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# *Some aspects of the Famine in Clonmel*

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By Seán O'Donnell

The Famine experience of Clonmel has been well charted in two previous issues of the *Tipperary Historical Journal*.<sup>1</sup> For Clonmel the Famine was an ordeal of death, fever, hunger, suffering and want, especially in 1846. It was also an episode of considerable disorder and destruction. The various measures taken by government and grand jury to relieve distress are part of the experience, as is the heroic work of the Quakers and other charitable and religious groups and individuals in the face of devastation. This article confines itself to just a few aspects of the experience and looks briefly at the performance of some welfare institutions and the corporation in those difficult years.

The potato failure which beset Ireland in the autumn and winter of 1845 was not initially widespread in the Clonmel area. There were worrying signs, however, in Clonmel Fever Hospital, where alarming increases in the instances of fever were reported. The number of patients admitted in 1845 was the highest annual intake since 1827 and the fourth highest since the beginning of hospital records in 1812.

The only consoling feature of these admissions was that the death rate was only 3%, the lowest on record.<sup>2</sup> Isolated instances of potato failure at the end of October prompted the mayor, Charles Bianconi, to discuss the matter with his fellow aldermen and councillors and to propose a remedial strategy. It was the unanimous opinion of all that the corn mill of Edmund Daniel at Poulboy be mechanically adapted to convert potatoes into farina, a powdery substance which was a compound of flour and potatoes.<sup>3</sup> Such a suggestion was not original, being widely promoted in national newspapers at that time.<sup>4</sup>

By the spring of 1846 the pattern of Clonmel's famine experience was emerging. In March a survey conducted by Bianconi revealed that 197 tradesmen and 730 labourers in the town were unemployed with no means of support, and that their dependents amounted to 5,647 people. These unemployed and other people in need were circularised about the arrival in the town of Indian "flour", which was available to them at one penny per pound. They were advised that ten pounds of this flour was capable of sustaining a man "at the hardest labour" for a week.<sup>5</sup>

Carts bringing this flour to the town from Cork then became the targets of attack and at the request of the local millers were henceforth met at Woodrooff by a troop of the 13th Dragoons from the Clonmel barracks and escorted into the town. Boats carrying corn downriver from the town were similarly escorted to within four miles of Carrick-on-Suir following attacks, especially from the overhead bridges at Twomilebridge and Kilsheelan.

General civil unrest led to reinforcements at the Clonmel barracks and to the posting of detachments at Marlfield and Kilsheelan. The unrest continued throughout 1847 with attacks on shops in the town, the most spectacular being in March 1847 when 300 labourers assembled for a meeting in Main Street and then proceeded to Irishtown, where they plundered Johnson's bakery of its bread supply.

In the hinterland crimes involving arms in 1847 were reported at Twomilebridge, Kilmanahan and Kilcash. Despite this unrest, however, the number of prisoners in Clonmel goal in December 1847 at 353 represented a drop of 19 from the previous July.<sup>6</sup> There was widespread unrest in the town throughout 1848. Much of it was of a political nature and is described elsewhere.<sup>7</sup>

At the height of the Famine local institutions became a refuge for the poor. The intake to the Fever Hospital in 1847 was more than four times that of 1844. The Workhouse surpassed its capacity of 600 in November 1846 and the numbers continued to rise steadily until they reached nearly three times the official capacity in May 1847. Between January and March 1847 the number of children admitted was more than five times greater than that of January 1846.

By then, of course, auxiliary workhouses were needed to cope with the numbers. Two of these were located in Morton Street, a third on the Quay and a fourth in Irishtown. Numbers remained high in 1848 and 1849 and a record was set in January 1849 with 1957 inmates.<sup>8</sup>

A feature of the number of workhouse inmates in Clonmel between 1846 and 1849 was that it dropped during the months of July and August and reached a high point from October to January. While this may have been due to weather conditions, it is also likely that it was the policy of guardians to discharge inmates in early summer.

