

Our Need is Very Great

The notion that the Great Hunger which afflicted Ireland between 1845 and 1852 somehow passed Ulster by is no longer as commonly held as it was twenty years ago. Detailed analysis supported by much original documentation has demonstrated conclusively that the sufferings of Co Armagh were, if not as great as that of Co Galway, at least comparable. There is no oral tradition today in Mullavilly that speaks of that time, nor did the first historians of the parish make much mention of it. The history written by WH Wolsey and printed in a local newspaper during the 1950s only discusses the famine in terms of how it led to an increase in the size of the congregation. Even TGF Patterson, Curator of Armagh Museum and indefatigable chronicler of local history, makes not a single reference to it in any of his notes on Mullavilly. None of the Vestry records contains the word ‘famine’. Yet the poor in Mullavilly suffered greatly during this period, and there were examples of great kindness and charity – not least from the clergy – as well as great indifference and callousness. Such a story should be remembered.

1845

In April 1845 a shipment of seed potatoes from America brought *Phytophthora infestans*, potato blight, to Belgium. By September 1845 the mould had reached Ireland; by November at least a third of the crop had been affected across the island and by December over 300,000 families were being supported through public works and charity. Without seed potatoes a new crop could not be planted. The failure of one particular food need not have caused disaster, had not the potato been the staple food of more than 3 million people across the island. In Co Armagh the October 1845 crop failed totally.

By the standards of the day, the parish of Mullavilly was, on the eve of the famine, reasonably prosperous. The Parliamentary Gazetteer of 1846, which used data gathered in 1844-5, said of the barony of Orior:

The surface consists of good land, and has a wide, well-cultivated and very ornate appearance.¹

Work on the land was augmented by weaving and there was therefore less reliance on the potato as the staple crop. Oats and flax provided an alternative food and a cash income. However, a combination of circumstances made some in the parish particularly vulnerable to the impact of the blight.

Weaving, the main non-agricultural occupation, had brought significant additional income to those who, until then, had been little more than subsistence farmers. During the 1830s weaving had, however, become more mechanised as new technologies were introduced. In evidence to the Poor Enquiry of 1833-6, the Rector of Kilmore stated that the incomes of weavers were *“little more than those of day labour²”*. (Weavers earned some 3 shillings {£124} a week, recently reduced from 8 shillings {£330} a week.) Another enquiry was told: *“The machinery has thrown our families idle³”*. The only markets with demand for home-weaved linen were those for fine cloth, and this was beyond the capabilities of two thirds of weavers in the parish.

As the income of the weavers fell they relied more on their small plots of land for food. The main crop from these was the potato, which, when combined with milk, provided an excellent source of protein, carbohydrate and minerals. When the crop failed in 1845, however, it meant that the poor tenant had neither home-grown food nor sufficient cash income to replace it. As the price of food rose in response to dwindling supplies, the position grew progressively worse.

1846

On 23rd May 1846 a meeting was held in the Mullavilly School House. Present were the Revd Robert McGhee of Mullavilly parish and his Roman Catholic counterpart, Parish Priest the Revd Patrick Quinn. Also present were many leading figures in the local community: Robert Henderson, Thomas Lennon, Edward Wright, James Wright, Thomas Dermott, Edward McDonnell, William Adams, Patrick Grant, John Balmer, Robert Adams, Michael Hoare and Arthur Bickerstaffe.

The meeting passed the following resolutions, which were later published in the Protestant *Newry Telegraph* and the Roman Catholic *Vindictor*⁴ in Belfast.

Resolved – “That, in consequence of the low wages now given to weavers (they being the principal tradesmen in this district), and the great failure in the potato crop, want of food is felt, at present, bordering on famine.”

Resolved – “That it is the duty of all who have it in their power to come forward at this crisis, and render the required aid to their suffering fellow creatures.”

Resolved – “That application be respectfully made to the landed proprietors, the Lord Lieutenant and the local inhabitants, who have the means, in order to raise funds to meet this present distress.”

