



THE GREAT FAMINE

in

COUNTY MEATH

An Gorta Mór
i gContae na Midhe

A 150TH ANNIVERSARY
COMMEMORATION (1845 - 1995)

Compiled by DANNY CUSACK

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GRE

FAMINE DEATHS: STARVATION & DISEASE

It has already been noted that the Census figures show a decline of approximately 24% in the population of Meath between 1841 - 1851. A large proportion of that would have been due to emigration and to deaths that would have occurred naturally anyway. Nevertheless, it is estimated that approx. 20,000 people in Meath died between 1846 - 1851 directly as a result of the Famine.

As with all famine situations, it is difficult to distinguish between deaths from starvation and deaths from disease, since many or even most victims die from famine-related diseases before outright hunger consumes them. It is safe to assume that most deaths in Meath occurred from disease rather than from outright starvation - though there were undoubtedly cases off the latter.

The major famine-related diseases were typhus, also called "fiabhras dubh" (black fever) due to the dark colour of the skin; relapsing fever, where the skin turned yellow giving rise to the name "fiabhras bui" (yellow fever); scurvy, which was unknown in country districts before the famine; dysentery, which became an epidemic and was frequently fatal, and, dropsy, caused by prolonged hunger.

Scurvy, for example, was an obvious consequence of the failure of the potato crop, since it is a disease caused by lack of fresh fruit and vegetables. Thousands of poor farm labourers and cottiers who had been almost entirely dependent upon the potato for food, suffered massive Vitamin C deficiencies when their source of sustenance was suddenly removed. Indian meal was a very poor substitute.

In Navan, relapsing fever was "pretty generally epidemic" from 1845 and became extremely severe by 1847. A report by a Dr. Lamprey on the districts of Trim and Kilcooley describes them as the richest in Ireland. So many of the people were engaged in grazing that the failure of the potato crop did not result in starvation as such. But disease soon became very prevalent in the area, and Dr. Lamprey had this to say about the cause:

"By far the chief agent in propagating it was the constant practice the people of the western and more stricken counties had of migrating towards the eastern parts of the island. These poor creatures, obliged by their poverty to sleep in ditches and other wretched places, carried the fever, at that time more prevalent in the west, and, mixing with the people attending fairs and markets, for the purpose of begging, imparted the disease to them. I have often observed whole families belonging to distant counties lying in fever on the roadside."

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Outbreaks of cholera were also prevalent at the time, given the unhygienic conditions. There was a major outbreak of cholera in mid-1849 which is well recorded and severely affected most of the workhouses in Meath, especially in Kells where a significant number of deaths occurred. However, this was a recurring problem (although exacerbated by famine conditions); another major outbreak of cholera occurred in Kells in 1856.

Amidst all the facts and statistics regarding starvation and disease, the victims, unfortunately, are all too often cloaked in anonymity. Unlike some other counties, very few records survive in Meath giving the actual names of those who died in the workhouses and the fever hospitals (not to mention those who perished elsewhere) .

The details of individual people are rare enough indeed. We are confronted with a mass of human beings who perished unrecorded and forgotten. However, a few names and personal stories do emerge from newspaper reports of the time. Two such examples will serve to put some human flesh on the dry statistical bones of death and disease.

The Drogheda Argus of Feb. 26th 1848 reported a coroner's inquest conducted in the townland of Rathcoon, parish of Kilberry, a few miles north of Navan. Michael Kelly, a stranger to the area, had been found dead in an outhouse on the property of people named Hughes. Seemingly, Kelly had first called at the nearby house of a Thomas Conlon and had been offered food and drink, but only took the drink. The same thing occurred at the Hughes' house. A verdict was return of death by starvation. It was observed that the unfortunate victim had been so affected by hunger that he was unable to take food even when it was given to him. His body - or at least his stomach - could not accept it.

The same Drogheda Argus had reported a month previously (January 22nd 1848) on the inquest conducted on the bodies of Elizabeth Doggett and her daughter Catherine of Maudlin Road, Kells. The verdict recorded death on 2nd of January from "cold, starvation, and actual want of the common necessities of life". Evidence was called from various witnesses, including Rev. John Kelly, who gave a graphic description of the hovel and its inhabitants.