A more remarkable feature of the inmates was the gender imbalance. The number of women was always in excess of that of men. This was true even in the years between 1842 and 1845, when at times the number of adult female inmates was double that of males. This pattern remained constant from 1846 and 1849. The same ratio between the sexes did not prevail, however, among adolescents. In the period from 1842 to 1845 there were usually more boys than girls, while there is no constant pattern in the variation during the years between 1846 and 1849.

The gender imbalance may be partly explained by the fact that some women may have sought admittance in order to be near their children, there usually being a concurrent pattern in the number of women and children admitted, although there was a notable exception to this trend between March and June 1847. A much more sustainable explanation seems to appear, however, in the statistics for 1848 and 1849, which reveal that a large proportion of women who were admitted were classified as "ablebodied".

The reasons why so many ablebodied women should have been workhouse inmates is a matter which deserves special study. The quality of life of these women and children in Clonmel and other Tipperary workhouses has been graphically described elsewhere in earlier issues of this Journal.<sup>9</sup>

## Corporation's Defects

The Famine was of such catastrophic dimensions that it glaringly exposed the inadequacies of all welfare institutions. Poor law legislation has been well scrutinised in this respect by historians. So too has the grand jury system of local government. Less attention has been paid, however, to the reformed corporation. They were the product of the municipal corporations (Ireland) act, 1840, and their emergence was heralded with jaunty trumpeting a few years earlier by Daniel O'Connell.

Clonmel provides an interesting case history in this regard, with 24 ardent O'Connellites elected in 1842 as members of the newly reformed corporation there. John Hackett, on his investiture as its first Catholic mayor since penal times, promised a "new dawn" in the local government of the town.<sup>10</sup> Three years later Charles Bianconi, the third mayor since reform, was in office at the outbreak of the Famine and he was realising the grim truth that municipal reform lacked much of the substance earlier attributed to it.

In April 1846, when food riots were becoming disturbingly frequent on the streets of Clonmel, the corporation sought permission from the lord lieutenant to mortgage part of its property in order to raise £1,000. It needed the money to pay almost that amount in debts which it had inherited from the old corporation. Permission was refused.<sup>11</sup>



Fearing the wrath of ratepayers, it did not strike its first rate until 1850 and during the Famine years was therefore financially dependent on its annual income from tenants, which in 1845 amounted to £655 18s. 5d.<sup>12</sup> Unlike most other Irish corporate towns in the 1840s, Clonmel did not have any income from tolls and customs.

The response of members to Famine relief was conditioned therefore partly by compassion in the face of widespread suffering, partly by the fear of antagonising ratepayers and partly by the limitations of the 1840 municipal act, which had made no provision for the clearing of inherited debt and had introduced very strict conditions for the raising of revenue by urban authorities. Their mind-frame cannot have been too dissimilar from that of the members of the grand jury of South Tipperary, mostly landlords, who were meeting regularly in Clonmel during those years in search of solutions to mounting distress. For both groups the government provision that after August 1847 the entire fiscal burden for relief was to be transferred from central to local resources was alarming.

The response of Clonmel corporation to the Famine is best seen in its dealings with its own tenants. Throughout the 1840s it had a total of 61 tenants holding land on its estate to the south of the town. Of these 26 were leasehold tenants, who all remained solvent during the Famine years and paid a total annual rent of almost £340. The remaining 35 tenants were on yearly tenancies, with 28 having very small holdings in Scouthea and the rest in the Comeragh foothill areas of Moonagillagh and Moonacullagh.

