

A Piece of History – John Hanly NT 1985

The recent burning of Coffey's Store by the Quay side recalls events of local history. Originally the building was a granary. It stored corn for export through the once busy port of Clarecastle. Even during the Famine year of 1845/47 there was a great supply of corn stored there, and it was exported despite the hunger and deprivation of the Clarecastle people.

The corn came by cart from the Cornmarket in Ennis. To ensure safe conveyance of the corn from Ennis to Clarecastle, the British soldiers, fully armed paraded up and down the Ennis Road in pairs. As the corn arrived, it was spread on the floors of the store and was regularly turned by shovel to prevent fermentation. Each floor was the height of a man so that maximum use of the capacity of the store was achieved. When a coal boat or other ship had dislodged its cargo, the corn was taken to the quays and loaded for export. There were chutes from each floor to the ground floor of the store and in this way was quickly transferred.

So desperate were the people of Clarecastle during the Famine years that a group of local fishermen decided to hijack one of the ships down the River Fergus. They intended to board it in the dark from their fishing boats. This was possible as a loaded ship would be deep the water. However, try as they did, the fishermen were beaten off and the ship entered the River Shannon unharmed! From that time on, A British Man of War accompanied each ship entering Clarecastle Harbour, and later still, gave each it protection as it departed.

Hopefully the recently burned store will be reroofed. Its mighty walls and closed windows withstood the tremendous heat caused by the fire. This is tribute to the tradesmen who built it many years ago and it would indeed be sad if the building were to become a ruin. It tells the story of landlordism in this area. It is a testimony to the fact that the tenants sold their com to pay hack - rents. This corn was not for consumption by the Clare tenants, even during the Famine and years of terrible disease. The episode down the river caused the Man-of-War to travel the Fergus to uphold the rights of the landlords to export their corn despite the starvation of the people. The system in other words was to be maintained irrespective of the social conditions of the people. It is positive proof that the ruling classes held domain over their tenants and workers. It was the 'Third World' of the day – suppression of the masses by the privileged.

The 'Trocaire' of that time came from foreign countries, not Britain. Ignorance by Britain of the prevailing circumstances in the Ireland of that time was a contributory factor to our great Famine. Also of course was Britain's insistence that the class structure of that society should continue. When the realisation of the true facts was known and fully understood, it was much too late as famine, deprivation, disease and death were widespread and no immediate remedy could arrest the decline. The famine had to take its course with dire consequences for this country, economically, socially, culturally and spiritually. The Irish beggar was forced to emigrate. He landed in America poor, uneducated, diseased and unwanted. Little words that he clung to the American cities. and showed very little interest in acquiring land. Little wonder too that it took two or three generations before he could emerge as an integrated citizen of that but country. It was pauper's graves that President Reagan's ancestors were buried. We talk about these things, but we have little realisation of the actual facts of these times, or so it would appear.

The corn store is truly connected with our history of oppression and the bleeding of our society. Its significance as a com store per se diminished overnight with the repeal of the Corn laws and the consequent agricultural change in Ireland from com growing to cattle. This change had other

repercussions on the Irish society of the nineteenth century and even today, underdevelopment of our land. and poor productivity are with us as a result.

Truly we should be in sympathy with all peoples who are oppressed and deprived. We should strive to assist them in every possible way. We have every opportunity of doing it if we have the will. Pictures of the 'Third World People' and their swollen bodies often appear in our television screens. We are shocked. This happened to our people in Clarecastle during the Famine and especially during the winter of 1847. This particular winter was the coldest ever recorded in this country. That year because of the shooting of a Mr Hennessy, the famine relief works in Clareabbey were dropped. The village people had no income and were starving. It is recorded that on Christmas Eve of that year the women of Clarecastle, almost naked, were out in a field northwest of the village trying to up dig up turnips from the hard frosted ground with their hands. Their children were with them, some running up and down, naked, others lying on the ground, unable to stand, they were all weeping and wailing because of hunger.

These children had the swollen stomachs of the children of today's "Third World". They were in a horrible state and I ask you imagine the dread, the desperation of their mothers who could do little to comfort them. The situation deteriorated so much that the authorities in Ennis were forced to re-open the relief works in Clareabbey and to supply food through soup kitchens. And yet there was corn in the Store by the Quay. Even when food is present it is unlikely that the ordinary people will receive it. It seems. That the black market imposes itself on the system in those countries.

We should remember our suffering people of yesteryear and it should evoke in us a sympathy for those who suffer today.

Strange that the burning of our historic store here in Clarecastle should recall such unhappy moments in our history. It too may awaken in us a Christian concern for the suffering of today. Hopefully it will.

Script transcribed by Fr Pat Malone from an interview with John Hanly in 1985 for publication in a local youth magazine.

