When Hunger Swept the Land

The Life and Times of Manorhamilton Workhouses

Margaret Connolly

IN THE cold harsh February of 1846, two little sisters, orphaned or more likely abandoned by their parents, trudged the weary miles from Derrygonnelly, Co Fermanagh to Manorhamilton. For some time after their arrival here, Jane and Ann Edwards were cared for by officers of the 5th Fusiliers and after that Company was transferred from Manorhamilton, the girls were admitted to the Workhouse—Jane never to leave. Her death is recorded there on July 19th. Ann, then aged nine, remained. Her fate unknown. Did she survive? Or emigrate? Or was she laid with the countless others, who sleep their last long sleep in unmarked graves at the Workhouse site in our town?

This is but one of the heart-rending accounts that tell of life, as our ancestors knew it, a century and a half ago. Most cultures are rich in lore and legend which celebrate heroism and strength but, it is important too to record the grim statistics and painful details of a darker past because the past, from deep within us, moulds our understanding and empathy of the present.

It is difficult for us, who have lived in an age of newfound prosperity, to visualise and comprehend the conditions which existed in Ireland in the 1800's. For many poverty was a way of life. Our forefathers lived in an Ireland that suffered from an oppressive landlord system, their holdings small and held at the whim of the landlord. The Poor Law Act of 1838 spawned the Poor Law System. Based on the English Poor Law System, it was 'an English solution to an Irish problem' and so came the Workhouse. Dr Brendan Hensey in his book 'The Health Services of Ireland' states 'The Workhouses were planned to be grim and strictly functional so as to discourage all but the destitute poor from partaking of its benefits'. Sir George Nicholls in his writing further tells us 'For the efficiency of the Workhouse, reliance was chiefly placed on the enforcement of order, sobriety, cleanliness, daily decorum and the exclusion of all stimulants to excitement—these constitute the real strength of the Workhouse as a test of destitution'. Statements such as these, devoid of any hint of kindness or pity, set the scene for how life would be in these institutions.

Manorhamilton Workhouse

The first meeting of the Board of Guardians in Manorhamilton took place on Monday 14th October 1839. Cairncross Cullen was elected Chairman (a position which, shortly after, went to Nicholas Loftus Tottenham), Simon Armstrong became Vice Chairman and Thomas Nixon Secretary. Following discussions in early 1840 a site was purchased from Henry Duggan and Allen Rutherford for £12-5s-6d. The contractor chosen was James Caldwell, an established Sligo builder. One can still see his fine work at the Clarion Hotel in Sligo –originally Sligo Mental Hospital, built by Caldwell in 1848. The cost of the Manorhamilton building was approximately £6400 and a loan was secured from the Ulster Bank in Enniskillen. As the time of opening approached, positions were keenly sought after as the pay, by the standards of that time, was attractive. Four doctors applied for the post of Medical Officer and Dr Dundass was appointed at an annual salary of £40. This gentleman subsequently died of fever on September 2nd 1847. There were seven applicants for the position of porter and Michael Lynch secured the job. His salary was £10 per annum with a suit of clothes, hat and shoes supplied. To the business community and the more prosperous farmers of the Manorhamilton area and its hinterland, the coming of the Workhouse would bring many benefits with the awarding of contracts for food and supplies, the need for craftsmen and carters, the supply of fuel and, in later years the supply of water and, sadly, the great need for coffins. On December 8th 1842, the Workhouse opened its doors for the reception of paupers and seven inmates spent 'the festive season'

there. In the following years hundreds of poverty stricken souls from Manorhamilton, Cloonlougher, Dromahair, Killenummery, Killargue, Rossinver, Kiltyclogher, Inishmagrath, Lurganboy and Drumkeerin poured through the doors of that austere institution.

Life in the Workhouse

On arrival, all those seeking admission, entered through the Porter's Lodge which stood to the front of the Workhouse. Some were accepted, some turned away. Those 'fortunate' enough to be admitted then made their way to the Workhouse itself. Here families were separated—men and boys to the right, women, girls and younger children to the left. For some this was a final parting as the Grim Reaper called for many. Life here was lived to the toll of the bell, rousing those within in the morning and, in the course of the day, calling them to work, to eat and to sleep again. Those who were physically able carried out the routine daily chores—cooking, cleaning, mending, carrying in turf, bringing water from the well and preparing the dead for burial. We read in the Workhouse Minute Book, that in November 1843 the boys had the special chore of 'rubbing the flags with coarse stones to achieve a smoother surface'. From the Master's report we glean that the outcome was 'a great success'.