The yearly tenants were all in arrears by the end of 1846. By September 1848 the amount of arrears had reached more than £330 and by March 1849 it was almost £550. Eviction orders against a number of yearly tenants were obtained in December 1847 but were not proceeded with.<sup>13</sup>

Harrowing accounts of suffering among yearly tenants were regularly reported at corporation meetings. As no funds were available to relieve the distress, members were often asked to make private donations. In April 1847 a number of tenants who sought help for the purchase of seed were invited to a council meeting and were interviewed individually. Varying amounts of barley and oatseed were granted to them, but in all cases they were asked to undertake to repay the cost in the autumn.<sup>14</sup>

## Causes of Fever

The town of Clonmel was a breeding ground for fever during the Famine. This was partly due to the lack of statutory control of markets or fairs and partly to the quality of certain elements of the town's infrastructure. It had been a traditional right of the Mayor of Clonmel since medieval times to inspect occasionally the standards of hygiene in the markets and bakeries of the town. When John Hackett and Charles Bianconi had attempted to exercise this custom in 1843 and 1845 their right to do so was legally challenged. When, during his mayorality in 1848, John Luther attempted to assert his control over a pig fair in the town, he too was challenged, a clause in the 1840 municipal act being cited on all occasions.

A report in January 1848 that contaminated produce in the fish market was a source of infection and fever prompted the corporation to side-step the law and set up its own market on a site in New Street which it had rented from William Tinsley. The effort was frustrated, however, because all the market traders boycotted the scheme and the uncontrolled markets and fairs continued to operate as usual.<sup>15</sup>

The narrow lanes of Clonmel were frequently cited as a source of fever during the Famine. The large number of these lanes can be attributed to the burgage plot pattern from which the

town evolved. There was a total of 33 classified as public thoroughfares in the primary valuations of the town which were completed in 1849.

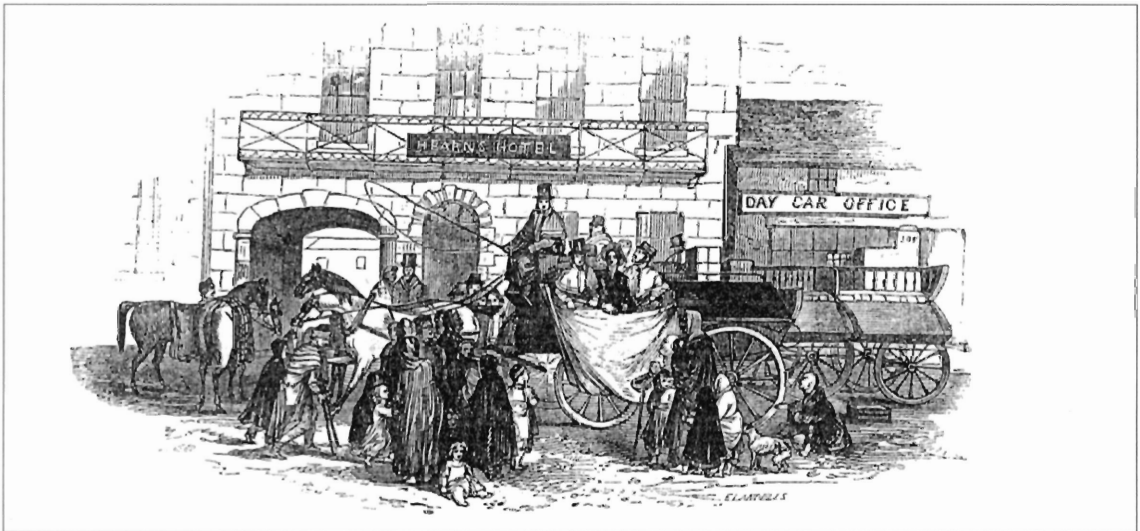
The highest concentration was in the area of Main Street, with nine on the south side of the street and eight on the north side. There were six on the east of Johnson Street and four on the west. On the south side of Irishtown there were six such lanes. The risk to health in these lanes was due to the fact that many people lived there in a very congested environment and in poor quality housing.

The primary valuations listed 184 lane dwelling houses. The highest concentration was in Hopkin's Lane, Phelan's Lane, and White's Lane, all of which were adjacent either to Main Street or Johnson Street. There was also a high concentration in Sargent's Lane in Irishtown. Charles Bianconi and other corporation members and private individuals, mindful of the possibility of fever outbreaks, regularly provided residents in these lanes with lime and brushes.

