

## SOME GLIMPSES OF THE LIFE OF A KINLOUGH HEROINE OF THE GREAT FAMINE

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WHILE READING Gerard MacAtasney's well-researched and detailed book on the Famine years in Leitrim, *The Dead Buried by the Dying*, I noted several heroes and heroines from every corner of the county working to relieve the stress that scarcity of food brings. Among them was a young girl living in Kinlough whose contribution was only discovered recently from the letters she wrote to different bodies, especially The Society of Friends (Quakers).

In the 1841 census Penelope Johnston aged 19 years, is listed with her family in Kinlough House. Very early on in the tragedy she began to distribute soup to thirty or forty persons daily. The Society of Friends told her that if she could raise subscriptions and increase the daily distribution they would support her with a new boiler and £20 cash. The problem with Penelope as with others attempting to stem the tide was the fact that, as she put it herself, 'many persons of large property did not reside here.'

However, some large landown-



■ **Manorhamilton Fever Hospital plaque**

ers did become involved. Elizabeth Peyton of Carrick-on-Shannon, for example, engaged some people in fine knitting and spinning. Her husband maintained that this initiative had been the means of raising a spirit of industry in that neighbourhood hitherto unknown to them, with some children earning nearly £3 in six weeks. In Kinlough Penelope Johnston was managing a similar operation and with a grant of £10 from the Quakers she was able to employ spinners and weavers in making flannel and linen. This was then sold to the needy of the area who paid for it in weekly instalments.

While the Irish Relief Association and the Society of Friends were the main sources of relief

outside government initiatives there was one group which stepped in at this time. The Irish reproductive Loan Fund had developed from the London Committee for the relief of the Distressed Irish (also known as the London Tavern Committee) which had been the main source of relief during the Famine of 1822. On 15 March 1847 Rev. George Shaw of Annaduff wrote to the Secretary of the fund to enquire if money in the hands of the Leitrim trustees of the fund could be made available as loans to enable people to seed their land. However Shaw's letter hinted at problems connected with finance. 'Around £500 was in circulation a few years ago but was called in by the trustees – or at least the holding of it

made so disagreeable that we were glad to pay it off since which time it has lain idle. If it could now be restored to us under a milder and kinder regime we would employ it most usefully to encourage the seeding of the land which otherwise I fear will be quite neglected by a small farmers from want of means for purchasing seeds.

Rev Richard Clifford made known that he had distributed £80 worth of seed oats to the tenants of the Glebe lands in Aughnasheelin at his own expense while in Kinlough, Penelope Johnston had bought 'a great deal of seed oats and flax,' and was delighted that 'Thank God, they had been blessed and the crops, unusually speaking, are good.

Throughout the months of September to December 1847 constant references were made by correspondents to the fact that the closure of government soup kitchens and the introduction of the Poor Law Extension Act had resulted in large numbers being left in want. For example, Emily Auchmuty in Drumsna stated that the hundreds 'who had before lived on the rations issued out under the operation of the Relief Act are now in the greatest destitution.'

Rather than simply distribute

food, the Society appeared to prefer supporting private work initiatives. For example, when Penelope Johnston reported increasing distress in the Bundoran area she also revealed that she was attempting to maintain employment of a 'great number of women' who were paid in both in food and clothing. She was sent an voucher for one ton of Indian meal from Sligo.

In Kinlough there was a huge demand for pea seeds, given that they required little manure. The importance of such grants was reflected in the following comments of Penelope Johnston. "I never saw such excitement as the peas have caused. I have already been obliged from the demand to reduce the quantity. I intended giving four stones but now only two to each person unless extreme cases. I really think if I had 500 stone I could dispose of them at one shilling a stone. In Ballyshannon where peas are sold they pay two shillings a stone and even at that price quantities sold. I am getting lists for turnip seed made by persons I can rely on being exact."

