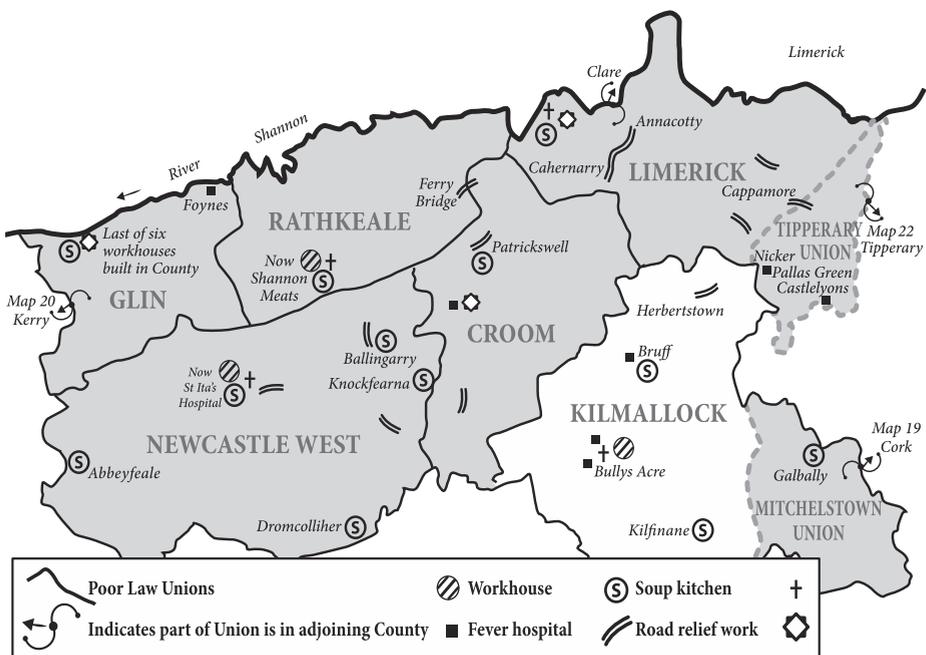




Above: Knockfierna famine soup pots.

Below: Map indication of workhouses and soup kitchens from Famine times.



# THE GREAT FAMINE

By Brian Gallagher

**G**range suffered from arguably the greatest tragedy to befall the nation through the Great Famine of 1845-1851, as did every other locality throughout Ireland. Perhaps the 'Great Hunger' is a more apt description owing to the fact that food, in the form of grain, including oats, was still being exported from Ireland while, at the same time, people were dying of hunger everywhere. While the potato, the staple diet of the Irish people, was rotting in the ground, grain in sufficient quantity to feed the nation was being exported by unscrupulous and uncaring landlords.

Partial crop failure was not unusual in Ireland, so little notice was paid to the blight that struck in 1845. The potato blight caused total crop failure in 1846-1847. Allied to this, the severe winter of 1846/1847 made it one of the worst winters in living memory. 1847 is known as "Black 47" due to the devastation experienced throughout the country. In the years from 1847 through 1851, there was either total or partial potato crop failure.

The potato is not native to Ireland – which may surprise many people. It is thought that it originated in the Andes Mountains in Peru and was introduced to Ireland in the 1500s when Spaniards returned after conquering the Incas of South America. By 1800, the potato had become the staple food of Irish peasants. They were sustained as long as the crop didn't fail.

The population of Ireland increased to over eight million by 1840. People tended to marry young in those times and as a result land holdings were subdivided to accommodate several family units. These smaller holdings became uneconomic and unviable. Tenants grew corn and raised a pig to pay the rent. Most over-relied on a diet of potatoes to feed themselves as they were easily grown and suited to the Irish climate and to social circumstances of that time. Even animals benefited from the humble potato. However, in the autumn of 1845, the dreaded blight struck, the animals could not eat the rotten potatoes buried in the ground, and people went hungry. Many did not initially realise the destructive nature of the blight, as the green leaves of the potato plant often remained unaffected above the ground. Too late, the devastating effect of the blight was realised at harvest time.

The nation, including the people of Grange and neighbouring localities, was unprepared for what was to follow.

The Great Famine lasted from 1845 through 1851 – though its repercussions have been felt to the present time. It left a permanent scar on the nation: over one million people died and almost one and a quarter million emigrated. Consequently, the Irish language, culture, traditions and values are evident in countries throughout the world today.

The British Government of that time commenced public work schemes throughout the country, hoping employment would ease the plight of the people. Building work and repairing of roads and drains commenced. Even today, the remains of “famine roads” may be seen in parts of Ireland (roads leading to nowhere in many cases). However, many people were too weak to work and were forced to enter the dreaded “workhouse” for basic food and shelter in return for work done.