Resolved – “That the Revd Messrs McGhee and Quinn be requested to make the necessary application and to receive whatever monies may be remitted for the above purpose.”

The situation must have been worse than elsewhere in the area as there is a record of only one other such meeting being held in Co. Armagh at around this time. There are no extant records of how much the committee was able to raise immediately, but over the entire island of Ireland relief committees had collected a total of £98,003 1s 2 1/2d {£7m} by August. The Lord

Lieutenant added a further £65,914 10s {£49m} of government money.

The Duke of Manchester, a Mullavilly landlord⁵, was chairman of the Irish Relief Association, which by September 1846 had raised some £42,000 {£31m}. However, it was accused by Daniel O'Connell of favouring Protestants to the exclusion of Roman Catholics and the fund's operation became the subject of debate and disagreement.

The summer of 1846 provided a little alleviation of the distress as other crops and fruits became available. Schemes of public works, which included improvements to the road between Portadown and Tandragee, provided some employment. In the autumn the Duke of Manchester offered to lend money on preferential terms to those of his tenants prepared to use it to improve their land by building drains. More helpfully, he also offered to give them parsnip and turnip seeds for free, although rye seed had to be paid for at cost price. Although this gesture was clearly well-motivated, it would have done little to alleviate the problems of those who were already starving.

To the Tenantry on the Duke of Manchester's Estates

The DUKE OF MANCHESTER, anxious to alleviate the Distress which the failure of the potato crop is likely to occasion, has directed me to make such arrangements as will provide employment for the TENANTS and COTTIERS on his ESTATES, in the execution of works that will be of permanent utility.

Having himself already opened the principal water-courses on his property, the drainage of the land has been greatly facilitated, and His Grace now proposes to advance money, without interest, to such tenants as are anxious to improve their farms through Through-draining, under the direction of the Agricultural Inspectors; the sums so advanced to be repaid through ten equal Yearly instalments.

When it is borne in mind that Through-drainage, when properly carried on, is found to repay the expense in Five Years by the increased value of the Crops, the extension of the time for repayment to Ten years will be found more than sufficient. I beg to call the attention of the small Farmers to the necessity of preparing their Land immediately for the ensuing Crop; a quantity of SEED RYE shall be provided at First Cost, to be repaid after the harvest of 1847; and to those who prepare the ground for PARSNIPS, a portion of SEED will be given, together with TURNIP SEED at the proper season, as hitherto, without any charge.

HENRY JOHN PORTER, AGENT

Tandragee Castle

October 31 1846.

The winter of 1846/7 was particularly harsh and food was very scarce. At Knockbridge on the border of Mullahead and Knock townlands, a barge carrying flour and meal was attacked by some thirty local men on 13th January 1847. The thieves were armed with flintlocks and spirited away those parts of the cargo that were foodstuffs⁶. They left untouched the remaining items. Alarmed, the magistrates in Portadown called out the army. Barges traversing the canal were often given an armed guard thereafter.

The Curate of Kilmore, Revd John Lloyd, wrote to his mother at this time describing the appalling situation within the parish.

"We have now 212 families on our relief list containing 910 individuals and the number is increasing daily. Indeed many more families should be on the list but with our present resources we cannot now relieve their plight. No one will now give credit. They have received their meal from the Committee on the morning of the preceding Wednesday. They had taken the last meal of it on Friday about mid-day. [...] They got nothing the rest of the day. They did not receive a morsel of food the whole of Saturday. When I was

led into their home providentially on Saturday night they had not the smallest hope of procuring any food for the following Sunday. I have no doubt that there are many other families in the parish in the same condition...⁷

In Mullavilly the congregations rose as people turned to the church. In 1845 the average attendance at church had been some 100 in the morning and 40 in the evening. On October 4th 1846 the congregation numbered 560 in the morning and 200 in the evening, (Mr Lloyd, curate of Kilmore, preached). The collection from both services totalled two shillings and eight pence {£100}. The average in 1845 had been six shillings and seven pence {£254}.

