

## FAMINE REPORTS FROM SKIBBEREEN

### *Introduction*

The Great Irish Famine was the most appalling disaster in the history of nineteenth century Europe.<sup>1</sup> Out of a total population of about eight and a half million, it is estimated that over one million people died unnecessarily between the years of 1846 and 1851. This figure rises to almost one and a half million when averted births are included.<sup>2</sup>

Emigration offered a chance to escape, and more than a million people emigrated between 1846 and 1851, adding to the decline in Ireland's population.<sup>3</sup> Emigration was already taking place prior to the Great Famine but the scale of the exodus during and post Famine was unprecedented in the history of international migration, as two million people left Ireland between 1845 and 1855.<sup>4</sup> This was more than had emigrated from Ireland in the preceding two and a half centuries.<sup>5</sup>

Some areas of Ireland were disproportionately affected and the Great Famine 'was less a national disaster than a social and regional one'.<sup>6</sup> Of the excess deaths, Munster accounted for 30.3%, Connacht 40.4%, Ulster for 20.7% and Leinster 8.6%, so the south and west were particularly badly affected.<sup>7</sup> The average population loss

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<sup>1</sup> Joe Lee, 'Foreword', in Pat Cleary & Philip O'Regan, *Dear Old Skibbereen* (Skibbereen Printers, Skibbereen, 1995), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> James S. Donnelly Jr, *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (Sutton Publishing, Gloucestershire, 2002), p. 171.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>4</sup> David Fitzpatrick, 'Flight from Famine', in Cathal Póirtéir, (ed.), *The Great Irish Famine: The Thomas Davis Lecture Series* (Mercier Press, Ireland, 1995), p. 175.

<sup>5</sup> Kirby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York, Oxford UP, 1985), p. 291.

<sup>6</sup> L.M. Cullen, *An Economic History of Ireland Since 1660* (Batsford, London, 1972), p. 132.

<sup>7</sup> Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 176.

in the Poor Law Unions of Cork was 24.2% but Skibbereen Poor Law Union came in with the highest loss in all of Cork, losing 36.1% of its people.<sup>8</sup>

It is not surprising therefore, that Skibbereen became synonymous with the Great Famine and features prominently in its historiography. But even for an area so badly affected, Skibbereen received an extraordinary amount of coverage from contemporary writers and journalists. This, in turn, caused even more travel writers and visitors to visit Skibbereen to personally witness the unfolding tragedy.<sup>9</sup> This resulted in a wealth of primary source material which was drawn upon subsequently by Famine historians, securing Skibbereen's place in the chronicle of the Great Famine.

This essay will look at the catastrophe as it progressed and examine some of the factors that led to Skibbereen's prominence in Famine reports. It will also question whether this notoriety contributed to more extensive relief measures in the Skibbereen Poor Law Union, and prompted more aid to Ireland generally.

### ***1845 - Early Famine Reports***

Ireland featured prominently in the British media prior to the Great Famine with reports on Irish misery and the progress of O'Connell's Repeal movement.<sup>10</sup> The most influential and powerful newspaper of the day was *The Times*, which had far out-distanced its rivals in circulation and authority by the mid-1830s.<sup>11</sup>

The editor of *The Times* from 1841, J.T. Delane, said that *The Times* represented the sovereign opinion of the educated 'ruling classes' and Sir Robert Peel said that it

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<sup>8</sup> James S. Donnelly Jr, *The Land and the People of Nineteenth-Century Cork: The Rural Economy and the Land Question* (Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., Great Britain, 1987), p. 129.

<sup>9</sup> Lord Dufferin & Hon. G.F. Boyle, *Narrative of a Journey from Oxford to Skibbereen during the year of the Irish Famine* (John Henry Parker, Oxford, 1847), p. 1. 'We were advised to proceed at once to Skibbereen ... which was reported to be the very nucleus of famine and disease'.

<sup>10</sup> Melissa Fegan, *Literature and the Irish Famine 1845-1919* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2002), p. 35.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Grey, 'British Public Opinion and the Great Irish Famine 1845-49', in Breandán Ó Conaire, (ed.), *The Famine Lectures* (Roscommon Herald, Boyle, 1997), p. 78.

was the 'barometer of public opinion'.<sup>12</sup> As British public opinion played an active role in moulding the perceptions of the government elite and in determining the state actions during the period, *The Times* and other influential newspapers of the time played a significant role in how the government responded to the crisis.<sup>13</sup> *The Times* did not merely report, but interpreted events, thereby influencing the attitudes of its readership.<sup>14</sup>

*The Times*' 'Commissioner', Thomas Campbell Foster, was touring Ireland when news of the first failure of the potato crop broke in September 1845.<sup>15</sup> A series of reports by Campbell Foster entitled 'The Conditions of the People of Ireland' ran from 1845-6 and the edition of 28 November 1845 reads:

Amongst the rough hills of West Carbery ... is a people, whose quiet docility and industry, if employed, and directed ... cannot be excelled, but who, if left to themselves, become indolent, careless, and unenergetic; ...