These two cases seem to have been ones of death by outright starvation.

A Pride of Paper Tigers

*A history of the Great Hunger
in the Scariff Workhouse Union from
1839 to 1853*

Michael O'Gorman

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TUAMGRANEY, Co. CLARE**

*"I do not think it within the power of this House to prevent the dreadful scenes of suffering and death now occurring in Ireland.
(Lord John Russell.)"*

*"Parliament today, after wondrous exertion, voted the sum of £250,000 for the relief of famine distress in Ireland.
Following the lunch time intermission the House reassembled and after a brief discussion on the state of the finances of the Armed Forces it was unanimously agreed that the sum of £18 million was immediately required."
(Notes for the Future Historian—Clare Journal 1847, Clare Champion Office, Ennis)*

*"Too much has been done for the Irish people.
Ireland must be left to the operation of natural causes."
(Charles Trevelyan.)"*

*"The Poor Law Guardians of the Scariff Workhouse Union were the wealthiest and most influential men in East Clare. They should have been like lions in defence of their poverty stricken tenants, but when the crisis came they acted like a pride of paper tigers."
(Michael O'Gorman)*

*"It was a blessed relief to get out of Scariff, for whatever the destitution here in Skibbereen, it is as nothing to the awful desolation of all classes in Scariff."
(Vice Guardian Rolleston on his transfer to Skibbereen, April 1849.)"*

era was raging and the mortality rate was high.

His work in Limerick hospital was met with great success and many lives were saved, through his medical expertise, which would otherwise have been lost. His untimely and tragic death from Typhus Fever during the fever outbreak in 1848, was a severe blow both to the people and the Medical world; what made his untimely passing even more traumatic, was the fact of the Cholera epidemic which followed such a short time later. Without his guidance, the medical men were helpless in the face of the savage epidemic which raged unchecked through the entire country causing the deaths of thousands.

Fatal diseases of the 1848 epidemic in Scariff

	Men	Women	Boys	Girls
Organic diseases of the stomach	1	0	0	0
Typhus	0	1	0	1
Hectic Fever	0	0	0	2
Remittent Fever	0	0	1	1
GastricFever	0	0	3	0
Smallpox	0	0	0	1
Diarrhoea	2	4	0	9
Detention	3	2	0	1
Chronic Dysentry	3	2	0	1
Wasting of the System	1	0	0	1

Total deaths and their causes in one week 37 (Ref. 100)

INQUESTS

Although deaths of people on outdoor relief were often hidden from the local relieving officer, those that were reported were investigated and an inquest usually held. A few of the more notable local ones are recorded here.

CASE 1. "An inquest was held today, on the body of William Denalier, of Moynoe, who was found dead on the roadside near Feakle. The Verdict was, that Denalier had died from a combination of old age and starvation. Mr. Purcell, Relieving Officer for Feakle, told the Inquest that, Denalier lived at Moynoe with his wife and young family. On the week previous to his death, he had come to the Scariff Depot for his outdoor relief ration and while collecting it, he said to Mr. Purcell., "I will not be with you much longer and I would like you to promise me, that when I am gone, you will give my meal ration to my little son, who is in great need of more food." Purcell stated, that he had made the promise to Denalier, but had forgotten all about the

incident until notified of Denalier's death. Anyhow, he said he had no authority to give Union food to anyone without the proper consent. Denalier was interred in Moynoe cemetery.

CASE 2. "An Inquest was held on the bodies of William Boland, his wife Margaret and their daughter Mary. They were all found dead in a ditch at Gortaveha.

The facts of the case were, that the Bolands were tenants of Col. Wyndham, who had promised them assisted passage to Canada, if they held their land until the following Spring. Boland had held the land and had paid his rent the week previous to his death. Col. Wyndham's agent, Mr. Crowe, gave evidence that Boland had paid him, the previous week.

The verdict returned, was that the Bolands had starved to death. However, the wording of the verdict sparked off an argument between the Vice Guardians and the Health Board. The Health Board said, that the Bolands had died from a combination of starvation and hypothermia.