1847

There was an alternative to starvation for those who chose to take it: the workhouse. The Banbridge Poor Law Union extended from Mullavilly in the east to Leitrim in the west; from Dromore in the north to Glaskermore in the south. In 1841 it encompassed a population of 87,323. The main purpose of the Poor Law Union was to build and then administer the Banbridge Workhouse⁸. This was situated on the site of what is now Banbridge hospital. The workhouse was built to a standard design⁹ and there were similar edifices in Armagh and Lurgan. It was a matter of some satisfaction to the Dublin government that Irish workhouses were constructed at smaller expense than those in England. Costs may have been reduced through rejecting such luxuries as plastered walls, ceilings and solid floors (beaten earth sufficed).

The Banbridge Workhouse could accommodate eight hundred paupers and, since it had been opened in 1841, it had never been more than half full. However, as some 30% of the population with the boundaries of the Union depended on the potato for sustenance, the number of inmates soon began to rise. By January 1847 disease – whooping cough, influenza and dysentery – was rife within the workhouse. A doctor recommended that the institution be closed. The Poor Law Guardians¹⁰ had to turn away fifty-four paupers on 2nd January 1847, having first given them a dinner and half a pound of

bread. Four applicants were in such a condition that despite the risk, they had to be admitted. Over the next four weeks three hundred further applicants were turned away while the Guardians tried desperately to find alternative accommodation. Efforts were made to rent a nearby brewery, and sheds and galleries were erected within the precincts to provide more space. A temporary fever hospital was built behind the workhouse to cope with the numbers of falling sick with flux, famine dropsy and typhus.

In February 1847 the Revd Robert McGhee made the long and difficult journey to London with the intention of seeking assistance for Mullavilly from its main landowner, the Count De Salis.

Peter, 5th Count De Salis was not ignorant of the famine. On August 20th, 1846 he had written to the *Limerick Reporter* describing a remedy against the potato rot, which he said had been successfully tried in Switzerland:

[...] by digging or stirring the earth with mattocks, the disease of the tubers disappeared. Recent reports declare that agriculturists who have had recourse to that means, as simple as it is easy, find themselves served by it ; their potatoes have become sound, and the fields which are not yet attacked by it are preserved from the disease. There are some writers on husbandry who would cut the stalk before stirring the earth. It is supposed that this mode of treatment is still better; the potatoes, nevertheless, develop themselves, and even better than by leaving them their foliage.”

It is not recorded whether those who took the Count's advice met with any success.

Mr McGhee later wrote to the Society of Friends (Quakers) Relief Committee to report that the Count had declined to see him and he had therefore returned from London empty-handed¹¹. By the time he reached Mullavilly again, fever and dysentery were widely prevalent in the parish.

On February 8th 1847 the National Club sent £25 {£18,000} to the Lord Primate in Armagh for the relief of the destitute poor in Mullavilly.¹²

On 20th February 1847, Mr McGhee wrote to the government in Dublin to say that the Earl of Gosford had approved his appointment as Chairman of the Relief Committee and that he had collected £100 {£72,000} in private donations. Despite refusing to meet the Rector, Count De Salis had contributed £20 {£14,000} and the Duke of Manchester £10 {£7,000}. The Rector of Kilmore, James Jones, had given £20 {£14,000} and local farmers had raised £50 {£36,000}. Under a scheme administered by the Lord Lieutenant, these sums would be matched from public funds.

McGhee concluded:

"We have been giving relief to the district poor who are very numerous for the last six or seven weeks at the rate of ten or twelve pounds {£7-9,000}. Our funds are rapidly diminishing and we are therefore obliged to apply to the government for the sum equivalent to our subscriptions to enable us to continue the relief of the destitute poor.¹³"

The letter, which is now in the National Archives in Dublin, is marked with the laconic note by the civil servant who received it: "Recommend £100" {£72,000} and below, in a different hand, "Done".

