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Memories of the Famine from the Irish Folklore Commission

Editorial Introduction

In 1945, on the centenary of the outbreak of the Great Famine, the Irish Folklore Commission circulated a questionnaire on the Famine. In many areas teachers, usually national teachers, proved expert collectors of information. This was recorded in writing and forwarded to the Commission in the form of written statements, on forms that had been prepared and distributed by the Commission.

The following three articles comprise three typical statements furnished to the Folklore Commission 50 years ago, all relating to Co. Tipperary. The statements have been edited only minimally, so as to make them suitable for publication. The author of the first was a member of a well-known Tipperary Quaker family who published a history of Irish Quakers in 1927. The author of the second was a national teacher in Thomastown near Golden, and was the father of the well-known writer and broadcaster Frank Delaney. The author of the third was also a teacher, in Kilcash.

All three statements come from Volume 1068 of the Main Manuscripts Collection of the Department of Irish Folklore in U.C.D., since 1971 the successor of the Irish Folklore Commission. They are reproduced here with the permission of the Head of the Department. The editor wishes to acknowledge the assistance and advice he received from Bairbre Ní Fhloinn of the Department, and advice also received from Cathal Portéir of RTE. It is hoped to publish a further selection of such statements in the 1966 *Tipperary Historical Journal*.

The Famine in the Carrick area

By Isobel Grubb

Famine deaths – My father, who was born in 1843, remembered relatives coming from Clonmel who spoke of the dead bodies of those who had died of starvation lying on the roadside between there and Carrick. Edmund Wall of Seskin, a townland in Co. Waterford, aged about 75 [in 1945], says there were no deaths in the townland. In Carrickbeg, the Co. Waterford suburb of Carrick-on-Suir, on the Waterford Road thirteen or fourteen people died in one house of cholera and no one was allowed to go in.

Burial places – On the road leading out of Carrickbeg towards Mothel, about 250 feet above the river at a corner, there is a tiny platform-like field where the cholera victims were buried. They were also buried at the east end of Carrick-on-Suir at Ballylynch, where the hospital and dispensary wait is flagged, and they are said to have been buried under the flags.

Cures – Edmund Wall says there was an old woman in a house and a man came in to her and she saw he had the sickness on him and she took a mug of spring water and put her hand up the chimney and took down a fistful of soot and put it into the water and stirred it up well and



made him drink it all. Soon he was very sick and the contents of his stomach came up and she saved his life and cured him of the sickness.

Emigration – When I was in Boston, U.S.A., the late Dr. McCarthy, the Irish-American poet [who was born in Carrick-on-Suir], told me that the descendants of the famine emigrants were much more anti-British than the Irish who had emigrated more recently.

Food – Mrs. Shanahan (aged 99 or 100) told me the other day of how they used to have to buy the yellow meal by the pound and could not always get even that. Her other memories were too vague to record. My grandparents, John and Rebecca, Quakers, ran a soup kitchen in Carrick-on-Suir. There was no thought of souperism or proselytism. Food was given to all who were in need.

Relief Schemes – Edmund Wall says that at Curraghmore (the Marquis of Waterford's demesne some five miles from Carrick-on-Suir) they gave some sort of allowance, and the men were to dig round the "Steeple" (a modern round tower on top of a hill) and they dropped because they were too weak to hold the spades.

The Famine from Cashel to Kilfeacle

By Edward Delaney

The crop was so promising that the people were delighted. But the blight came when the stalks were in full bloom. That was in the second year. In the first year [1845] there was a good harvest of potatoes; but these blackened in the pits. It was in subsequent years that the stalks were affected. The blight did return in successive years, even after '47.

On the road between Cashel and Tipperary great numbers died. At the height of the Famine fifteen or sixteen dead bodies would be found every morning between Golden and Kilfeacle. Anthony O'Dwyer's father told me that he saw people dead, dying and staggering about at a rest-house at Knockroe, a short distance on the Cashel side of Golden. These people had been on the way to Castle Lake near Cashel, where there was then a workhouse.

The people who died along the road were so numerous that they were thrown inside the ditches where they lay, and [were] buried there without the sacred rites of sepulture. In recent times, when a labourer's cottage was being built in Heaney's [?] field outside of Kilfeacle beside the main road, bones were unearthed at the digging of the foundation. Bones were also dug up when building a bungalow beneath the Moat of Kilfeacle on the side of the road.

Martin Donoghue, who lives near Cashel on the Hoare Abbey side, told Anthony Dwyer that he often heard his father speak of a night during the Famine when a knock came to the door in the middle of the night. He got up and opened the door, to find outside a man who had brought his mother's corpse on his back from a place near Clonmel, to be interred in her burying-place at Hoare Abbey. Her son had knocked at the door to ask for help with the burial. All those I spoke to had heard of people going blind during the Famine, but I can get no specific instances.

I have searched the district in vain for accounts of the dissolution of individual families during or after the Famine. But there must have been migration or eviction. Thomas Maguire remembers hearing of many people – he has no names, though – who got free passage to