The latter cause was attributable to the fact that the collectors for the Union, had taken Boland's last blanket in lieu of money, for the Poor Law Rates. The Vice Guardians vigorously denied any involvement regarding the death and stated that the Boland's blanket had been taken for County Rates. In the ensuing squabble, the Bolands were quickly forgotten.

CASE 3. Another tragic example of death from starvation was recorded at the Inquest, held on the body of a pauper named John Caulfield, who had been found dead on the roadside at Tuamgraney. The case was heard by Mr. John' Cronin, R.M., who sent the following report to the Poor Law Commissioners. "The deceased's stomach was so shrunken, as to denote an almost total absence of food for some considerable time. Medical evidence at the Inquest states, that Caulfield's last meal, such as it was, had consisted of a few pieces of turnip. The deceased, who had been on the relief list, had received half a stone of meal, the previous week, but evidently, this was not sufficient to sustain life. I feel that, the death of John Caulfield is, but a forerunner of many such deaths since the Government have seen fit to stop all outdoor relief." I attended Caulfield's funeral and there I met his brother and sister and I am convinced, by their skeletal appearance, that before long, they too, will follow him to the grave."

A FEW CASES OF NOTE FROM THE LIMERICK CHRONICLE.

January 6, 1847. ROBBERY.

"A wretchedly poor man named Bourke, who lived in Derrygoolin, near Clonrush, while lying ill with fever in his wretched hovel, was set upon by five intruders, who forcibly

to Rev. Patrick Hennesy of Scariff, to hold from March 1847, for the life of Rev. P. Hennesy, provided the interest of, the said James Flannery, should so long subsist at the yearly rent of

£25. Anne Flannery is dead. The public roads leading to Williamstown and Mountshannon are not for sale.

APPENDIX 1

Hunger amid Plenty

It makes sad reading, to find how people were so cruel to each other in times of great hardship, when one would expect kindness and compassion. Records from all the various Unions, carry reports of complaint regarding watered down milk to the point, where the milk had no nutritional value. This milk was then sold to the workhouses as nourishment for the paupers. Prosecution usually followed discovery, but the discrepancy between the fine and the profits made the risk of discovery well worthwhile for the unscrupulous.

What was far worse, however, was the fact of the great mass of actual starvation in a country with food, but in the interests of business speculation and high profits, this food was deliberately priced well beyond the means of the average family and so forced them to develop a dependence on an alien food, which sat badly on the stomachs of a people who, despite their poverty, were used to much better. Maize, or Indian Meal, as it was better known, was the cheapest and least nutritious of foods, but to induce the Irish to eat it, the authorities advertised it as a sort of 'Miracle' food. One early advertisement, extolling its nutritional virtues appeared in the Clare Journal in April 1839 and ran as follows.

"There is no single food more nutritious or sustaining than that golden harvest, which is even now, pouring into this country in great quantity.

This meal, when prepared properly, provides enough nourishment, to see a man through a days labour and still provide him to the extent of weight gain. It provides an excellent filler for the stomach, whereby the bowels benefit enormously. The people of Mexico have survived and flourished on this grain for many generations and it is from them that the following recipe comes. First, get a clean pot and pour in two pints of cold water. Add four measures of the meal and stir until a thick sludge is formed. The sludge, must then be placed over a steady heat and stirred constantly until cooked. When cooked the meal may be eaten hot or cold. A medical man of UNQUESTIONED AUTHORITY, has informed this writer that another of the benefits of eating maize, is that in the act of chewing it, one creates SALIVA which is an essential functionary of the digestive proc-

It is extremely doubtful, if the journalist, who penned this article, had any medical qualification to express an opinion on the nutritional qualities of Maize. He ignored, or was ignorant of the fact, that Maize is deficient in the vital vitamin C and right through the Famine, Scurvy was among the most troublesome diseases among the paupers and often proved fatal. It is worth mentioning here, that in 1846, after just one year of dependence on this 'Miracle Food' the paupers in the Scariff Workhouse were so debilitated, that their deplorable physical condition was referred to in a letter from Dr. Eagan., Medical Doctor to the workhouse, to the Health Authorities "There are fifteen men here in the workhouse, considered able bodied, but in reality not one of them is capable of doing a days work. . . The women and children are so debilitated from hunger, that it is pointless trying to inoculate them against anything as they are unable to breed a healthy virus."

