

THE NIGHT OF THE BIG WIND

By Tommy Hourigan

The difference between weather and climate is a measure of time. Weather is what conditions of the atmosphere are over a short period, and climate is how the atmosphere behaves over relatively long periods. Weather patterns change continuously, but the climate can change utterly over extended periods such as thousands and millions of years. For reasons not yet fully understood, our planet goes through cycles of warm and cool climatic periods.

The Ice Age in Ireland lasted from 30,000 years ago to approximately 14,000 years ago. During that time, sea levels dropped, and Ireland was joined to Britain and mainland Europe. The ice sheet came from the north-east and covered most of Ireland. When the ice finally melted, it left a scoured landscape of rounded mountains with deep rounded valleys and lowlands covered with drift material. Before the ice melted, vegetation and animals came across the land bridge and began to colonise Ireland. As the ice across the rest of Europe and the world continued to melt, sea levels rose by up to fifty metres to the level that they are now, turning Ireland back into an island again. The land itself, depressed by the weight of the ice, also began to rise, and this rise is continuing to this day, albeit at a slow rate of roughly two millimetres per year. (*Ireland in the Ice Age: <http://www.wesleyjohnston.com>*)

In our short life spans, we experience much less dramatic climate change, but we do experience varying weather conditions, and when extremes occur, they are usually of short duration. Such weather in Ireland can involve freezing temperatures with icy conditions, heavy rain followed by flooding, high winds or storms and not so much in our part of the world, heat-waves.

The experts warn us of the potential catastrophes that will befall our planet if global warming is not curtailed or perhaps even reversed. But meteorologists, albeit not to the extent that economists find it difficult to agree on economic issues, are not all in tune regarding the causes of global warming and its likely impacts on climate/weather into the future. However, it would be wise for us to tune into the debate.

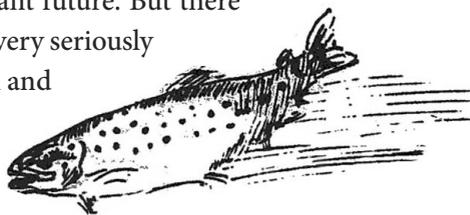
If you are beyond middle age or more advanced in years, you may tend to recall from your childhood years, cold winters with abundance of snow and ice offset

by lovely dry, warm and sunny summer days with balmy evenings. The accuracy of our recollections may be tainted somewhat by the passage of time, the exaggeration of youthful perception recalled, or the consequences of divergence in factors pertaining to then and now. For example, old winters may be remembered now as having been very cold. Of course, clothing was not as warm and protective as it is now, and buildings were not as insulated as nowadays – neither were they as well heated internally. Generally speaking, transport vehicles of bygone days were not equipped with “climate control” technology such as they are today. So, is it any wonder that those winters are recalled as having been very, very cold? The net point is that living circumstances in olden days were quite different to what is experienced now. This divergence may impact on how we recall the weather of times well in the past.



Coming back to the warnings regarding the future, one may tend to experience concern, if only of the fleeting type, when television programmes of the scientific *genre* illustrate melting ice-caps in the colder polar regions of our planet. One may also be inclined to wonder at the unusual weather experienced in Ireland in recent years – the storms of 2013/2014 and the freezing conditions of 2010 will live on in our memories for some considerable time.

However, very exceptional weather occurs from time to time, has done so in the past and will likely be experienced into the future. Hopefully, dramatic climate change is a very long way into the distant future. But there are warning signs that need to be taken very seriously by governments worldwide and by each and every one of us. Earlier in 2015, Pope Francis, in his encyclical, raised severe concerns about global warming, challenging governments of the world to take the matter seriously and to act accordingly.



An example of extreme weather is what is known as “The Night of the Big Wind” of 1839, an account of which follows.

