of the present disaster would be far-reaching; she went on to say that a revolution very nearly as awful as the French one was under way. It would be a hard lesson on all but worth it, in her opinion.

There was great difficulty in April 1847 when the old relief works began to close and they were waiting for a new scheme to start. At this time she met Lord Downshire, who owned the Blessington estate, who was greatly perturbed about a report that there was great distress in the barony of Lower Talbotstown. The conclusion they arrived at was that it must have been the lands of Lord William Beresford in Hollywood that was meant which was

'a wretched den for pauper squatters'. She was greatly perturbed to hear that Baltyboys would be lumped for rating purposes with the mountainous areas with their starving paupers. This would cause an injustice to those, like herself of course, who were looking after their tenants by being forced to pay for those who did not. She was delighted to hear in April 1847 that Baltyboys was to be separated from the mountains.

In November 1848 the money from the Board of Works came through for drainage and the colonel employed 30 men. Tom Darker divided them into six gangs and work commenced.

Work began on a fever hospital in Blessington in the early 1840's but was unfinished when fever broke out on a large scale in the summer of 1847; the necessary work was completed and it was pressed into service. On a visit to Blackditches (Valleymount) in June she noted every inmate at Carroll's public house on the way and a nearby private house seized by fever and she sent them to the hospital and had the houses limewashed. Numbers in the Blessington hospital rose to 31 in February 1848 and she was so busy working for it, perhaps raising funds, that she had no time to write up her Journal. By April this number had dropped to 22 but she claimed the fever was more virulent.

In November 1846 the sickness had gone but driving about the country was hardly less than depressing. There was still no food or fuel and all that was to be seen was roofless cabins for they were thrown down as soon as the occupier entered the Poor House so that they could not return. They were not shut of disease however as cholera made its appearance in the summer of 1849.

The draining was finished in February 1850 but she reports as much distress as before it began. They had kept the poor in their immediate vicinity alive for the past two years and now she says they must die, beg or steal - anything but the Poor House. She reports 1,500 in the Poor House in Feb. 1850. A number of tenants are given financial help to emigrate but she claims that it was generally the better off who were going with the very poor staying at home to starve together.

What of the effects of the crisis on those higher up the social ladder? The years 1849 and 1850 are much taken up with the knock-on effects of the

famine on some of her landowning neighbours due to increased poor law rates, high prices and a fall off in rents. In the case of Joseph Leeson, the fourth earl of Milltown and the Rev. William Ogle Moore of Manor Kilbride and rector of Blessington and Kilbride the famine just exacerbated an already precarious financial situation brought on by profligate spending. In the case of Milltown it was caused by gambling and in Moore's case reckless borrowing to keep up a lifestyle beyond his means.

Milltown was forced to let his servants go and sell off his stable of horses and Moore to auction all his furniture and give up living in the manor house and take a cottage. As the published journal ends she is looking to the Encumbered Estates Act for some escape from their debts.

An increased sense of danger and lawlessness can be perceived in the years 1849 and 1850 also. She reports sheep-stealing and threatening letters to her farm steward and they try to have a police barracks established in Baltyboys.

As the district moved out of famine in 1850 her journal is more and more taken up with domestic matters. The public matters and her attitude to them which we have briefly looked at, give us an insight into the workings of response to famine on the ground at the local level rather than the impersonalised purely administrative history of relief at a national level which is usually on offer.

NOTES

1. Patricia Pelly and Andrew Tod, *The Highland Lady in Ireland*, Edinburgh 1991. VIII
2. Karel Kiely, *Naas Poor Law Union during the famine*, M.A. thesis in local history, Maynooth, 1994 P.18
3. *The Highland Lady*, pp 16-17
4. *The Highland Lady*, p 80.
5. *The Highland Lady*, p 197
6. Christine Kinealy, *This great calamity*, Dublin 1994. p. 35
7. *The Highland Lady*, p. 228.
8. *The Highland Lady*, p. 273.

that there is not a town in Ireland so completely neglected during the late and present inclement season when sickness and starvation visited like the able bodied and the aged poor there were no humane individuals to step forward to adopt some mode of relief



The papers by Vincent Comerford, Karel Kiely and Gerard Moran were first read at a seminar on The Famine in County Kildare organised by the Kildare Archaeological Society, which was held in Maynooth University in January 1995.

Kildare County Council decided to publish these papers as part of its programme to commemorate The Famine in County Kildare, and invited contributions from Frank Taaffe, Lena Boylan and Seamas O'Maitiú because of their particular local knowledge and interest in the subject.

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by instituting public works or other useful things which would even partially mitigate their sufferings.