By this time the Mullavilly Relief Committee was supporting 1,200 individuals, many in a desperate state. A week later, Mr McGhee was able to write again to Dublin reporting that he had received additional private donations and thus could ask for further public money. The Dowager Countess De Salis had given £10 {£7,000}, and he himself had pledged £10 {£7,000}. Other farmers had raised £70 {£50,000} pounds and the total now stood at £190 {£140,000}. He asked for the money to be sent as quickly as possible:

"Our need is very great here, and our exertions have been unceasing.¹⁴"

kindly recommend
that they be inclu-
ded in the govern-
ment grant through
his Excellency, as
our need is very
great now, and our
exertions have
been unremitting

I am Sir
your obliged
and obedient
servant

R. J. F. McGehee
Chairman Relief Com.
Mullavilly

*Extract from a letter from Revd Robert McGhee
to the government in Dublin – February 1847*

It took until March 16th for the government to send an order for £190. By that time, the situation had deteriorated even further. The Parish priest, Father Patrick Quinn, whose parish of Kilmore included Mullavilly, wrote to the Belfast Vindicator to publicise the situation.

Correspondence.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE VINDICATOR.

SIR.—It is painful to me to have to inform you, that destitution has been sorely felt for some months past, and is daily increasing, in this parish. Within the last twelve days I have attended thirty-two sick persons, and out of that number (most of whom have since died) twenty-seven were ill from want of human food. On yesterday evening, after attending two chapels, I had to visit five persons, all under twenty-five years of age, and all suffering from the one only cause—want! want!! I have just come in this instant from visiting a boy whom I left speechless.—Whilst I write he is surely dead. His disease and death were brought on solely from want of sustenance. There are hundreds of families in this locality, with four, six—aye, some ten acres of land, suffering the severest privations—privations unknown beyond their own threshold, except by a confidant. Their actual state of misery they keep a secret—first, from a spirit of decency; and, secondly, seeing no immediate hopes of relief likely to arise from its being known. What a blight! falling on as fertile soil and as moral and industrious a people as any to be found in all Ireland. True, we have three relief committees in this parish; but the funds are so small, that two-thirds, in want, can get none at all; and what is given is not, by any means, sufficient to support existence.—I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

PATRICK QUINN, P.P. Kilmore,

March 1, 1847. County Armagh.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE VINDICATOR

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True, we have three relief committees in this parish^[15]; but the funds are so small, that two-thirds, in want, can get none at all; and what is given is not, by any means, sufficient to support existence. – I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

Patrick Quinn, PP

March 1st 1847.

By 13th March the situation in Banbridge had also deteriorated severely. An average of two people a day were dying in the workhouse and the burial ground could take no more. The police had to be called to keep starving paupers from knocking

down the gates of the workhouse after admissions had again been halted. Again, the Guardians tried to help those they could not admit, later providing them with portions of food to assist them to return to their homes. This ran contrary to the instructions from the Poor Law Commissioners in Dublin who deprecated such actions. Anyone travelling from Mullavilly needed to have walked some nine miles to reach the workhouse. The state of those being admitted was described in the Workhouse register, of which only a single page has survived. Each description tells a story of misery and want:

"Elizabeth McGlogan, age 63, Roman Catholic widow admitted by the board Jan 15th, almost starved and infested with vermin. Present condition: in fever hospital.

Ann and Margaret McClure, age 10 and 7, Protestant orphans admitted Feb 5th both almost starved, clothing in rags. Present condition: healthy in female school.

Hugh McBride, age 50, Presbyterian labourer widower 4 children alive admitted Feb 26th bodily infirm almost starved and nearly naked. Present condition: in men's ward.

Mary Ann, Patrick, David and Daniel Doherty, aged 11, 9, 7, and 4, Roman Catholic orphans admitted Mar. 4th all in dirty clothing, in rags and infested with vermin: Present condition good health at school.

John Craig, age 16, Protestant single admitted Mar 4th mentally infirm hungry clothing in rags dirty. Present condition in good health in male idiot ward.

