

## The Great Famine - Mallow

Television has made such an impact on our lives. It beams pictures of famine and disaster directly into our homes. It tugs at our conscience and makes us realise just how lucky we are here in Ireland with our generally moderate climate. Somewhere deep within our psyche we empathise with the misery and bewilderment felt by the people of countries like Niger and Malawi. While gazing at the news one evening, the quotation “Natural factors cause crop failures, but human beings cause famine.” (William A. Dando) sprang to mind. This turned my thoughts to what it must have been like in Ireland during the Great Famine, when the potato crop failed, especially in rural areas.

Ireland in the 1840's was one of the most densely populated countries in Europe, with over 8,000,000 inhabitants, of whom more than four-fifths lived on the land. Even in rural areas the population was as high as 400 per square mile. About half of these depended for its subsistence on the potato and it was local and partial failures of the potato crop that had produced the earlier famines. What gave the Great Famine its special character was that the crop failed over the whole country, and that the failure was repeated in successive years.

During the autumn of 1845 around Mallow the potatoes were carefully picked and pitted and only those without the slightest trace of disease were put in the pits. A Mr. E. Murphy of Leopardstown Agricultural College examined many of the pits. He reported that he made it his business whenever the opportunity presented itself to check the state of the potatoes, and of these, he estimated that from one-tenth to one-third were being picked out and thrown away. Contemporaries invariably wrote about the suddenness with which the blight struck; fields that had been healthy and luxuriant one day were a mass of putrefying vegetation the next.

At many of the Public Meetings held in Mallow during these famine years the necessity of paying a 'living wage' was emphasized again and again. Details of wages given in a questionnaire, which was sent to the Mallow Board of Guardians by the Poor Law Commissioners in Dublin, show that males got 8d. and females 4d. to 6d. per day, without diet. During harvest and potato planting and raising, males got 10d. to 12d. and occasionally more. However, in the year 1846 the local Board of Works fixed the wages at 7d. per day, and immediately a group of 218 labourers marched to the Workhouse and forced their way in, demanding that they be admitted as paupers rather than be abandoned to die slowly of hunger on 7d. per day. The wages were raised to 8d. per day, and the Mallow Relief Committee described this as 'arbitrary cruelty' and declared that the 'men on the works are starving.'

Food riots and similar disturbances were part of the pattern of desperation and despair. Deaths from starvation were partly averted by the action of Sir Robert Peel's government, which, during November 1845, purchased £100,000 worth of Indian corn in the United States and arranged for its shipment to Cork. It was not his intention that the Government should undertake responsibility for feeding the people; but he believed that by selling this grain cheaply it would be possible to keep down the general price of food, and prevent

profiteering. Relief Committees sold the meal at reduced prices, some at as little as 4d. per stone. In Mallow the price was 1s.4d. per stone.

A report in the Cork Examiner of 14<sup>th</sup> June 1847 stated that “Crowds are flocking into Mallow since the new Relief Committee started to issue free rations. Poor creatures place a little straw at a hall-door or outside some public building and remain there until they die.”

The impact of the famine in the Mallow Union was certainly far greater than is indicated by the very small percentage of the population that received poor law relief. (12% as against 47% in Kanturk.) More than half its population, a very high proportion relative to other unions, was composed of landless labourers, and this group was hit hardest by the potato failures. Great inconsistencies existed in the union, with respect to public relief on the one hand, and the desperate plight of the people.

It appears that better administration of relief would have eased much of the distress. This brings me back to my first thoughts that “Natural factors cause crop failures, but human beings cause famine.”

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