More liberality on the part of the landlords ... would lead to an improvement in the condition of the peasantry.<sup>16</sup>

This was a persistent theme of the British middle-class perceptions of Ireland – the Irish rents were an infamous source of profit and 'something not becoming of a gentleman'.<sup>17</sup> This hostility towards Irish landlords was fuelled by an antagonism in Britain towards landlords in general as supporters of the much-resented Corn Laws but those in Ireland were additionally vilified for allowing social and moral backwardness to continue.<sup>18</sup> Campbell Foster goes on to observe:

The general topic of conversation everywhere now is the failure of the potato crop ... I am as firmly convinced ... such is the general apathy, want of exertion and feeling of fatality amongst the people ... that unless the Government step forward to *enforce* these or similar plans for the national welfare, *not any one of them will be generally adopted and nothing will be done* ... The Government, however, have been *warned*

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>15</sup> Fegan, *Literature and the Irish Famine 1845-1919*, p. 35.

<sup>16</sup> *The Times*, Friday 28 November 1845.

<sup>17</sup> Grey, 'British Public Opinion and the Great Irish Famine 1845-49,' p. 80.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

– let them act promptly, decisively, and *at once*, and not depend on people helping themselves: for, such is the character of the people, that *they will do nothing until starvation faces them*.<sup>19</sup>

*The Times* continued its criticism of delays in feeding the starving and berated the government for adding to Ireland's perils for its indecision and inaction since the blight had been discovered.<sup>20</sup> This initial response must be viewed from the perspective that this failure of the 1845 crop was a single event, not a forerunner of a calamity.<sup>21</sup> The prospect of a famine of major proportions affecting any part of the empire was humiliating and a step backwards in civilisation.<sup>22</sup> Since the Act of Union in 1801, Ireland was part of Great Britain and the responsibility for its wellbeing lay with Westminster. How could such a thing be happening in the most powerful country on earth?

Dr Dan Donovan, the dispensary doctor for Skibbereen, showed concern at a meeting of the Carbery Agricultural Show in Skibbereen in October 1845. The *Cork Constitution* of 1 November reported that:

Dr. Donovan ... found that the wail all around him was that the potatoes were rotting everywhere.<sup>23</sup>

Action was called for and a special report in the *Cork Examiner* of 10 November 1845 reads:

A large and influential meeting of the inhabitants of Skibbereen and the gentry and landed proprietors of the vicinity was held on Monday, in the Courthouse of that town, for the purpose of considering the state of the potato crop in the district, and of petitioning government to adopt the best measures to alleviate the distress.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *The Times*, Friday 28 November 1845.

<sup>20</sup> Fegan, *Literature and the Irish Famine 1845-1919*, p. 36.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>23</sup> *Cork Constitution*, 1 November 1845.

<sup>24</sup> *Cork Examiner*, 10 December 1845.

## *1845 – Famine Relief*

The proportion of potato crop ‘lost’ that first year was estimated to be somewhere between a quarter and a third but by early December retail prices had more than doubled.<sup>25</sup> Peel’s government was urged to repeal the Corn Laws and allow the duty-free importation of grain but, instead, his administration made a secret purchase of Indian corn and meal from the United States.<sup>26</sup> There was no large established trade in this commodity, therefore its interference with private commerce was minimal.<sup>27</sup>

A central relief commission under Sir Randolph Routh was to arrange the efficient distribution of this food via a network of local committees. These local committees were to raise funds among local landowners and distribute the food at cost price locally. It was 24 March 1846 when the divisions for the county of Cork were decided and an immediate preliminary meeting was held in Skibbereen on that date.<sup>28</sup> Just four days later the Skibbereen Committee secretary, Thomas Hungerford, applied to the commission in Dublin.<sup>29</sup> The urgency of the local situation was evident from the rapid response of the Skibbereen Committee to the government actions.

Public works were set up so that people could earn the money to buy this food and the number of people employed on these works steadily increased, reaching a peak of almost 98,000 in the first week of August 1846.<sup>30</sup> The tone of *The Times*’ coverage changed and, by the time that the scale of expenditure on relief became clear, a leading article on 19 of February 1846 objected to the government voting away money on an ‘act of God’, to ‘a country that was used

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<sup>25</sup> Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 47.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>28</sup> Peter Foynes, *The Great Famine in Skibbereen* (Irish Famine Commemoration Ltd, Skibbereen, 2004), p. 27.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

to famines'.<sup>31</sup> By April 1846 it viewed the Famine as a frustrating brake on England's progress and prosperity:

Ireland certainly is the fated instrument for humbling the pride of this empire. In the moment of our greatest successes ... Ireland recalls us to modesty, if not to despair.<sup>32</sup>

### ***1846 – Famine Relief***

While only a portion of the 1845 potato crop was destroyed by blight, the 1846 crop was almost a total loss.<sup>33</sup> Despite this, the new government of Lord John Russell decided in August 1846 to reverse the previous government policy of restraining speculation in foodstuffs by importing foreign grain.<sup>34</sup> An exception to this rule was made for a few places only, among them Skibbereen, where government food depots were set up. However, they were to be opened only as a last resort.<sup>35</sup>

This decision resulted in an exponential food price increase. Indian meal in Cork rose from a price of £10 per ton at the time of the announcement, to £19 in December.<sup>36</sup> The ludicrous situation arose where the government depots, which had bought the meal for as little as £13 per ton, were selling it to relief committees for £19 as they would not undercut the market cost.<sup>37</sup> This food inflation meant that by December 1846 in the Skibbereen district, a labourer earning the prevailing wage of 8d per day was able to purchase only four pounds of meal a day.<sup>38</sup> This resulted in a slow starvation and there were a series of riots and disturbances throughout the Skibbereen Union during that autumn and winter.<sup>39</sup> In the closing weeks of 1846, Routh persistently argued that the government depots should be opened before the appointed date of the

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<sup>31</sup> Fegan, *Literature and the Irish Famine 1845-1919*, p. 44.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>33</sup> Donnelly, *The Land and the People of Nineteenth-Century Cork*, p. 84.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger, Ireland 1845-1849* (Penguin Books, London, 1962), p. 107.