By February 1843 there were twenty children in the Workhouse and a school master and school mistress was appointed—John Moore and Maria Ramsey. The Board of Guardians was basically satisfied with the administration of the building. There were, of course, minor matters of discipline and even the most trivial of these was reported to the Poor Law Commissioners in Dublin. Indeed by 1844, the Guardians felt that a smaller building would have been adequate. They could not have foreseen the chronic overcrowding, the appalling conditions, and the horror of disease which would confront them all too soon. And then came the Famine.

The Great Hunger

This was a time described in Dudley Edwards and William's book 'The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History 1845-'52' as 'but a period of greater misery in a prolonged age of suffering' The population of Ireland had been rising steadily. In the 1700's it was estimated to be around 3 million. By the second half of the 18th century it had risen to 4 million. By 1841 the Census records 8,177,744. Population experts question the accuracy of this figure and feel that the number was nearer 8.5 million. Whatever the correct count, by 1851 the population had tumbled to 6,554,074—a drop of almost two million. When we take into account the million who emigrated, we are still left with approximately another million souls lost through starvation and disease.

Families in those days were large, holdings were small and the potato had become the staple diet of many. Potatoes were not native to Ireland, but having been found by Spanish Conquistadors in South America in the 1500's, they were shipped to Europe and reached Ireland around 1590. Although other varieties (the cup and the apple) were grown, from 1810 onwards the lumper was the most widely cultivated. Its crop yield outstripped that of other varieties but it was susceptible to disease. Blight struck for the first time in the United States in 1843/44. The invisible fungus spores were transported to Belgium in a cargo of apparently healthy potatoes. The disease spread rapidly appearing in the Summer of 1845 in Flanders, Normandy, Holland and Southern England.

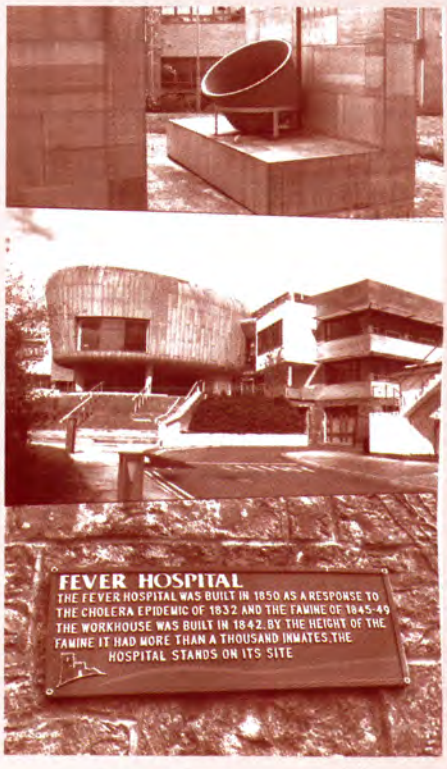
By August 20th blight was recorded at the Botanical Gardens in Dublin by Dr David Moore. A week later Co Fermanagh reported a total failure of the crop and by October, when it became clear that blight had destroyed the healthy potatoes harvested in August, panic gripped the West of Ireland.

The crop of 1846 was almost a total failure despite the fact that people had starved themselves during the Winter of 1845 in order to have seed for the Spring planting. The Workhouses of Ireland, of which there were 130 at that time, accommodated about 100,000 people but by the Winter of 1846-'47 more than five times that number had qualified for admission.

What of Manorhamilton Workhouse?

The failure of the potato crop brought in its wake fear, desperation and death. Within the Manorhamilton Workhouse, which had been built to accommodate 550, numbers exceeded 900 at the height of the Famine. Five additional premises were rented in the town in an effort to house the sick and starving – Skreeney House (as a Fever Hospital), a house in Donaghmore (for the aged women), The Commons Cottage (for the boys), the house of 'Christopher Wilson at the bridge', and the house adjoining Robinson's Hotel.

