



National Archives, Ireland

Historical commentary for 1822

Spring of 1822 saw famine affect large numbers of people in the west and south of the country, and in June fever spread with devastating consequences. In a bid to stem the resulting spread of social unrest, the government introduced the Insurrection Act in February, and in August 1822 the Irish Constabulary Act passed into law, allowing for the systematic establishment of an organised police force on a national basis. As economic pressure tightened, a corresponding increase can be seen in the activities of agrarian protest groups such as the Whiteboys, Ribbonmen, Rockites and Caravats. Most of these groups protested tithe and rent demands as well as tenant evictions.

One immediate result of the new police legislation was a marked increase in applications for situations as constables and sub-constables. Such requests augmented routine letters to the Chief Secretary's Office seeking promotions, grants or pensions. On occasion, we find more diverse applications for compensation coming from such individuals as a Gaelic court interpreter, a 'suffering loyalist' or a census enumerator. The papers include information on principle public offices such as the Four Courts Marshalsea, General Post Office, Stamp Office, House of Industry, Board of Works, Board of Records and Paving Board, and deal with major issues like education, religion, banking, emigration, prisons and asylums. There is information on the activities of the Orange Order, the Irish Lottery, coal yards, gas lighting, window tax, mendicity, foundlings and turnpike roads. However, famine and poverty were the pervasive themes of 1822, and there is a lot of material relating to public works initiatives for the employment of the poor in construction of roads, bridges, harbours and canals.

In the decades that followed the Act of Union, public works were viewed as an acceptable response to distress among the impoverished and labouring classes in Ireland. In exchange for their labour, the poor would be offered cash or food, through participation in schemes deemed to be of civic or economic value. For members of the governing class, such methods represented a means through which suitable public projects might be established or extended. To a large extent, direct government intervention in alleviation of poverty ran contrary to the prevailing laissez-faire principles which tended to dominate political thought, but the appearance of acute distress in Ireland during the opening decades of the century demanded an extraordinary response.¹

The acute food shortages experienced in 1822 were caused by rain damage to the potato crop of the previous season. Hunger and want were worst among the poorer inhabitants of Connacht and large parts of west Munster. Around a million individuals came to depend upon government aid during the crisis. The administration of relief was organised through a central committee in Dublin Castle, which distributed assistance to local committees. Funds were allocated for acquisition of foodstuffs, to



be distributed to the poor at reduced prices or without cost, and to finance local relief works.² Experience gained in dealing with the famine in 1816-17 was to prove beneficial, as was legislative provision such as the Poor Employment Act of 1817. This act provided £250,000 to be released by application for a broad range of public works schemes, such as roads, canals and harbours, or other projects deemed of benefit. Loans were to be repaid by means of local rates. A new injection of aid was voted by Parliament in May 1822 through passage of a similar relief act by which £50,000 was made available in response to the crisis.

Responsibility for day-to-day management of such works fell to civil engineers Alexander Nimmo, John Killaly and Richard Griffiths; Nimmo was entrusted with care of the northern district, Killaly with the middle district, and Griffith with the southern district [CSO/RP/1822/450](#) . A striking feature of the public works initiative in Ireland was the sheer physical demand placed on the framework by the vast numbers seeking relief. In July 1822, Griffiths reported there being 'upwards of 10,000 persons at present employed in the County Limerick exclusive of farming labourers', mainly on road building [CSO/RP/1822/268](#) . The civil engineers were responsible for evaluating applications from districts and parishes throughout the west and south of Ireland. They were also responsible for directing local supervisors, and to a significant degree were accountable for surveying, costing and the creation of maps for each scheme of works.

Construction of new roads and repair of existing ones were probably the most common public works in Ireland. A fine example of one such project is provided by Jeremiah O'Brien's hand coloured map and estimate of a proposed new line of road leading from Crookstown, in the parish of Moviddy, to Kealkil in the parish of Bantry, County Cork [CSO/RP/1822/421](#) . Laying of new roads or adding needed extensions to existing routes were useful schemes for employment of the labouring poor, but could also affect an isolated neighbourhood in other ways. Reflecting on the building of a road in the north of County Clare, Killaly claimed in a letter to Gregory that his plan would 'tend materially to civilise and bring under the control of the laws, a population hitherto very intractable' [CSO/RP/1822/304](#) .

The importance of reliable bridges was often mentioned, in letters from the engineers, as a vital means of linking up existing lines of communications across the country. Good design was valued, as can be seen in the graceful plan of the bridge over the River Blackwater at Cappoquin, County Waterford [CSO/RP/1822/3380](#) . Their function in relation to the imposition of law and order was acknowledged by Griffiths. In a letter to Goulburn, in September 1822, he expressed displeasure at the 'wild and uncultivated district which has hitherto been a secure asylum for robbers and murderers' in the area around Abbeyfeale, County Limerick, and offered recommendations for the erection of 'a bridge over the river Alla at Freemount, to enable the troops to act on both sides of the river in times of flood' [CSO/RP/1822/1772](#) .