The following chart from Col. Wyndhams Market in Ennis, shows just how much human food was available and this for just one average sized market. Note that the dates in question are from 1845 to 1849 inclusive.

Chart No.1 gives the total cash value.

Bacon pigs	£47,407. 0.0
Store pigs	£1,923. 0.0
Suckling pigs	£4,972. 0.0
Milk cows	£23,776. 0.0
Dry cows	£26,991.12.6
Heifers	£22,741. 7.6
Calves	£1,831. 3.6
Yearlings	£8,753.10.0
Bullocks	£4,386. 7.6
Sheep	£31,628. 9.0
Lambs	£ 2,098.19.0
Horses	£950. 0.0
Butter	£84,997. 0.0
Potatoes	£45,719.16.8
Oats	£208,161. 0.5
Wheat	£200,501. 4.1

Chart No. 2 shows the total livestock exports per year during 1846 to 1849 inclusive.

	1846	1847	1848	1849
Oxen	186,483	189,960	186,042	207,811
Calves	6,363	9,992	7,036	9,831
Sheep/Lambs	259,258	342,179	255,682	241,681
Swine	480,827	106,402	110,787	68,535

Chart No.3 shows the total livestock exports for the above years.

Cattle	770,296
Calves	33,222
Sheep	1,908,800
Pigs	766,551

Total Animal Exports 3,478,869

Even a brief look at the total figures will show a striking similarity with the population loss throughout the country for the same period. It is obvious that the British Government were living up to their promise not to interfere with private enterprise and made no effort at all to curtail food exports from Ireland during a time when in the eyes of the world, it would have been no more than an act of humanity to do so, but no, big business came first, with the resulting tragedy.

(Ref. Fairs and Markets Commission. p. 150)

LETTER OF WILLIAM DIGAN TO THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS

To: Messrs Bewley and Pim 12.1.1847
Gentlemen,

I am directed by the Killaloe Relief Committee to ask of your benevolent Society a grant or donation in aid of the many destitute and famishing poor of this town and neighbourhood.

I feel I would be doing an outrage to your fine feelings and great benevolence were I to attempt to excite your sympathy by a detailed account of their many sufferings and privations. One fact I consider it necessary to make use of namely, that the impotent poor are completely cut off from any relief in the Union workhouse owing to its present frightful condition. It is in fact a perfect charnel house -the deaths there average twelve per day.

Should your benevolent Society have the kindness to recognise our claim for relief I am ready and willing to answer any queries which you may think necessary.

I have the honour to be, Gentlemen, Your most obedient Servant, William Digan. Hon. Secretary. Killaloe Relief Committee. Going on this evidence then, it seems incredible that just out of the reach of all but the wealthy, a superabundance of food was produced and available for purchase and export all during the Great Famine. The great Irish patriot, John Mitchell, once wrote "... For every ship sailing into Irish Ports with its cargo of Indian Meal, there are six ships leaving ports with cargoes of cattle and wheat"

APPENDIX 2

A Profile of the Electoral Divisions of the Scariff Workhouse Union

The following profile of the Scariff Union Divisions, tells how they were in 1837 when they were surveyed for the Samuel Lewis Topographical Dictionary. It is unlikely that they would have changed much between then and the famine of 1845. Note, that the profile does not include Scariff, which has already been dealt with.

Feakle

This Parish is in the barony of Tulla Upper, in the County of Clare 4 1/2 miles N.W. of Scariff on the new road to Gort and contains 8,884 inhabitants. This Parish, which is the largest in the County, comprises of 30,000 statute acres of which two fifths

consists of arable land and pasture and the remainder with the exception of 300 acres of woodland, is coarse mountain pasture, which is improvable.