The poor quality of housing in Clonmel was not confined to the lanes. Early in the century all roads on the outskirts contained dwellings which were described as "mud cabins and houses of inferior value". This was especially evident in the Old Bridge area, where there were two long terraces of such houses. By 1849 the situation had not greatly improved, with only 29 of the 112 properties there valued in excess of £1.

The condition of lodging houses was another area of concern. There were 99 dwellings classified as lodging houses in the primary valuations of the town which were concluded in 1849. These were to be found in various parts of the town, with large concentrations in Hopkin's Lane, in the court to the north of Peter Street and in Duckett Street where the greatest numbers were found. These were areas of the town where the quality of housing was very poor. No statutory control over these lodging houses was ever exercised by the corporation in the 1840s.

Other elements of the Clonmel infrastructure were likely to cause the spread of fever. The underground sewerage system then in use in the town had been set in place by the Tipperary grand jury at the end of the eighteenth century. It consisted of a network of rectangular



*Bianconi's coach outside Hearn's Hotel, Clonmel during the Famine.*

passages built in rough mortar. These passages were inefficient as sewers because they were flat-bottomed rather than having an incline which would allow for flushing from the drains at street level.

The lack of an incline also contributed to the accumulation of garbage and stagnant water as did the roughness of the mortar. The network served only part of the town, and areas which were without any form of an underground sewerage system included all of the town centre from the Main Guard to the West Gate, Rink Place, Cashel Street and Heywood Road.<sup>16</sup>

The public water supply system in Clonmel in the 1840s consisted of a number of wells throughout the town from which the water was drawn by iron handpumps placed along the sides of the streets. The number of pumps varied during the Famine years between 24 and 30. Some of these wells were dangerously close to sewers and to the town's burial grounds. Yet the sewerage and water supply systems remained in place until much later in the century, as did the lack of statutory control of markets and fairs.

The fact that such sources of contamination were allowed exist in a large town like Clonmel at a time of high instances of fever seems shortsighted. Yet it is understandable when it is considered that most legislation for Irish town initiated by central government before 1870 was permissive. This left decision-making with regard to the quality of life in the hands of local ratepayers. However, these ratepayers, already traumatised by the pressure which Famine relief had placed on their limited resources, remained for many years locked into a mindset which was averse to all forms of public expenditure. This was yet another long-term effect of the Famine in Clonmel – and probably in every town in Ireland.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. D. G. Marnane, *The Famine in South Tipperary*, *Tipperary Historical Journal*, 1996 and 1997.
2. Records of Clonmel Fever Hospital, Tipperary (South Riding), County Museum (TSCM 1987).
3. Minutes of meetings of Clonmel Corporation, 20/10/45 and 1/11/45 [Town Hall, Clonmel (C.M.)].
4. *Nation*, 13/9/1845, *Freeman's Journal*, 3/11/1845.
5. *Tipperary Constitution*, 28/3/1846.
6. *Ibid.*, 1/4/1846, 22/4/1846, 25/4/1846, 24/3/1847, 10/7/1847.
7. Forthcoming publication by this writer entitled "Clonmel 1840-1900; anatomy of an Irish town".
8. Minute book of board of guardians, Clonmel poor law union. Tipperary County Library, Thurles (BG 67/A1, 67/A6, 67/A7).
9. A. Lanigan, "Tipperary Workhouse Children and the Famine", *Tipperary Historical Journal*, 1995, pp. 54-80.
10. C.M., 1/11/1842.
11. C.M., 20/4/1846.
12. *Abstract of statements of monies received and expended on account of certain boroughs in Ireland*. H.C. 1846 (485), xlii, 337.
13. C.M., 9/12/1847.
14. C.M., 19/4/1847.
15. See note 7.
16. *Ibid.*