<sup>36</sup> Donnelly, *The Land and the People of Nineteenth-Century Cork*, p. 84.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 84-5.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>39</sup> Foynes, *The Great Famine in Skibbereen*, p. 50-51.

28 December but even in Skibbereen, by then achieving an international reputation due to almost daily reports of death by starvation, no exception was to be made.<sup>40</sup> This was subsequently revoked but, at the time, Trevelyan, permanent head of the Treasury, explained to Routh:

These principles must be kept in view in reference to what is now going on in Skibbereen, for if we were to commence a lavish issue there, we might find it difficult to adopt a safe course elsewhere.<sup>41</sup>

Changes in the system of the relief works, devised by Trevelyan in August 1846, meant the Board of Works assumed complete responsibility for all public schemes.<sup>42</sup> This resulted in a massive bureaucratic machine which often led to delays in payment to workers. The inquest into the death on 13 October of Denis McKennedy, a labourer working on a relief scheme at Caheragh near Skibbereen, found that he had ‘died of starvation due to the gross negligence of the Board of Works’.<sup>43</sup> He was owed three weeks’ wages when he died on the side of the road and the results of the inquest were publicised by a report in the *Cork Examiner*.<sup>44</sup>

### ***1846 – Reports from Skibbereen***

In late November, the Skibbereen Relief Committee sent a delegation to England to seek contributions to relieve distress.<sup>45</sup> Rev. Charles Caufield and Rev. R.B. Townsend sought permission to hold a nationwide church collection. They were unsuccessful in this but on 5 December, after their visit, Trevelyan suggested to Routh that ‘the whole or portion of the Ceylon subscription be given to Skibbereen, where, judging from the number of deaths, the destitution must be frightful’. By 12 December, the Skibbereen food depot was open three

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<sup>40</sup> Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845-52* (Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 2006), p. 79.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 70.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>44</sup> Jeremiah O’Callaghan, ‘Another Death by Starvation,’ *Cork Examiner*, 6 November 1845.

<sup>45</sup> Foynes, *The Great Famine in Skibbereen*, p. 57.

days a week while the official fixed date for opening the depots was still December 28 for the rest of the country.<sup>46</sup>

On 18 December the Chief Secretary for Ireland, Henry Labouchere, contacted Routh as he ‘was very anxious about the reports from Skibbereen’. That same day Routh sent a senior official, Assistant Commissary-General Inglis, from Limerick to Skibbereen ‘to organise a plan for relief.’ Inglis met members of the Skibbereen Relief Committee who advised him that an active Soup Committee existed in Skibbereen and on December 21, Inglis pledged £85 to the account of the Soup Committee.<sup>47</sup> This was the first government assistance specifically directed to a soup kitchen.<sup>48</sup>

By this stage, Skibbereen was featuring prominently in the press. The *Cork Examiner* carried headlines: ‘Death by Starvation’; ‘More Deaths from Starvation!!!’; ‘Another Death by Starvation’; ‘More Deaths by Starvation’; ‘Deaths from Starvation’; ‘The Deaths from Starvation at Skibbereen – The Inquests’; ‘Horrible Distress in the West – Another Death from Starvation’; ‘Awful State of Skibbereen District-Destruction of the People-Famine, Disease and Death’.<sup>49</sup> These accounts were so appalling that many people thought them greatly exaggerated and went themselves to establish the truth.<sup>50</sup> One of these witnesses, Mr Nicholas Cummins, a Cork magistrate, wrote an open letter to the Duke of Wellington which was published in *The Times* on Christmas Eve, 1846:

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>49</sup> *Cork Examiner* ‘Death by Starvation’ (from a Skibbereen Correspondent) 16 October 1846; Jeremiah O’Callaghan, *Cork examiner* ‘More Deaths From Starvation!!!’, 28 October 1846; *Cork Examiner* ‘Another Death by Starvation’ 6 November 1846; *Cork Examiner*, ‘More Deaths from Starvation – letter to the editor from J. Mulcahy, P.P. Castlehaven and Myross’ 20 November 1846; *Cork Examiner*, ‘Deaths from Starvation (from our reporter)’ 27 November 1846; *Cork Examiner* ‘The Deaths from Starvation at Skibbereen – The Inquests’ 30 November 1846; *Cork Examiner* ‘Horrible Distress in the West – Another Death from Starvation (from our correspondent)’ 11 December 1846; *Cork Examiner* ‘Awful State of Skibbereen District – Destruction of the People – Famine, Disease and Death’, 16 December 1846.

<sup>50</sup> Canon John O’Rourke, *The Great Irish Famine* (Duffy and Co., Dublin, 1989), p. 154.