The parish throughout presents a succession of mountain and valley extending to the confines of the County of Limerick and includes the picturesque lake called Lough Graney, situated nearly at its centre. Prior to 1821, there was hardly a road on which a wheeled carriage could run, but through the spirited exertions of James Molony, Esq., of Kiltanon, excellent roads have been constructed, partly by the Board of Works and partly by the county at large. This district now has direct communi-

- STACK Very Rev. Michael J., (retired), Riverside Drive, Castleisland.
- STACK Rev. Willie, (S.P.S.), C.C., The Presbytery, Castleisland. 066-41241.
- SUGRUE Very Rev. Patrick, P.P., The Presbytery, Killeentierna. 066-64141.
- *SULLIVAN Rev. Kevin, P.O. Box 16567, Nakuru, Kenya, East Africa.
- TARRANT Rev. Joseph, C.C., The Presbytery, Millstreet, Co. Cork. 029-70043.
- VAUGHAN Rev. Timothy, (S.P.S.), C.C., The Presbytery, Bere Island, Co. Cork.
027-75007.
- WALSH Rev. Brendan, C.C., The Presbytery, Park Road, Killarney. 064-31014.
- WALSH Rev. Gearóid, Diocesan Secretary, Bishop's House, Killarney, Co. Kerry.
064-31168.
- WALSH Rev. Nicholas, (S.P.S.), C.C., Beaufort, Killarney, Co. Kerry. 064-44160.
- WALSH Rev. Padraig, C.C., St. John's Presbytery, Castle Street, Tralee, Co. Kerry.
066-22522.

ALPHABETICAL LIST OF PARISH SISTERS

- BRODERICK Sr. Bernardine, Ballymacelligott Parish, 9 Carraig Li, Killeerisk, Tralee.
066-21281 (Home) (Presbytery: 066-37118)
- HARRINGTON Sr. Teresa, Causeway / Ballyduff Parish, 26 Tower Drive, Ballyduff,
Co. Kerry.
066-31533 (Home) (Presbytery: 066-31118 & 066-31148).
- McNAMEE Sr. Audrey, St. John's Parish, Tralee,
(Presbytery: 066-22522) (Convent - 066-25641)

OSULLIVAN Sr. Mary, Kilcummin Parish,
(Presbytery: 064-43176) (Convent -064-31172)

TIERNEY Sr. Katherine, Our Lady & St. Brendan's Parish, Tralee,
(Presbytery: 066-25932) (Convent - 066-21966).

Kerry Diocesan Directory - 1977

IN THE LINE OF DUTY

*Priests who ministered to the Famine Victims.
(Fr. Kieran O'Shea)*

In the film version of The Field, the Bull McCabe in a moment of anger says: 'No priest died at the time of the Famine'. He was wrong. In 1847 alone at least thirty-six priests died in Ireland from Famine related disease, sixteen of them during the month of May. In Kerry priests suffered their share too. Their work of administering the Sacraments to the dying meant that they were often in danger of contracting disease. One writer said: "Thus are our devoted clergy doomed to take on themselves all the burden, all the solicitude and encounter all the danger of contact with plague". The Protestant clergyman, Matthew Moriarty in a letter to the Kerry Evening Post wrote: 'The Roman Catholic priests of this District (West Kerry) almost live in their saddles and even so, I am sure they cannot minister the rites of their Church to all who die within its pale'. Another Protestant clergyman remarked: 'I cannot for the life of me understand how the priests of this county are enabled to live, what between the great privations to which the necessity of their people and the physical exertion to which their attendance on the dying and the dead subjects them'.

One of the first priests to die in Kerry from famine-related illness was Fr. Jeremiah Falvey, P.P., Glenflesk. He died on 28th December, 1846. The Kerry Examiner said: "On the 27th ult. (December 1846) from illness brought on by great exertions in endeavouring to mitigate the sufferings of the poor of his parish in this awful season of distress".