The dietary of the Workhouse changed from one of oatmeal porridge,



potatoes and milk or buttermilk to one of Indian meal porridge and milk (with a possibility of molasses being used at times as a substitute for milk). Children from 2-9 years were allowed 4ozs of bread and ½ pt of milk for supper. The Infirmary, to the rear of the Workhouse, was unable to cope with the numbers needing medical attention and so the straw shed was turned into a fever ward for the women and the turf shed became the male fever ward.

As in all famines, disease is the greatest killer and accounts of the time record deaths from fever, dysentery, colic, measles, syphilis, dropsy, to name but a few. The weekly reports concerning those who passed away are inconsistent—sometimes names are recorded, sometimes numbers only and sometimes just the number of coffins ordered. After March 18th 1847 no more shrouding was ordered and on May 4th of that year the order for coffins was 47 large, 17 second and 7 small. The cost of coffins then was 3s8d for large, 3 shillings for second and 2s6d for small. It is evident that some children were not afforded an individual coffin or perhaps one at all, as a large proportion of the recorded deaths were of children. In that same week in May the Medical Officer reported 197 ill of fever, dysentery and measles.

On a wet day in 2001 I stood with archaeologist, Declan Moore, in one of the cemeteries of the Workhouse. The rows of spruce coffins, most in a remarkably good state of preservation, laid so close to each other as to be almost touching, will forever be etched on my memory and I had to remind myself that I was in Manorhamilton and not in some remote corner of darkest Africa or war-ravished Cambodia.

The archaeological dig in progress at that time was necessitated by the construction of the Head Offices of the North Western Health Board. The exhumed remains—73 in all—were subsequently re-interred, after five years of controversy, in a specially commissioned vault incorporating a famine pot donated by the O Flynn family. The simple words on the stone read 'In memory of those who died in Manorhamilton Workhouse during the Great Famine 1845-1849'

Looking at the Famine years we see, that although petitioned by many, including Daniel O Connell, the response of the British government to the calamity in Ireland, only commenced in March 1846 when relief schemes were introduced. The employment figure on these work schemes was initially 140,000, a figure which rose to 734,000 within a year. December of that year saw the opening of the Government grain stores in the West, where grain was offered for sale at five percent above market price. By July 1847 The Soup Kitchens were estimated to be giving daily sustenance to some three million. The first soup kitchens in North Leitrim opened in February of that year. £26 was donated by the local Relief Committee, the Tottenhams and the Society of Friends (the Quakers) towards the establishment of the one in Manorhamilton. Fever, of epidemic proportion, spread rapidly in all Workhouses due to hopeless overcrowding. Plans to build a Fever Hospital in the grounds of the Workhouse had been discussed on several occasions by the Manorhamilton Board of Guardians.

In May 1848 advertisements in the General Advertiser and the local papers invited tenders for the construction of same. The lowest tender of £849 was accepted and the Fever Hospital, now known locally as St Josephs, opened in 1850. It is the one building remaining from the Workhouse complex. The Great Irish Famine petered out around 1849/1850. Soup kitchens and outdoor relief were gradually discontinued and the rented houses, with the exception of the Commons house, reverted to their original owners. Life in the Workhouse took on a semblance of normality following a high number of deaths from June to August 1849—June 80, July 100 and August about 60. In November came a week when, at last, no death was reported.

A New Era

The dreaded word 'Workhouse' became 'County Home'. Between November 13th and 26th 1936 all the inmates and staff in the Manorhamilton home were transferred to a new County Home in Carrick-on-Shannon. Eighteen years later demolition of the Workhouse here made way for Our Lady's Hospital in 1954. Today the impressive offices of the Health Services Executive tower over the Hospital. Let all who visit this historic site, be it to call on patients in the hospital, or to pay their last respects to those in the little Chapel or simply to attend work, spare a thought and breathe a silent prayer for the nameless hundreds who rest beneath.

THE PAUPER'S ACRE *Lily O'Hagan*

Tread softly on this hallowed ground
Saints sleep here below
Clapped roughly in their six by two or a shroud
Who cares to know.
Fever, famine, hunger pain
The Workhouse, harsh eviction.
Poor victims solicit for us
God's Mercy and Benediction.