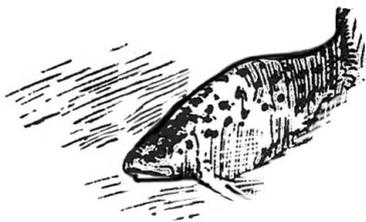
*Taken from article written by Gerard Curtin, published in Winter Edition 1999 –
Old Limerick Journal*

The ‘Big Wind’ of 6th January 1839 was a landmark experience, a horror that was, in its way, comparable with the Famine, for what the Famine did to life, it did to property. (Note1)

The morning of Sunday, 6th January began well. The sun rose at about half past eight on a land much of which was white from the previous evening’s

snowfall. The day was calm, so calm that many vessels that had set out from port had to anchor, as there was scarcely any wind. (Note 2)

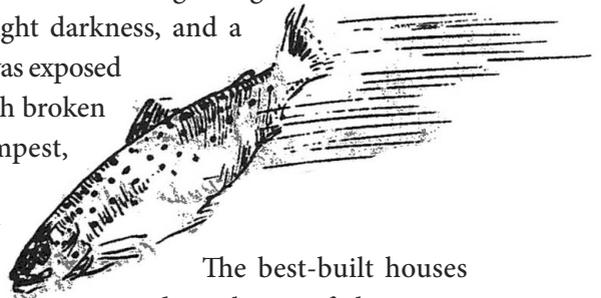
This was a bit odd, but not in itself alarming. In a house in Limerick City, it was noticed that the glass “shewed [showed] the quicksilver under the extreme lowest mark of the barometer”. (Note 3) This was an ominous sign, and one of the few indications of what was to follow. (Note 4)



Fierce winds blew fish from water to land.

Between four and five o'clock, the temperature was quite mild and the atmosphere, though cloudy, gave no evidence of the elementary conflict about to follow. At about half past eight, the storm set in, blowing with gale force winds from the west-north-west, increasing in fury every hour, until eleven and twelve o'clock, when it raged with all the horrors of a perfect hurricane. The winds swept through the streets of the city, extinguishing all the gas lamps. “The watchmen took refuge, in terror of their lives, under hall-door porticos and archways, no living creature being able to stand in the streets, while the spirit of the tempest was careering in all its might through the air, streaks of lightning, at intervals, illuminating the midnight darkness, and a shower of slates at every angle which was exposed to the blast, strewing the ground with broken particles, and flying before the tempest, like sherds of paper.” (Note 5)

Not a public building in the city escaped the ravages of the wind. of the New Town trembled in the and many buildings were dismantled in the upper storeys. Husetops and flues fell to the streets while the crash of window glass was incessant. To crown the panic of those families already feeling the storm's effect, “a whole stack of chimneys would occasionally tumble down, after struggling with the blast like a drunken man to hold his equilibrium”. (Note 6)



The *Limerick Chronicle* reporter went on, “at Arthur's-quay, the houses rocked like a cradle during the worst stages of the whirlwind, for such it then was, and when the affrighted families hurried from their beds to the areas and vaults below for protection, they were repulsed in despair by the rush of water from the inflowing tide, raised to an unusual height by the force of its kindred element”. (Note 7) The English and Irish towns, which constituted the abode of the less affluent of society, were scenes of ruin and dilapidation as the storm progressed. A large number of people took refuge in the hall of the Exchange.

In their anxiety to escape what seemed instant death, some never thought of bringing any clothes. (Note 8)

Looking at the docks and shipping, the splendid fabric of Wellesley Bridge (Note 9) was in a dangerous state, “a melancholy picture of the ruthless hand of the destroyer”. (Note 10) Many of its pillars were dismantled, and much of the stonework broke in pieces. The swivel section of the bridge was, however, undamaged. The merchant stores by the quays lost some hundred yards of slating off their roofs. (Note 11) The fleet of merchant ships at the lower quays had burst from their moorings in the midst of the hurricane. “Tide and wind dashed these vessels with full force against the only barrier in their path, Wellesley Bridge, which was struck again and again, breaking down its stone battlements and causing much damage to the ships in these dreadful collisions.” (Note 12)

It was hoped that the storm would have abated by twelve o'clock, but contrary to expectations, the gale held on with additional fury and did not go down until between four and five in the morning. (Note 13)

Around the country, the storm's destruction was also on a gigantic scale. At Lansdowne, the river broke through an embankment, sending a deluge of water through the fields, destroying crops of hay and corn and also cows and sheep. At Coonagh, a poor man named Hickey, his wife and two children, were carried off as the flood went through their cabin. The father and the two children were drowned, with the mother left a widow, having been thrown upon a hedge by the flood waters. The roof of Mr Maxwell's residence at Islandmore, Croom, was demolished. Milford House, near the city, was dismantled, and the occupants were obliged to abandon their home. Plassey House was damaged, trees torn up, with great damage to windows and slates. Kilballyowen Demesne was ravaged, with many trees laid prostrate. (Note 14)