Families were usually torn apart; they were separated into male and female groupings. Often, they were never to see each other again. Frequently, workhouses harboured disease and death due to overcrowding and impoverished living conditions. There was one



Refurbished house from Famine times at Knockfierna Hill, Co Limerick.

such workhouse in nearby Kilmallock, where the County Council offices are now situated. Immediately behind this building is a “famine graveyard”, which was neglected for many years. In 1998, this graveyard was rightfully restored, and a monument was erected to the memory of all those who perished and were buried there during those tragic times.

The graveyard in Grange contains many stones known as “marking stones”. These are usually associated with famine burials and are widely found in graveyards throughout the country. Due to the number of deaths at the time, the situation of the people and local conditions, people were often buried in graves such as these. Mass graves located in some areas of the country are also reminders of the wretched event that wreaked so much devastation. Each year, communities throughout the country commemorate the victims of the famine, with local wreath-laying ceremonies and Masses.

A major and sorrowful effect of the Irish famine was emigration. Many immigrated to Canada and America and some to Australia and farther afield. On

those journeys by ship, travellers were often so weak that the journey was to be their last. Conditions were crowded, and disease and hunger were, more often than not, their companions. It was the last time for many to see their native shores, even if the journey to far-away places was survived.

The term “coffin ship” has been attributed to those vessels due to their unfortunate and unkind nature. The “Dunbroody” in New

Ross, Co Wexford, is a fine modern reconstruction of such a vessel. A custom of “waking” anyone journeying on such a ship was in vogue at the time. The reason for this was twofold. Firstly, it was more than likely that the family and neighbours of the voyager would never set eyes on their beloved again. Secondly, it was thought that the journey might not be survived to the final destination.

Many landlords and agents continued to demand huge rents from the peasants and cottiers. Those unable to pay were evicted from their holdings, which were often lowly mud cabins, sparsely furnished, on small plots of land. Thus, mass emigration from Ireland began. Sometimes, it was cheaper for landlords to pay the ship fare for a tenant, rather than incur the cost of eviction. Irish and English landlords alike applied this tactic. Annie Moore, who sailed from Queenstown (Cobh), was the first immigrant to be processed at Ellis Island, New York when it opened in 1892. Every now and again, at Grange Cemetery or other such locations, a tourist may be encountered, looking for a headstone or seeking information about parish records, in attempts to investigate ancestral roots.

Fever hospitals, workhouses and “soup kitchens” were set up throughout the country. Soup kitchens were mostly set up by the society of Quakers and the British Relief Association, a private charity set up by prosperous English merchants. The Soup Kitchen Act of 1847 was introduced to finance provisions for aid but was not successful due to the financial state of many in Ireland at the time. Not all died from hunger, however. Many died from typhus, dysentery, relapsing fever and famine dropsy. Bruff was one of the many towns in which a fever hospital and soup kitchen were set up. Without a doubt, it was with the help of such aid that many local families survived the ominous effects of the famine. Families who took the soup were referred to as “Soupers” in Irish society for many



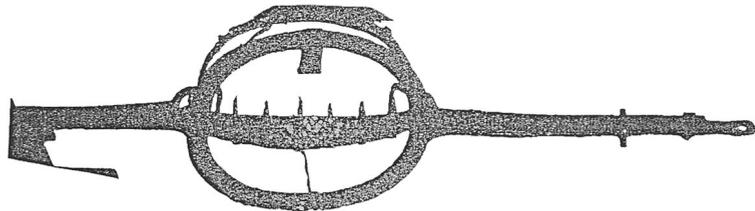
Eviction scene in Famine times.

generations after. People would forsake the Catholic Religion in favour of the religion of their helpers. Many reverted to Catholicism later on.

The repercussions of the Great Famine in Ireland were many. The famine had a major bearing on world as well as Irish history. The Irish political landscape, as well as the farming landscape, changed drastically. Charles Stewart's Land League commenced the move towards Irish Independence – eventually Home Rule and the Irish Free State. Farmers and businesses established new work practices, and diversification began in Irish society.

The influence of Irish immigrants and their families on the development of the United States of America is well known and acknowledged. Famous American family names such as Kennedy, Reagan and Obama have well-established ancestral connections with Ireland. Irish culture and traditions are found today in many

Man trap used during Famine times.



countries worldwide – originally brought there by early Irish immigrants, and safeguarded, prized and cherished by subsequent generations of Irish communities abroad. Irish family names and place-names are found worldwide. Saint Patrick's Day is celebrated in many countries – for example, by staging elaborate and colourful parades in public places, by displaying and wearing the colour green and, of course, by wearing a sprig of shamrock, our much revered Irish Emblem.