Just a few weeks later on 15th January, 1847, Fr. John O'Donoghue, P.P., Kilgarvan died. The Tralee Chronicle reported:

On the night of Friday the 15th inst. of fever, in the prime of life, the Rev. John O'Donoghue, P.P., of Kilgarvan in this county. We little thought when adventing in our last to the illness of this our old and valued friend, that death had already chilled the heart once warm with the best and noblest impulse of our nature. We little dreamed that the friendship of nearly twenty years, which no difference of creed had ever weakened,

was to slumber so soon in the longnight of the grave It is but a few months since our Rev. friend was promoted from the Curacy of Kilcummin to the parish of Kilgarvan: Yet so much did he by the kindness of his heart which was "open as the day to melting charity" endear himself to his flock, that never did a wilder or a more widely spread sorrow diffuse itself among the people of every district, than among the peasantry of that picturesque region.

It was natural that his kindred should wish that the ashes of one of whose virtues, talents and accomplishments they had so much reason to feel proud and to cherish the recollection, should commingle [sic] with their own. This, however, was found incompatible with the feeling of the people, who could not let him go from amongst them. He was accordingly buried in the chapel of his ministry.

His monument - the fond recollection of his worth embalmed in the bosoms of an affectionate people. Nor was it alone to those of his own religious persuasion that he was so much endeared. He was warmly loved and respected by the Protestant inhabitants of Kilgarvan, whose Minister, the Rev. Going, with whom he had gone hand in hand in alleviating the miseries of the present Visitation, was a constant attendant at his bedside during his fatal illness and followed him to the grave with a sorrow and respect honourable to both. Fr. O'Donoghue fell a victim to the faithful performance of the duties of his ministry.

The next priest to die in March 1847 from fever was a young curate in Castlemaine, Patrick Tuohy, C.C. The Kerry Examiner reported: 'At Castlemaine, of the prevailing epidemic brought on by the discharge of his arduous duties, the Rev. Patrick Tuohy, C.C., (died)'. He was succeeded by another young priest Rev. Thomas Enright, C.C., Castlemaine in April 1847 who was ministering in Tralee. Within a few days he also was dead.

The Kerry Examiner reported:

This promising young clergyman has just fallen a victim to the heavy duties which in common with so many others of the priesthood he had been called on to discharge at the bedside of the fever-stricken poor ... While going through his vicarious labours with devoted zeal, the Rev. Fr. Enright was seized with illness which his constitution already weakened by the toils of his mission, was unable to struggle with.

Meanwhile other priests were laid low with fever while reporting the death of Thomas Enright, the Tralee Chronicle says: 'At the present moment, in this diocese, there are no less than eight Roman Catholic Clergymen on the bed of fever, contracted during their ministrations'.

One area that suffered greatly during the Famine was West Kerry. A report in the Kerry Evening Post (10.3.1847) graphically records one scene in Venury.

A family of five - father, mother and three children were laid on one bed by starvation and its accompanying disease: in a short time the mother and one child died, leaving the father and the other two to drag out a miserable existence. On Wednesday last the father also closed his eyes in death, having stretched beside him the two little survivors.

Another reporter in the same paper records:

At Kilquane, a parish to the west of Dingle, 1/5th of the inhabitants have already fallen victims to famine and disease. On Monday last the decomposed remains of a father and his three children, who had laid dead for eight days, were conveyed in baskets to be buried.

Priests helped where they could. In Ballyferrier parish Rev. John O'Connor spent day after day in his smoky cabin distributing meals to the poor and destitute.

In such a situation it is no surprise more priests should die. In early March 1848, Rev. John Gallivan, C.C., Ferriter died from fever. He was described as 'a promising young clergyman, who was but a very short time on the mission and only in the 29th year of his age'.

Cholera was still rife in 1849. On May 29, Michael Devine, P.P., Dingle died from the disease.

The Dingle correspondent for the Kerry Examiner wrote:

Rev. Michael Devine has been attacked by that mysterious epidemic Cholera. On Sunday he discharged his duties with his usual attention in his Chapel and in the afternoon ... he laboured under the premonitory symptoms of that said disease which he caught in the unceasing discharge of his duties".