I ... went ... to Skibbereen ... the scenes that presented themselves were such as no tongue or pen can convey the slightest idea of ... famished and ghostly skeletons ... such frightful specters as no words can describe ... Their demonic yells are still ringing in my ears.<sup>51</sup>

This letter, graphically describing the horror and suffering of Skibbereen, had a profound effect on the readers of *The Times* and was instrumental in the formation of the British Relief Association.<sup>52</sup> This organisation played a major role in delivering almost £500,000 in relief aid to Ireland.<sup>53</sup>

In December the Society of Friends, another key aid organisation who subsequently delivered relief of £200,000, sent three Cork Quakers to investigate the reports of the situation in Skibbereen.<sup>54</sup>

This place is one mass of famine, disease and death; the poor creatures hitherto trying to exist on one meal per day ... I have got a coffin with moveable sides constructed to convey the bodies to the churchyard...were it not for my strong reliance on Almighty God, I could not bear up against these scenes.<sup>55</sup>

The reports made by Quakers in the field were invaluable as they provided first-hand accounts from sources that were considered reliable and were particularly useful in countering the unsympathetic reports of *The Times* and *Punch*.<sup>56</sup> By 30 December 1846, subscriptions to Skibbereen relief had come from Cork city, Armagh, Cavan, London, Meath, Kildare, Sheffield, Melton Mowbray and Dublin, leading Routh to remark that too much money was finding its way to Skibbereen and ‘some of the poor ... have become sick from the sudden change to abundance’.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Foynes, *The Great Famine in Skibbereen*, p. 52.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>53</sup> Christine Kinealy, ‘Potatoes, Providence and Philanthropy: the role of private charity during the Irish Famine’ in Patrick O’Sullivan, (ed.), *The Irish World Wide, History, Heritage, Identity, Volume Six: The Meaning of the Famine* (Leicester University Press, London, 1997) pp. 144 – 156.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>55</sup> Éamonn de Búrca, *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends during The Famine in Ireland in 1846 and 1847* (Edmund Burke Publisher, Dublin, 1996), p. 188.

<sup>56</sup> Kinealy, ‘Potatoes, Providence and Philanthropy’, p. 153.

<sup>57</sup> Foynes, *The Great Famine in Skibbereen*, p. 57.

The reports from local Cork newspapers, *The Cork Examiner* and *The Southern Reporter* in particular, carried extensive coverage of the Famine in the Skibbereen area and extracts from these provincial newspapers were carried in the 'Ireland' column of *The Times* reaching a huge international readership.<sup>58</sup> The name 'Skibbereen' was becoming a byword for famine. Juxtaposed with these reports of death and starvation, *The Times* continued its editorial policy of denigrating Ireland and its suffering. By 6 November, when it was reported that huge sums of money had been deposited in Irish savings- banks, *The Times* acerbically commentated that:

A few more famines, and Ireland will become one of the wealthiest countries in the world.<sup>59</sup>

### ***1846-1847***

The *Illustrated London News (ILN)*, also carried significant coverage on Skibbereen. It was a highly influential publication, selling 67,000 copies weekly by 1850, to mostly upper and middle class readers.<sup>60</sup>

Dr Dan Donovan, Dispensary Doctor for Skibbereen and first Medical Officer of Skibbereen Workhouse, was an indirect contributor to the *ILN*.<sup>61</sup> Dr Dan's contribution to raising awareness about the Famine in Skibbereen was hugely significant, with the *Dublin Medical Press* observing:

At this period, the letters that emanated from his facile and graceful pen, written to the *Cork Daily Reporter* and London newspapers, exposed ... the melancholy suffering and privations the poor people in the south of Ireland, especially about Skibbereen, were undergoing at the time.<sup>62</sup>

By the end of 1846, the government recognised that the public works schemes were not effective and pressure mounted on the government to meet to resolve

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<sup>58</sup> Fegan, *Literature and the Irish Famine 1845-1919*, p. 48.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>61</sup> Cleary & O'Regan, *Dear Old Skibbereen*, p. 27.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

the crisis. The Queen re-opened Parliament on 19 January 1847 with a speech, read personally, with its main emphasis on the situation in Ireland.<sup>63</sup> A letter was also read by Lord George Bentinck to the members of Parliament, sent by Rev. R.B. Townsend from Skibbereen which, once again, focused attention on this area.<sup>64</sup>

### *1847 – Soup Kitchens*

A new government policy emerged where an alternative system of relief was to be put in place, designed to deliver cheap food to the masses via soup kitchens while simultaneously winding down the public works. The ‘soup kitchen act’ was hurried through parliament in late January and early February, but the massive administrative machinery for its actual operation took some months to establish.<sup>65</sup> This system of relief was to be a temporary measure, lasting only until the harvest season of 1847 when a revised poor law system would come into place.<sup>66</sup>

The soup kitchen system was much less expensive to administer than the public works but the emphasis was, at all times, on cutting down on costs and the possibility of abuse.<sup>67</sup> As the public works wound down, people were reliant on the soup kitchens although many who were eligible for the relief works were ineligible for the new system. The numbers of people in receipt of soup steadily increased as the Famine wore on, with over three million people receiving rations from the soup kitchens by July 1847.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> O’Rourke, *The Great Irish Famine*, p. 162.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 81.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 82 & 87.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

The ‘Committee for Gratuitous Relief’ had opened the Skibbereen Soup Kitchen on 7 November 1846, prior to the ‘soup kitchen act’.<sup>69</sup> On 6 February 1847, the committee wrote to Routh saying that it had received £900 in subscriptions.<sup>70</sup> The Committee had received no funds from the British Relief Association but had purchased rice and grain from it at cost price. Giving estimates of its expenditure over the following months, it appears that the Committee was planning to feed approximately 8,600 people per day.<sup>71</sup>

### *1847 – Visitors to Skibbereen*

However, despite these efforts, the first months of 1847 brought an increase in the death rate of the Skibbereen Union with disease now prevalent throughout the Union.<sup>72</sup> The harrowing accounts from the area during this time focused attention on the Famine’s progression, evoking world-wide compassion and charitable contributions.<sup>73</sup>

On 30 January 1847, *The Illustrated London News* published a front page drawing of a famine funeral in Skibbereen under an editorial calling for greater government action.<sup>74</sup> On February 13 and 20, it followed this up with two series of reports and drawings from the same area from its artist, James Mahony, and many of his sketches featured Skibbereen. These iconic illustrations are among the few images that we have of the Great Famine and they moved the people of the time to make contributions towards relief efforts.<sup>75</sup> The majority of the charitable donations received during the Famine years poured in during these first months of 1847.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Cleary & O’Regan, *Dear Old Skibbereen*, p. 22.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 23

<sup>72</sup> Foynes, *The Great Famine in Skibbereen*, p. 68.