Bruff and its vicinity were thrown into a frightful panic by the destructive power of the storm. The townspeople were seen flying in all directions seeking shelter, most having abandoned their dwellings, many of which were in ruins. The police rushed out of their barracks, the roof of which was totally destroyed. (Note 15) On the street in the village of Bruff, such was the anarchy that raged during the storm that it seemed that there were “two invisible armies throwing slates, pots and tiles at each other, as when the wind shifted, it would bring the slates from the opposite side against the slates on this side, and they often met in the air with such violence as to shatter them all to bits”. (Note 16)

The demesnes of Adare, Curragh, Castletown, Shannongrove, Tervoe, Caher-guillamore, Doonass, Hermitage, Tinerana, Kilballyowen and 'Ballinaguard' suffered severely with many hundreds of the oldest and finest trees torn up. (Note 17) (The article went on to describe the immensity of the damage suffered throughout County Limerick)

The 'Big Wind' of 1839 is held to be the greatest storm ever to hit these islands. What caused it, why was it so extreme? It is hard to say. Storms of this intensity in these latitudes are still largely an unknown quantity. The antiquity of the storm is another hindrance. The amount of meteorological data available on it is limited, so any examination of its cause may involve a lot of guesswork. Wind gust speeds during the storm's 'hurricane' phase have been estimated at 85-100 mph, with gusts in excess of 115 mph likely in the worst affected areas. (*Note 18*)

The memory of the storm was revived in 1909 when the introduction of the Pensions Act entitled every one of seventy and over to a weekly pension of five shillings. But who was over seventy, when in many places there were no written records? Enter the 'Big Wind' once again, this time in the



Nothing escaped the Big Wind of 1839.

unaccustomed role of provider, rather than destroyer. If you could remember the wind or put up a reasonable show of having been around at the time, you qualified for the pension. It's amazing what you can remember if you have good enough incentive. An estimated 128% of Ireland's pensionable population made a point of getting on the books, a fact that caused much comment in the Westminster Parliament. Those old folks were no fools. (*Note 19*)

The 'Big Wind' stands apart as a landmark experience. Every town and village in the land felt its dire effects, the most extraordinary calamity of the kind with which people were ever afflicted – a calamity that somewhere out in the broad Atlantic could be waiting to happen again. [*End of Old Limerick Journal article*].

It was separately reported that sixteen deaths occurred in County Limerick “and in Caherguillamore Demesne, near Bruff, 200 crows were found dead, having perished by the severity of the night”. (<https://limerick100.wordpress.com>)

An account and review of the Night of the Big Wind, provided by Met Éireann (*Meteorological Services*) in an abstract from *Irish Geography*, Volume 22, Issue 1, 1989 provides detailed insights into the storm. For example, the number of deaths on Irish soil and at sea were variously estimated up to four hundred. The power of the storm was exemplified by many reports of amazing events throughout the country. These included transportation of animals over long distances; a seabird was found ninety miles inland, and fish from a lake were found in a field, three miles away.

Brace yourself for the next ‘Big One’! It is not a question of ‘if’ but ‘when’!

References and Notes:

- (1) Peter Carr: *The Night of the Big Wind*, The White Row Press Ltd, Belfast, 1994
- (2) *ibid.*
- (3) *Limerick Chronicle*, 9 January 1839
- (4) Peter Carr: *The Night of the Big Wind*, The White Row Press Ltd, Belfast, 1994
- (5) *Limerick Chronicle*, 9 January 1839
- (6) *ibid.*
- (7) *ibid.*
- (8) *ibid.*
- (9) Now Sarsfield Bridge
- (10) *Limerick Chronicle*, 9 January 1839
- (11) *ibid.*
- (12) *ibid.*
- (13) *ibid.*
- (14) *ibid.*
- (15) *Kerry Evening Post*, 12 January 1839
- (16) *Limerick Chronicle*, 9 January 1839
- (17) *ibid.*
- (18) Peter Carr: *The Night of the Big Wind*, The White Row Press Ltd, Belfast, 1994
- (19) *ibid.*

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