Over the years, it has become customary for an Irish dignitary to present shamrock to the President of the United States of America on St Patrick's Day. The Irish presence and influence worldwide, today, is in no small way traceable to the famine times and to the huge numbers who left devastation behind, electing to board "coffin ships" in search of survival in faraway places. Many perished, but many also survived the perilous journeys, some going on to build successful lives for themselves and their families, some destined to have the future 'great and famous' in their lineage.

The trilogy of novels by the author Marita Conlon-McKenna (*Under the Hawthorn Tree*) reflects the state of the nation and the suffering of the ordinary Irish people in famine times. Two other pieces of literature are the well-known poems *Famine Deeds* by Pat Brosnan and *A Mystery* (from *The Nation* 1847). These have truly captured the drastic effects of the Great Famine, which have been engraved in Irish history. Today, Irish people have an affinity and empathy with countries who endure suffering similar to that experienced in the past by our own

country – Ethiopia, Sudan and Chad come to mind. This Irish concern for others is evidenced by our worldwide reputation for helping those in need.

Godfrey Massy (1803-1852), Church of Ireland Vicar of Bruff, was an outspoken and controversial character, indefatigable in the cause of Protestantism and hostile to the practice of Roman Catholicism; a man of strong and deep convictions and a great humanitarian. He was renowned for his efforts during the famine years to assuage the starvation of the poor, irrespective of religious beliefs, and in this regard, he worked tirelessly to collect funding from the well-off and Government in order to obtain food supplies from whatever sources possible. The *Memoirs of Godfrey Massy (Footprints of a Faithful Shepherd*, by his brother, Rev Dawson Massy), published in 1855, provides horrifying insights to the suffering inflicted by famine. The following short extracts are graphic and heart-breaking:

His [*Godfrey Massy*] district extended over forty square miles. So awfully rapid was the career of the famine, that on his first inquiry, he discovered 14,783 persons – nearly all Romanists – of whom 7,000 were absolutely “dying by inches, and almost naked for they had pawned or sold their little rags of clothes, to keep the breath of life in themselves!”

They looked like living mummies – their figures were attenuated – their faces greenish – their eyes glassy and hollow – their hands like birds’ claws – their voices sepulchral – while their skeleton bodies exhaled “the smell of the grave”.

It was soon seen that these feeble labourers [*referring to public paid work*] were doing nominal work, so task-work was introduced. This system yielded one penny per day to some and one shilling to others, but the exertion proved fatal to creatures so unfit for labour, and the terrible “road-fever swept them away like flies”.

He [*Godfrey Massy*] implored them [*Government*] to exercise such enlarged benevolence as would provoke the affectionate gratitude of the poor, and continued – “It is heart-rending to witness the appalling suffering of multitudes – sufferings only equalled by their patience; for they invariably exclaim, ‘We could bear anything but the woeful sight of our starving little ones.’” Indeed, the children were the most distressing objects of all; their legs and arms were as thin as canes. Even the grace of infancy deserted them, and creatures of two years old were seen eating what they got, with the sharp gravity of age.

Kilmallock Workhouse, built for 800, contained at the time 1,400 inmates, whose swollen hands and feet and total loss of appetite proved that it was almost the death-struggle which forced them from their cabins to its detested shelter. The perpetual use of chloride of lime alone made these abodes endurable, but the mortality in them was appalling.

In the adjacent counties of Cork and Kerry, such numbers died of starvation that they were buried without coffins, and famished dogs tore up their shallow graves and preyed upon the dead.

## THE LAND OF LIBERTY

By Garry McMahon, Newcastlewest 1995

*In black forty-seven the Famine drove him out  
He'd seen his brother dying, the green grass in his mouth,  
He packed his few belongings, went to meet his destiny  
And took the road to Queenstown and the Land of Liberty.*

*The landlord and the grabber came to break his cabin door,  
The golden thatch they burnt, it fell blackened to the floor,  
His parents to the workhouse, from the tyrant had to flee,  
And so he turned westward to the Land of Liberty.*

*He'd watched the starving thousands which cut him to the core  
And the corn ships departing which grieved him ten times more,  
His heart in two was breaking as he sailed across the sea  
But hope springs eternal in the Land of Liberty.*

*He just survived the coffin ship unlike many hundreds more  
And with haunted eyes at Boston Port he quietly slipped ashore,  
He soon found work, got married, and raised his family  
And that is how you're here today in the Land of Liberty.*

*He was your great grandfather, my little Yankee boy,  
So remember where you came from and hold your head up high  
And don't forget old Ireland, let her flag fly proud and free,  
With the Stars and Stripes forever in the Land of Liberty.*

*She welcomed us with open arms, downtrodden and unfree,  
God bless Ireland and America – the Land of Liberty.*