<sup>73</sup> Grey, ‘British Public Opinion and the Great Irish Famine 1845-49’, p. 92.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>75</sup> Grey, ‘British Public Opinion and the Great Irish Famine 1845-49,’ p. 93

<sup>76</sup> Kinealy, ‘Potatoes, Providence and Philanthropy, pp. 165-6.

Skibbereen was now regarded at the epicenter of the unfolding disaster and those who travelled to Ireland to witness the Famine were advised to go there. Two young students from Oxford University, Lord Dufferin and the Hon. G.F. Boyle, travelled to Ireland to ‘ascertain with our own eyes the truth of the reports daily publishing of the misery existing there’ and were told to ‘proceed at once to Skibbereen’.<sup>77</sup> The report of their visit, entitled *Narrative of a Journey from Oxford to Skibbereen During the Year of the Irish Famine*, was subsequently published and all proceeds of the work were given for relief to Skibbereen.<sup>78</sup> The two young men were overwhelmed by what they saw as they toured the area and were deeply moved by the suffering of the people of Skibbereen:

The accounts are not exaggerated – they cannot be exaggerated – nothing more frightful can be conceived. The scenes we have witnessed during our short stay at Skibbereen, equal any thing that has been recorded by history, or could be conceived by imagination.<sup>79</sup>

This remark on the reliability and exaggeration of the accounts was typical of the period; unable to rely on the testimony of the Irish, they felt obliged to witness the situation first hand.<sup>80</sup> After their visit, an anonymous donation of £1,000 was made for relief at Skibbereen and it was many years later when the donor was identified as Lord Dufferin.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Dufferin & Boyle, *Narrative of a Journey from Oxford to Skibbereen During the year of the Irish Famine*, p. 2.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, Cover page, ‘*The proceeds of this work to be sent to Skibbereen*’.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>80</sup> Fegan, *Literature and the Irish Famine*, p. 79.

<sup>81</sup> O’Rourke, *The Great Irish Famine*, p. 271. (Interestingly, on his visit Dufferin identified himself solely as an Oxford student and not as the landlord of Clondeboye in Ulster but the donation was made by an ‘Irish landlord’).

Another notable visitor to Skibbereen in February 1847 was Elihu Burritt, a well-known American social reformer and philanthropist.<sup>82</sup> The *Southern Reporter* announced his visit to Skibbereen:

As a philanthropist, a linguist, and a traveller, Mr. Burrit holds a very high position in the civilised world ... after various interviews with the Lords of the Treasury he succeeded in obtaining a promise from them to pay the freight of any quantity of corn which the benevolent American Citizens might be disposed to forward to their distressed Irish brethren ... He this day starts for Skibbereen ... in order to have personal proof of the horrible spectacle which that distressed locality presents.<sup>83</sup>

There is no doubt that Burritt was deeply moved and shocked by what he saw and he published an eloquent account entitled *A Journal of a Visit of Three Days to Skibbereen and its Neighbourhood* which reads:

The wretchedness of this little mud city of the dead and dying ... Here human beings and their clayey habitations seems to be melting down together into the earth. I can find neither language nor illustration sufficiently impressive to portray the spectacle to an American reader... I met several gentlemen...among whom was Dr. Donovan. He had just returned from a neighbouring parish ... on moving a piece of canvas, he discovered three dead bodies, which had lain *unburied for the fortnight* ... He related other cases, too horrible to be published.<sup>84</sup>

Burritt left Skibbereen in fear of fever and subsequently reached an international audience with the publication of the account of his visit.<sup>85</sup>

### ***1847 – Poor Law Amendment Act***

This wave of sympathy, fuelled by reports from Skibbereen, was short-lived with ‘compassion fatigue’ setting in soon after.<sup>86</sup> The Whig government was preparing the poor law amendment act which would shift the burden of relief

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<sup>82</sup> Born in Connecticut in 1830, he founded an international pacifist newspaper *The Christian Citizen* and also edited the publications *Advocate of Peace* and *Universal Brotherhood*. In 1846 he moved to Britain where he founded ‘The League of Universal Brotherhood’ — source Charles Van Doren, *Webster’s American Biographies* (Merriam, Springfield Mass., 1974), p. 156.

<sup>83</sup> *Southern Reporter*, Thursday 18 February 1847.