In 1848 Archibald St George and Penelope got married and made their home at Mount Prospect House in Kinlough. He had been appointed Vicar of Rossinver



■ St. George Family plaque

Parish in 1844. Penelope continued working on her humanitarian mission and I have no doubt that he was involved also. A son was born to them two years later but tragedy soon struck the family, as the marble memorial in the parish church in Kinlough relates:

Sacred to the memory of Reverend Archibald St George late Vicar of the parish of Rossinver who departed this life on 22 January 1851, aged 46. Also to the memory of Baldwin Robert



■ **Manorhamilton Fever Hospital**

St George, his only child born 30 October 1850 – Died 20 February 1852. Suffer little children to come unto me and forbid them not for of such is the Kingdom of God.

Both father and son probably died from an infectious disease such as cholera or typhus which were very prevalent at the time. So there was a great deal of sorrow in Penelope's own life. I guess that by then she had shared so much in the sufferings of the poor people of Kinlough that she drew on all the words of consolation available from the Bible.

By 11 April 1849, the first time that official statistics for Manorhamilton workhouse are

available, the numbers on outdoor relief total 999 people at a cost of more than £41/6s, with the areas most in need being Killanummery and Killargue. People from both Kinlough and Glenade had to register at Ballyshannon workhouse and a similar situation pertained there.

The workhouses were expected to repay the loans given them as well as maintain both patients and staff. By February 1849, the guardians of Manorhamilton Workhouse appeared to have been in a strong financial position. Much of the new rate had been paid and they enjoyed a balance in their favour of almost £33,000. But there were signs that distress was not yet termi-

nated. In the first two months of the year there were 322 admissions to the house. At the same time outdoor relief costs increased from a nominal £1.8.0 on 4th January to almost £14 in the first week of March. At the end of that month the Board paid £1,451 to meet various expenses, thereby reducing its balance to £514. While temporary inspector, Captain Gilbert, paid tribute to the guardians for their economy and good management which gave the appearance of the union being "favourable circumstanced" he painted a grim picture of the prospects for the future:

'The means of the proprietors and occupiers are exhausted.



#### ■ Manorhamilton Famine Pot

Rents are not to be had except in part in some electoral divisions. The stock of cattle is decreasing amongst tenants, the haggards are empty, and many townlands waste and deserted. The causes of destitution are the failure of the potato crop, absenteeism, and the consequent lack of employment. There are no potatoes in this union except some retained for seed. The food in general use amongst the peasantry is Indian meal and Oat meal; turnips as an article of food was much in use up to the present time, but the store is now exhausted'.

Gilbert's observations were corroborated by a series of letters from Penelope St George during

these months. In late December 1848 she had received a bale of clothing from the Society of Friends and by January 1849 was endeavouring to sell them, but she informed the Central Committee that such sales would take some time 'as the distress has lately increased.'

By March 1849 she was enquiring as to the possibility of receiving food for 'some very poor families whose wages are not sufficient to support their families around Kinlough.'

Assuring the Friends that she had 'assisted all classes and denominations' she lamented she was unable to do more as 'clergymen now are not only badly paid but highly taxed.' In

a further letter she requested some cabbage and parsnip seed to assist 'the small struggling industrious farmers who would be unable to crop their land without it'.

Having failed to secure favourable reply she revealed that the poor were now suffering and 'vast struggles' had been made by them to get a crop down, despite being 'half-starved and getting worse every day.' Upon eventually receiving a grant of £7 from the Society she utilised it in the employment of a dozen women each week working at flax, the latter supplied free by her brother James. In this way she was able to produce cheap clothing which she then sold to the poor. The women, being 'industrious heads of families', received one stone of meal per week, along with a dinner provided by herself.

This is the full extent of the information we know about Penelope Johnston of Kinlough House. I am indebted to both Gerard MacAtasney and Deborah L Johnston of Alexandria USA for the research they have already carried out. Hopefully we will be able to find out more from other sources in the future.