



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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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 of 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 buí" (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.

ORPHAN GIRLS TO AUSTRALIA SCHEME

This initiative provides an interesting sidelight to the Famine emigration story. Between October, 1848 and August, 1850 over 4,000 female orphans arrived in Australia from Irish workhouses as part of Earl Grey's (British Secretary of State for Colonies) pauper emigration scheme. Earl Grey thought that he could solve Australia's problems of a shortage of labour and an imbalance of the sexes by alleviating the overcrowding in Ireland's famine-filled workhouses. His scheme met with some degree of opposition from Australian colonists and the orphan girls received a far from universal welcome in Australia. Nevertheless, most of these girls went on to forge new and successful lives for themselves in their adopted country.

In his book Barefoot and Pregnant: Irish Famine Orphans in Australia, Trevor McClaughlin reproduces from the shipping records lists of names of the 4,000 girls who were sent "Down Under". Approximately 100 of these girls were from workhouses in County Meath: 26 from Kells, 25 from Navan, 12 from Trim, 16 from Dunshaughlin and 22 from Oldcastle. There were also a few girls sent from the Ardee Union workhouse whose home places were in County Meath.

The following is a list of the orphan girls transported, according to Poor Law Union. More research would need to be done at the Australian end to plot the subsequent histories of each of these girls but this would make an interesting study. Suffice it to say that most of these hundred or so girls from Meath probably experienced a better life by emigrating than the fate that would have awaited them had they remained in the workhouses.

Note: In most cases the girl's name, age and homeplace is given, followed by the names of her parents and whether they are dead or alive (and, if so, where).

Where girls of the same surname and parents are listed together it can be assumed that they are sisters. In many cases, the homeplaces of the girls have been mis-spelt (or mis-heard) in the records. In most instances the correct place-name can be guessed. In these instances I have recorded the original (mis-spelt) version in square brackets afterwards.

KELLS POOR LAW UNION

Arrived in Sydney on the ship "John Knox" on 29th April, 1850.

Anne Bradley (18) Dulane [Dooling]. Parents: James & Mary (mother in Kells).

Biddy Brady (18) Moynalty [Menalty]. Patrick & Anne (mother in Kells).

Catherine Burd (18) Kilmainham [Kilmanam]. Michael & Judith (both dead).

Mary Callaghan (16) Kells. John & Rose (mother in Kells).

Mary Clarke (18) Moynalty [Menalty]. Michael & Mary (both dead) .
 Bridget Clarke (15) Moynalty [Menalty]. Michael & Mary (both dead) .
 Mary Costello (18) Mullagh. Owen & Ally (mother in Kells).
 Mary Lovett (18) Kilskyre [Kilskee]. Owen & Ann (both dead).
 Mary McCabe (16) Kells. Owen & Ann (both dead) .
 Elizabeth McConnell (18) Whitewood. Lawrence & Peggy (both dead).
 Judith McDonough (18) Kells. Peter & Mary (both dead).
 Margaret Maguire (16) Kilskyre [Kilskeath]. Michael & Ann (both dead).
 Anne Murtagh (17) Kilmainham [Kilmanim]. Peter & Kitty (both dead) .
 Elizabeth Norris (16) Oristown [Ormistown]. Peter & Betty (both dead)
 Bridget Norris (15) Oristown [Ormistown]. Peter & Betty (both dead) .
 Mary Oxe (16) Mullagh. Phillip & Bridget (both dead)
 Ann Patterson (18) Nobber [Nabber]. Henry & Bridget (mother in Kells)
 Frances Plunkett (16) Dulane [Dooleen]. John & Mary (both dead)
 Rose Sheridan (18) Kilskyre [Kilskeath]. Brian & Catherine (both dead).
 Jane Smith (16) Kilskyre [Kilskeath]. Brian & Bridget (both dead).
 Mary Smith (18) Kilskyre [Kilskeath]. Brian & Bridget (both dead).
 Bridget Smith (14) Kilskyre [Kilskeath]. Brian & Bridget (both dead).