<sup>84</sup> Elihu Burritt, *A Journal of a Visit of Three Days to Skibbereen and its neighbourhood* [Online] P. 7 & 15 [Accessed 25 October, 2010] Available at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/25115>.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Grey, ‘British Public Opinion and the Great Irish Famine 1845-49,’ p. 94.

from the British treasury to the Irish landlords and tenants.<sup>87</sup> The providential meaning of the Famine was discussed with *The Times* coming to the conclusion that what Ireland needed was ‘The lesson of self-reliance and practical industry’:<sup>88</sup>

The theory of relief was not to lead the Irish people on step by step until they could walk alone ... a certain amount of misery and hardship [is necessary] ... It was calculated that during the time of public support, owners ... would prepare crops of a less perishable nature than those swept away by the mysterious visitation.<sup>89</sup>

These attacks on Irish landlords and the Irish land system were widespread and, according to the critics, Irish landlords had been so neglectful of their duties that they had created the conditions that led to the Famine.<sup>90</sup> Worse again, they were dumping their evicted pauper tenants on the shores of England, Scotland and Wales with *The Times* observing on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 1847:

No argument that pen ever writ or heart indited [about maintaining the Irish poor at home in Ireland] can match with the spectacle of England positively invaded, overrun, devoured, infested, poisoned, and desolated by Irish pauperism.<sup>91</sup>

When the soup kitchen scheme, always intended as a temporary measure, was terminated in September 1847, the government resorted to the poor law system to give relief to the destitute.<sup>92</sup> The lack of blight in 1847 led the government to declare that the Famine was over and Trevelyan published *The Irish Crisis* in which he remarked:

The owners and holders of land ... had permitted ... the growth of the excessive population...and they alone had it in their power to restore society to a safe and healthy state ... The deep and inveterate root of social evil remained, and this has been laid bare by a direct stroke of an all-wise and all-merciful Providence.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 92.

<sup>88</sup> Grey, ‘British Public Opinion and the Great Irish Famine 1845-49,’ p. 96.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 92.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>93</sup> Charles Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis* (Macmillan and Co, London 1880), pp. 78-79.

Again we see the landlords vilified as the cause of the problem alongside the ‘Christian Providentialism’ view that the Almighty intervened in human affairs.<sup>94</sup> The Famine was therefore seen as a punishment by God which had to take its course, as to intervene would be acting against His will. The way in which the Irish landlords were treated by the British press and in parliament during this time display the telltale features of scapegoating and, when God’s judgment was added to the equation, it helped to resolve any British middle-class guilt about the mass deaths.<sup>95</sup>

### ***1848 Onwards – Death, Disease and Emigration***

This government decision to throw the whole burden of relief onto Irish property, which was already in crisis state, was a death sentence for thousands of Irish people.<sup>96</sup> The sole system of relief from then on was through the workhouses, which were hopelessly underfunded and overcrowded and Skibbereen Union Workhouse, designed to house 800 people, contained 4221 inmates in December 1848.<sup>97</sup> Even as late as 1850, when A.G. Stark visited Skibbereen he recorded that:

In the main workhouse, and about twenty auxiliaries ... here are upwards of 4,000 paupers fed, lodged and clothed in idleness at the public expense ... I did not visit any of the poorhouses; indeed the shrill sound of female voices that reached my ear, as I passed one of them ... as if nothing reigned within except discord and pain... The weekly mortality is so great as to suggest the prospect that, before many months elapse, the rate-payers will have much less to pay, as some hundreds will have gone ‘where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest’.<sup>98</sup>

This situation was mirrored in many parts of Ireland and, with mass evictions and disease prevalent, the focus of attention shifted from Skibbereen to other

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<sup>94</sup> Frank Neal, ‘Black 47: Britain and the Famine Irish,’ in Breandán Ó Conaire, (ed.), *The Famine Lectures* (Roscommon Herald, Boyle, 1997), pp. 334-5.

<sup>95</sup> Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 127.

<sup>96</sup> Neal, ‘Black 47: Britain and the Famine Irish,’ pp. 334-5.

<sup>97</sup> Cleary & O’Regan, *Dear Old Skibbereen*, p. 17. [*one thousand...men and seven hundred...women...1641 children... and 880 infirm and aged*]

<sup>98</sup> Archibald G. Stark, *The South of Ireland in 1850 : being the journal of a tour in Leinster and Munster* (James Duffy, Dublin, 1850), pp. 178-9.

parts of the country. The clearances in Kilrush in 1847-50 received extensive publicity giving it a 'gruesome notoriety ... that was held earlier by the charnel-house district of Skibbereen'.<sup>99</sup>

Even before the Great Famine, the pattern of disease following food shortages was well-known.<sup>100</sup> It was during 1847 that 'famine fever', dysentery and diarrhea caused most deaths but these persisted at extremely high levels through 1850.<sup>101</sup> An epidemic of 'Asiatic Cholera' occurred in 1849 while deaths from measles tripled between 1845 and 1849; consumption deaths doubled between 1846 and 1847 and smallpox deaths tripled in 1849 compared to previous years.<sup>102</sup> But typhus and relapsing fever were the big killers; the latter was prevalent among the poor while typhus also affected the higher social classes, particularly those who were engaged directly in relief work.<sup>103</sup>

Emigration was another factor in the decrease of Ireland's population and over 1.2 million people fled Ireland between 1845 and 1851.<sup>104</sup> In west Cork, where deaths were high, emigration was relatively low and the highest rates of emigration were from south Ulster, north Connacht and the Leinster midlands.<sup>105</sup> The media carried extensive coverage of this mass exodus, with *The Times* describing the Irish in Liverpool as 'pestiferous' and gloomily forecasted 'a Mayo on the banks of the Ribble, and even of the Thames'.<sup>106</sup> The *Illustrated London News* said of the treatment of the Irish by Liverpool parish officers 'far more care would be taken of Irish cattle'.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 144.