Mary Ann Lyle, age 53, Presbyterian married, deserted by husband, admitted Mar 11th with her child age 8 both almost starved clothing dirty and in rags. Present condition in good health.¹⁶"

On 18th March 1847 there was a debate in the House of Commons on the subject of absentee landlords. Hansard reported that:

"MR. W. SMITH O'BRIEN said, that as long as there was such a large remittance of the rents of absentees to England, the evils attending the circumstance to the country whence they came, would not make much impression here, as this country derived all the benefit attending the expenditure of so much wealth. He had observed repeatedly the emaciation of his own country from the constant withdrawal of wealth from it, by the payment of the rents to the absentees; he therefore had felt it to be an imperative duty on him to bring the subject under the consideration of the House at this period, when they were so much called upon to adopt means of meeting the calamity which so severely afflicted Ireland.¹⁷"

William Smith O'Brien¹⁸ was the member for Ennis and an Irish nationalist. He went on to list the names of every absentee landlord who continued to take money out of the country during the famine. Present on O'Brien's list of absentee landlords was the name of Count De Salis.

By the autumn of 1847 conditions in Ulster, though not in the rest of Ireland, were beginning to improve slightly. A good harvest for crops other than potatoes was most welcome and there was a slightly increased demand for weavers, possibly because so many looms had been sold for food. However, such slender indications of better times to come were few and very far between. Other indicators told a different story. The crime rate in Portadown was, in 1847, almost double what it had been in 1845.

Early in 1847, the Poor Law Commissioners had authorised the establishment of soup kitchens in every electoral district. This meant food should have been made available to most people within a reasonable distance of their homes and without them being forced into the workhouse. In just one day in one electoral division some 14,000 people were fed. It is estimated that at the height of the scheme some 30% of the population of Co. Armagh

were being fed in this way¹⁹. Implementation was, however, patchy and in September 1848 new laws enacted at Westminster ended the soup kitchens, which had been successful and instead confined relief to the workhouse system, which was utterly inadequate for the task. The system failed primarily because it was to be financed from the rates, and the majority of ratepayers were in no position to pay. Worse, where small farmers were being summonsed for non-payment of rates, they themselves were falling into debt and in time were being made destitute. Without the money they needed, the Poor Law Guardians could do very little and the penniless were thrown back on private charity such as that provided by the Mullavilly Relief Committee.

1848

The population of the Banbridge workhouse still continued to rise until 8th February 1848, when it reached 1,464 (in a building designed for 800). The number of inmates did not fall back below 1,000 until the summer of 1849.

Fever had always been a problem inside the workhouse, but in 1848 it raged outside as well. There were cholera outbreaks in Portadown, Lurgan and Tandragee; and a smallpox epidemic in Banbridge.

During the period 1845-50 some 5,000 people were admitted to Banbridge workhouse, of which some 1,000 died. Because of the loss of the register it is not possible to tell how many inmates, if any, came from Mullavilly. Similarly, the census records for 1841 and 1851 were burned during the Irish Civil War, so the impact of the famine on the local population cannot be accurately calculated. However, summary records do exist for some townlands.

Within Mullavilly and the surrounding area the following population changes occurred during the famine years:

| | 1841 | 1851 |
|----------------|--------------|--------------|
| Artabracka | 575 | 473 |
| Ballywillan | 740 | 606 |
| Ballylunn | 151 | 137 |
| Clownagh | 288 | 241 |
| Derryhale | 628 | 367 |
| Cornascriebe | 486 | 350 |
| Lisnavogue | 213 | 206 |
| Tamnamore | 416 | 338 |
| Tamnavelton | 337 | 291 |
| <i>Totals:</i> | <i>3,834</i> | <i>3,009</i> |

The overall fall of 825 (22%) is not just explained by deaths, as some who possessed the means emigrated. However, this decline is higher than for the rest of Co Armagh (c15%).

The census for 1841 found that the parish of Mullavilly had a population of 6,841; comprising:

| | | |
|-------------------|--------------|-------|
| Church of Ireland | 3,930 | (58%) |
| Presbyterian | 1,242 | (18%) |
| Other Protestants | 317 | (4%) |
| Roman Catholics | 1,352 | (20%) |
| <i>Total:</i> | <i>6,841</i> | |

If the same percentage reduction in population that affected the townlands listed were to be applied to the whole of Mullavilly, then the total number of those who either died or emigrated during the famine can be calculated as approximately 1,500.