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Arrived Sydney on ship "William & Mary" on 21st November, 1849.
 Rose Farrelly (16) Moynalty [Menalty]. John & Mary (mother in Navan) .

Ship

Arrived in Port Phillip, New South Wales on ship "New LiverPool" on 9th August, 1849. Transferred on "Raven" to Portland, Victoria.
 Mary Riley (16) Nobber [Nabber]. Possibly Ardee Union.

Anne
 Bridg
 Mary
 Julia
 Bridg

NAVAN POOR LAW UNION

Arrived in Sydney on ship "William and Mary" on 21st November, 1849.

Betsy Boyle (16) Near Navan. Parents: John & Bidy (both dead) .
 Elizabeth Carry (16) Castletown. David & Mary (both dead) .
 Mary Clarke (15) Simonstown. Patrick & Peggy (mother in Navan) .
 Anne Clarke (18) Simonstown. Patrick & Peggy (mother in Navan).
 Catherine Collins (14) Navan. Patrick & Mary (father living).
 Bridget Cummins (16) Slane. John & Rose (both dead).
 Mary Dwyer (16) Slane. John & Rose (both dead).

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NEWSPAPER EXTRACTS

These are just a few highlights from newspapers of the time.

DEATH BY STARVATION

MEATH HERALD

2nd May, 1846.

Letter to the editor by Rev. Patrick Guinty of the Kells Relief Committee.

[This very lengthy and extensive letter details several case studies of famine victims, of which the following is but one].

"April 27 - P.M.G., (initials only given) living in the parish of Kells. Labourer, having two sons and three daughters; one in fever for fifteen days, unfit to be removed, no food in his house today; could not buy a half-penny worth of food or milk; lying all of them in their clothes; the shreds of their two blankets given to cover the sick boy; for want of clothes and every thing (as the father himself says) unable to sleep; sitting up at the fire all night; father aged 62; parted with his eldest son going to America this day, and travelling miles without his breakfast to get a last look at his parting son,...."

DROGHEDA ARGUS

22 January 1848.

[One of the very rare cases in which the actual names of famine victims are recorded].

Report on the inquest into the deaths of Elizabeth Doggett and her daughter Catherine of Maudlin Road, Kells. In his evidence, the Rev. John Kelly affords a graphic description of the hovel and its inhabitants. The verdict recorded is: "death on 2 January from cold, starvation, and actual want of the common necessaries of life."

26 February 1848

Report on coroner's inquest at Rathcoon, parish of Kilberry (near Navan), of Michael Kelly, a stranger, found dead in the outhouse of a man named Hughes. Deceased had been offered food in Hughes's house and previously in the house of a man named Conlon. However, because of his condition, he had been unable to take the food even when it was given to him.

Verdict: "Death by Starvation"

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17th July 1847.

Reported that Ellen Carthy (aged 36) had been sentenced at the Trim Assizes to three months hard labour for stealing a sheet and some ribbon from the house of Owen Farrelly of Kells. The woman pleaded guilty but claimed that "poverty overcame her when she saw her poor orphan starving."

At the same Assizes William Kelly (19), James Lynch (29), John Robinson (19), James Butterfield (18), Pat McCabe (21) and 40 others were charged with having tumultuously assembled on 5th May at Causestown (outside Kells) and having seized two sheep belonging to Patrick Barnewall to roast and eat. The men pleaded that they were "starving" and Judge Doherty discharged them.

26 February 1848.

Report that two Connaughty brothers were each sentenced to seven years' transportation at the Trim Assizes for killing and fleecing two sheep belonging to Patrick Dillon of Girley (near Kells) .

James Doyle (18) sentenced to three months hard labour for absconding from Kells workhouse with Union clothes.

FREEMAN'S JOURNAL

24th October, 1845

Extract from letter by Fr. Nicholas McEvoy, P.P.Kells.

"...With starvation at our doors, grimly staring us, vessels laden with our whole hopes of existence, our provisions, are hourly wafted from our every port. From one milling establishment I have last night seen no less than fifty dray-loads of meal moving on to Drogheda, thence to go to feed the foreigner, leaving starvation and death the soon and certain fate of the toil and sweat that raised this food".