<sup>100</sup> Duffy, Dublin, 1850), pp. 178-9 & Laurence M. Geary, 'Famine, Fever and the Bloody Flux,' in Cathal Póirtéir, (ed.), *The Great Irish Famine* (Mercier Press, Cork, 1995), pp. 78-79.

<sup>101</sup> Donnelly Jr, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, pp. 171-2.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 174-175.

<sup>103</sup> Geary, 'Famine, Fever and the Bloody Flux,' p. 83.

<sup>104</sup> Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, pp. 171-2.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185 & p. 182.

<sup>106</sup> Fegan, *Literature and the Irish Famine 1845-1919*, p. 62.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

Reports from Skibbereen decreased in the latter parts of the Great Famine, not because conditions had improved there but more that conditions elsewhere had worsened, and so the spotlight shifted from Skibbereen to other parts of Ireland.

Skibbereen, to be sure, ceased to attract so much attention as it had been previously doing but the people of that devoted town had received much relief; besides there were now fewer mouths to fill there ... Instead of one, Ireland now has many Skibbereens. In short, the greater part of it might be regarded as one vast Skibbereen.<sup>108</sup>

### ***Did Skibbereen's Notoriety Help its Relief Efforts?***

We can see that reports from Skibbereen had a definite quantifiable result on its relief contributions from some of the examples above. As early as 1846, Trevelyan singled out Skibbereen for receipt of some of the 'Ceylon subscription' after the visit of Townsend and Caulfield.<sup>109</sup> The government depot in Skibbereen was also opened early on his directions, again after getting a report from the area.<sup>110</sup>

Cummins' letter to *The Times*, after a visit to Skibbereen, was instrumental in the establishment of the highly effective British Relief Association.<sup>111</sup> This organisation raised enormous sums of money to aid Famine relief generally but it also directed aid to Skibbereen directly.<sup>112</sup> In December, 1847, the British Relief Association introduced a scheme to provide food to children who attended schools.<sup>113</sup> In January 1848, Mr Haly, Secretary of the British Association, reported to Trevelyan:

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<sup>108</sup> O'Rourke, *The Great Irish Famine*, p. 177.

<sup>109</sup> Foynes, *The Great Famine in Skibbereen*, p. 57.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>112</sup> Kinealy, 'Potatoes, Providence and Philanthropy', pp. 165-6. 'by the time they had closed their operations, they had raised almost £500,000'.

<sup>113</sup> Cleary & O'Regan, *Dear Old Skibbereen*, p. 30.

In the Skibbereen Union, 12,000 are being thus fed and Mr. Marshall reports that this number will shortly be increased to 15,000 ... The inspecting officers have been requested to require that water, towels, soap, and combs are provided at each school at which relief is afforded, and that no children be allowed to partake of this ration without having first well washed.<sup>114</sup>

This latter proviso may have saved some of these children from disease too. By increasing the rate of personal hygiene, it may have reduced the number of human lice which acted as the vectors for the spread of the prevailing diseases.<sup>115</sup>

We have seen that the Quakers, another hugely significant organisation in delivering relief, reported from Skibbereen in February 1847.<sup>116</sup> Later that month we see a recommendation from their New York branch:

Your ... descriptive letter ... has been of great service in arousing a general feeling of commiseration all over the country ... from your letters and papers, I think the south-west and west of Ireland are in the most deplorable condition ... I hope therefore that you will attend very particularly to these. Skibbereen, Co. of Cork ... is in an awful condition and your Cork friends should have an agent there.<sup>117</sup>

In September of that year, the Society referred again to Skibbereen:

The Government must be made to feel the difficulty, and the necessity of taking early steps to meet it, or we shall have the dreadful scenes of Skibbereen again repeated.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Geary, 'What People Died of During the Famine,' in Cormac Ó Grada, (ed.), *Famine 150: Commemorative Lectures* (Teagasc/UCD, 1997), p. 103.

<sup>116</sup> de Búrca, *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends*, p. 188. 'extracts from letters addressed to the Committee, showing the condition of different parts of the country in the winter of 1846-7'.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 261. 'Extracts from American Correspondence' letter from Jacob Harvey, New York, 23<sup>rd</sup> of February, 1847.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 318. 'From one of the secretaries to Jacob Harvey' Jonathon Pim, dated 17<sup>th</sup> of ninth-month, 1847.

The Society, as an international group, had great influence both in Britain and overseas and its reference to Skibbereen, as a means to pressurise government to provide aid to Ireland generally, was therefore significant.

As we have seen, Skibbereen's soup kitchen was the first in Ireland to receive government aid.<sup>119</sup> By December 1846, contributions to Skibbereen had come from Cork city, Armagh, Cavan, London, Meath, Kildare, Sheffield, Molton Mowbray and Dublin.<sup>120</sup> The conditions at Skibbereen were described in Parliament at the same sitting where Queen Victoria made her personal speech asking for Famine relief support.<sup>121</sup>

Lord Dufferin's significant contribution of £1,000 came to Skibbereen as well as the proceeds from his publication while Elihu Burritt's account spread the word about Skibbereen internationally.