A plaque in the porch of St. Mary's Church, Dingle reads:

Sacred to the memory of Very Rev. Michael Devine who laboured without ceasing as a true minister of Christ ... and in the end died a martyr to his pastoral zeal having inhaled the poison of death in administering the last consolations of religion to the plague stricken members of his flock during the Cholera visitation of 1849.

The priests of Kerry served their people well during the Famine. Some paid the supreme sacrifice with their lives.

The Nuns in Kerry The unsung heroines of the Famine

In September 1845 potato blight was first noticed in Ireland. Although the failure of the crop would be a major catastrophe it did not happen that year partly due to the action taken by Sir Robert Peel, The Prime Minister, who imported maize from America and sold it for 1d a pound. In 1846, however the potato crop was almost a complete failure and the new liberal government led by Lord John Russell decided not to import grain and not to interfere with market forces. This meant that unscrupulous merchants could inflate the price of grain. It was a question of supply and demand. The result was that thousands died in the winter of 1846/7.

The annalist in the Presentation Convent, Listowel wrote with dire foreboding: "The year 1846 is ended. The prospects for the coming year are appalling. May God assist His own now, and help us to relieve the loved children". Her worst fears were realised.

We read in the Annals of the Presentation Convent, Tralee:

The famine that threatened in 1846 arrived at its height in this year (1847). The potato crops suffered in two nights, and was completely destroyed by a dismissal and general blight. The potato fields had the most flourishing and promising appearance when after one night they appeared withered quite black as if the stalks were burnt. The blight happened in July. An awful famine ensued. A frightful dysentery swept off thousands. The Poor Houses crammed to excess, out of which the dead were usually taken off on a dray and thrown without coffins into one common pit. In some localities the dead were left to decompose on the wayside until fear of putrifying the site obliged public officers to consign them to the earth . . . Never was any country so prostrate.

The same annalist records:

Doctor McEnery (P.P. Tralee) could never appear abroad that he would not almost instantly be surrounded by crowds of famished men and women tottering with disease and the ravages of hunger strongly marked on their ghastly faces. It was truly an appalling sight to see the chapel yard crowded every morning to surround and almost seize him for relief.

The nuns were only too aware of the awful horror of the Famine. They saw it above all in the faces of the children who attended school more in the hope of getting food than of learning.

In Listowel, the nuns began in March to feed the children in their car. They started with thirteen but very soon they were feeding two hundred and fifty children. Every morning the nuns gave the children bread, a mug of boiled rice and a little milk. It was hoped that this diet would also prevent dysentery. During 1847 alone the nuns in Listowel distributed 31,000 breakfasts.

In Dingle the people were badly hit by Famine. Here again the nuns rallied to help the starving. They turned their school into a "part hospital, part cook-shop". Day after day they strove to alleviate the suffering they saw around them. Some of the nuns spend all day baking bread and distributing hot soup to "the famished creatures who had hardly enough strength left to hold the vessels in which they received it". Others dispensed medicines for the relief of fever-stricken victims. Some made clothes for the poor while others wrote letters appealing for help. Mother Teresa Collis wrote to Rome and received help from Cardinal Franconi on behalf of the Pope. The nuns in Listowel made like appeals and also received money from the Pope. None contributed more to the nuns than the Society of Friends or Quakers. Their generosity was outstanding.

The nuns in Cahirciveen report hardship amongst the people. They too helped by distributing bread and clothes as did the nuns in Killarney, Tralee and Castletisland and Miltown.

In Killarney the work of the Sisters of Mercy lived on in the memory of the people. They cared for the sick and dying or "nursed them in the hospital wards set up in the partly finished Cathedral". Day after day they visited the fever-stricken in the crowded lanes while others were afraid to enter the homes of the sick lest they catch disease, the nuns entered fearlessly, sometimes to coffin the dead.

All this great work by the nuns took its toll on their health. Worn out by sheer exhaustion, many caught fever and some died. Amongst those who paid the supreme sacrifices were: Srs. Angela Love, Mary Joseph O'Kane, Philomena Moriarty, Ignatius Martin in Listowel; St. Catherine Vize aged 27 Castletisland.

The nuns in Kerry were the unsung heroines of the Famine.