Over the following years the effects of the famine became less visible if not less remembered. There was time to take stock of what had happened.

Some emerged from the experience with their reputations enhanced. The Rector of Kilmore, the Revd James Jones was praised by his curate, Mr Lloyd, at the height of 'Black 47':

*"In Kilmore district Mr Jones is expending his money magnificently. I am convinced he has not appropriated one shilling of his income this year to his own personal expenses. The poor on his glebe, together with the expenses of the Parish swallow up the whole of the year's income."*²⁰

Mr Lloyd was none the less committed:

*"As for myself, I have spent all I had, and what I am now spending is borrowed money. Yet it is quite impossible to resist giving when I see whole families starving before my eyes."*²¹

The Revd Robert McGhee put his own position at risk by travelling to London to seek help from the patron of his living, the Count De Salis. Having only arrived in the Parish in 1845, he was soon working tirelessly with his Roman Catholic counterpart Father Quinn both to raise the funds for relief and to apply them as effectively as possible. He too gave a large proportion of his income to help his parishioners.

McGhee left Mullavilly in 1850²², leaving Ireland for the parish of High Roding in Essex (which was in the gift of the Anglo-Irish peer and diplomat, the Earl of Arran). Later he joined the Army as a Chaplain and travelled to Canada and China. It is possible to surmise that his experiences in Armagh led him to decide to move as far away as possible from the scene of such distress.

Compared with the exertions of these fine Christians, the efforts and concern of some others seem paltry. On 2nd January 1847, the same day that Banbridge Workhouse had to shut its gates to fifty-four starving paupers, the *Northern Whig* reported that a group of "*noblemen and gentlemen*" had formed a society to bring the Bible to "*the unenlightened portions of the people*"²³. They considered the famine to be a "*favourable crisis which must not be allowed to pass unimproved*". A committee was formed to raise £20,000 (£14.5m) to pursue the proselytising

purposes of the society. The first signatory was the Duke of Manchester. As the *Northern Whig* pointed out:

“The Duke was too much taken up with the spiritual concerns of the famished poor to have time or inclination to look to their physical condition.”

On 22 February 1847, two days after the Revd Robert McGhee had written desperately to Dublin seeking funds to support 1,200 starving parishioners, the Lurgan Agricultural Society held its annual ploughing match in Kilmore. Some 2,000 people attended and the Newry Telegraph reported

“...an extensive prospect of the fertile counties of Down, Antrim and Armagh could not but cause the beholder to compare it with the desolation of the south and acknowledge that only in our own happy Ulster could the like be found.²⁴”

In September of the same year, when paupers were dying at the rate of 14 a week in the workhouse, the society held another event in Lurgan; after which the members retired to the Brownlow Arms for “*an excellent and substantial dinner*²⁵”. Earlier, in June, the proprietors of the Portadown Market Company sought to have a soup kitchen moved from the premises as the sight of queuing paupers was offending customers²⁶.

The rents paid to the Count De Salis by his Armagh tenants were £4,342 {£2.9m} per annum. From this, under the terms of his father’s will, he paid his mother an allowance of £500 {£332,000} per annum²⁷. The Count’s donation of £20 {£14,000} to the Mullavilly Relief Committee, and the subsequent donation of £10 {£7,000} by the Dowager Countess seem small by any standards. His refusal to see the Rector of his church, who had travelled several hundred miles to explain the misery being endured by his tenants, is inexplicable.

The *Banner of Ulster*, a newspaper edited by the Revd William Gibson, a Presbyterian minister wrote of others in the same position who had given similar sums:

“A £40 subscription from the absentee drawer of hundreds and hundreds of pounds yearly, in a

time of famine, is but a mockery of charity. At the same time, the owners are living in fashionable luxury, dreaming no doubt, that their mite is the means of saving the poor from regular depopulation.²⁸"

In 1847, when the famine was at its height, the agents of the Count De Salis evicted fourteen families from his lands in Mullavilly²⁹.