As well as direct aid to Skibbereen Union, the reports from Skibbereen helped to raise pity and compassion for the suffering of the people of Ireland and prompted charitable donations. Donations were received from the five continents of the world and the name 'Skibbereen' would have featured in many of these international reports, especially during the crucial year of 1847 when the bulk of private contributions poured in.<sup>122</sup>

James Mahony's reports from Skibbereen in early 1847 in the *Illustrated London News* were hugely effective in raising funds and over £400,000 worth of charitable donations came to Ireland that year.<sup>123</sup> The role of private philanthropy was short-lived, however, as most of the donations ceased following the 1847 harvest when the Famine was declared to be 'over' by the

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<sup>119</sup> Foynes, *The Great Famine in Skibbereen*, p. 57.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> O'Rourke, *The Great Irish Famine*, p. 162.

<sup>122</sup> Kinealy, 'Potatoes, Providence and Philanthropy' p. 140.

<sup>123</sup> Grey, 'British Public Opinion and the Great Irish Famine 1845-49', pp. 93-94.

British government.<sup>124</sup> So the reports from Skibbereen came at a critical time where public sympathy was at its highest.

Dr Dan Donovan's reports also played a huge part in raising awareness and funding.<sup>125</sup> Rev. R.B. Townsend, who himself died of typhus in 1850, was another major agitator for Skibbereen, petitioning government for relief and writing letters to the newspapers of the time about the conditions there.<sup>126</sup>

As Stark put it in 1850:

Here [in Skibbereen], perhaps, more than in any other part of the kingdom, the potato blight was felt...when the root failed, the whole fabric built upon it tumbled to pieces and the civilized world rang with the woes of Skibbereen ... Contributions from every part of the compass, in money and food, from Turk and Christian, from Jew and Gentile, Gael and Saxon, poured in ... At one time it was feared, that humanity would give up in despair at the task of saving Skibbereen.<sup>127</sup>

While it is impossible to quantify exactly what effect the reports from Skibbereen had on its relief receipts, one can say with certainty they had a significant impact. On a broader scale, Skibbereen also contributed to the relief for Ireland generally as the reports on the sufferings of its people were shared with the world and contributions poured in as a result.

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<sup>124</sup> Kinealy, 'Potatoes, Providence and Philanthropy,' p. 140.

<sup>125</sup> Cleary & O'Regan, *Dear Old Skibbereen*, p. 27.

<sup>126</sup> O'Rourke, *The Great Irish Famine*, p. 166. 'Lord George Bentinck read a letter [to Parliament] from the Rev. Mr Townsend of Skibbereen, in which it was stated that in one month ... there were 140 deaths in the Workhouse of that town'.

<sup>127</sup> Stark, *The South of Ireland in 1850*, pp. 170-71.

It cannot be an exaggeration to say that the descendants of those who survived the Famine, throughout the world, therefore owe a debt of gratitude to the unfortunate people who suffered and endured the Great Famine in Skibbereen.

*The graveyard in which he will lie will be just a deep-drilled potato-field,*

*Where the seed gets no chance to come through*

*To the fun of the sun.*

*The tongue in his mouth is the root of the yew.*

*Silence, silence. The story is done.<sup>128</sup>*

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<sup>128</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, 'The Great Hunger' in Antionette Quinn (ed.), *Selected Poems* (Penguin Books, London, 2000) p. 44.

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## Appendix One: Overview of Some of the Major British Newspapers of the 1840s

### *The Times*

The most influential and powerful newspaper of the day was *The Times*, which had far out-distanced its rivals in circulation and authority by the mid-1830s.<sup>129</sup> The paper's circulation was rising steadily and reached 40,000 daily by 1850.<sup>130</sup> But the readership was much larger than this figure as papers were frequently read in exchanges, libraries and reading-rooms and its readership may well have been as high as half a million by 1850.<sup>131</sup> In addition, *The Times'* opinions were disseminated by the provincial press who would often reprint articles.<sup>132</sup>

### *The Illustrated London News*

The *Illustrated London News* was founded in 1842 and, by 1850, was selling 67,000 copies weekly<sup>133</sup>. Its buyers were mostly upper and middle class and therefore influential.<sup>134</sup> It was one of the few English newspapers that seems to have accepted unequivocally that England was responsible for Irish misery.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Grey, 'British Public Opinion and the Great Irish Famine', p. 78.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid* p. 79.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid* p. 80.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> Fegan, *Literature and the Irish Famine 1845-1919*, p. 40.

## ***The Economist***

*The Economist* was widely respected for its statistical and factual information and its editor, James Wilson, had a particular interest in Irish affairs and reported frankly from Ireland.<sup>136</sup> Wilson printed what he considered the truth, however unpalatable.<sup>137</sup> Although its readership was small at 2-3000, it was nevertheless influential in certain powerful circles.<sup>138</sup>

## ***Punch Newspaper***

*Punch* was a satirical illustrated newspaper, with a substantial political influence and a circulation of around 30,000.<sup>139</sup> Its radicalism was middle class and hostile to O'Connellism and, by 1850, it was well on the way to being the more conservative patriotic national institution of the period.<sup>140</sup> It took its priorities and line on public affairs from *The Times* with whom it shared some of its writers.<sup>141</sup> *Punch* acknowledged that in the terrible conditions of 1846-7 Ireland needed some assistance but it was concerned about the length of this support.<sup>142</sup> By May 1847, at the height of the Famine, it was advocating reliance on the new poor law and leaving Ireland to 'shift for herself for a year'.<sup>143</sup> It was constantly finding evidence of Irish 'ingratitude' for English relief operations and its satirical sketches illustrated this view.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Grey, 'British Public Opinion and the Great Irish Famine 1845-49', p. 79

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> Fegan, *Literature and the Irish Famine 1845-1919*, p. 79.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*