Alternative proposals for relief employment included schemes for land reclamation and to prevent flooding. Killaly, writing from Ennis, County Clare, to Gregory, urged adoption of unconventional works on property not in public ownership such as



'reclamation of waste Land or the rescuing [of] ground from the Sea, or from Rivers' [CSO/RP/1822/315](#) . An application of this sort was sent by Henry Westropp, Tulla, County Clare, to Goulburn, requesting aid to create an embankment of the river between the bridges of Ayle and Annaneal in order to counter regional flooding [CSO/RP/1822/2045](#) . Jocelyn Thomas sought a grant from the Crown to improve a section of beach of Tramore, County Waterford in 1820. His planned construction of an embankment produced the beautifully conceived map of the area that survives [CSO/RP/1820/1227](#) . Where appropriate conditions permitted, another option was to employ the impoverished in cutting turf. This was advanced by Nimmo as an addition to the various work schemes under his guidance. In his letter to Dublin Castle in June 1822 he observed with some unease 'The number of mendicant poor in Galway at present is very great and fever I understand also prevails to an unusual degree in the town' [CSO/RP/1822/350](#) .

In some cases, applications for inclusion in public works aid came from local urban communities who saw an opportunity for construction of essential public buildings, while also offering some relief to local unemployed families. Such an application came from Colonel Robert Hedges Eyre, of Macroom Castle, County Cork, who wrote in May 1822, requesting an advance of £300 to facilitate erection of a market house or barracks in town of Macroom [CSO/RP/1822/244](#) . Funding for a bridewell for the town of Kildorrery, County Cork, was the subject of a request from Mr Batwell who claimed that such an initiative 'would employ many tradesmen and labourers of the place who are much in want of employment and the expense would be inconsiderable and be a public advantage in both a civil and military point of view' [CSO/RP/1822/243](#) . Financial assistance for a 'good footway from the Town of Castlerea to the free school' affiliated to Erasmus Smith in Castlerea, County Roscommon, was sought by Rev. William Blundall in mid-1822. He alludes to local distress alleviation and remarks the 'number of individuals on their book now amounting to above five thousand' [CSO/RP/1822/386](#) .

As well as being instruments for mitigation of poverty, public works were often advocated and promoted in terms of their wider economic value. Writing from Great Brunswick street, Dublin, to the Lord Lieutenant in October 1822, Joseph Morris stressed the terrible state of the starving in Ireland and set out proposals for payment of premiums to cultivators of flax and hemp [CSO/RP/1822/1460](#) . James Kelly, of Dundrum, County Dublin, indicated his willingness to provide employment to one thousand persons in counties Galway, Mayo and Clare for a half year, on condition that a government subsidy be provided for the scheme. Kelly proposed that the workers be employed in gathering rock moss, a commodity which is 'necessary to be manufactured for the use of Silk Dyers & Clothiers' [CSO/RP/1822/214](#) . For those whose subsistence depended more broadly on the textile sector, a degree of relief was provided by a government grant of £3,000 to the Linen Board, which was 'to be expended in the Purchase and Distribution of Flaxseed, in the distressed Districts of Ireland' [CSO/RP/1822/1443](#) .

Both pragmatic and personal considerations underlay an application from John Stokes, engineer of the Grand Canal Company, Limerick, referred to in a letter of July 1822 to Joseph Huband of Dublin. Pressing for construction of a new portion of



canal near O'Brien's Bridge, County Clare, to enable circumvention of a troublesome section of the River Shannon, Stokes pleaded that such a project 'would relieve a thousand famishing wretches of that Country & would save the lives & Properties of industrious people employed in the Carriage of goods to this Town'

[CSO/RP/1822/410](#) . A request from the Commissioners for the Improvement of the Town and Harbour of Sligo, for a grant of £6,000 for public works, stressed the historical mercantile tradition of the port and the likely advantages flowing from such investment [CSO/RP/1822/347](#) .

With considerable financial resources available for expenditure on public works, administrators were obliged to exercise caution in disbursement of funds, and to prevent fraud or misuse of grants. This issue turns up in a letter from Killaly to Gregory in July 1822. Stressing the need for protection of public money, he warns of public works applications emanating from disingenuous 'needy adventurers, who (incapable themselves), employ persons, to frame such memorials, as they think will induce His Excellency to place money at their disposal' [CSO/RP/1822/337](#) .

Prevention of inappropriate application is also the subject of a letter written by Killaly from Ennis in County Clare to Gregory in August 1822. Reporting on proceedings of a meeting of the Clare central relief committee, he complains of discord among members over the choice of public works for employment of the poor and laments a 'passion for promoting those works only, which tend most to individual advantage' [CSO/RP/1822/2222](#) .

On the more serious question of financial impropriety, the conduct of Malachi Duggan, parish priest of Moyarta and Cross, County Clare, was brought to the attention of the Chief Secretary's Office in November 1822, by Rev A.C. Massy of Dunaha House. Massy's allegation that the priest had embezzled funds collected for use of poor of the neighbourhood is difficult to assess, but may have been motivated by denominational jealousy or local rivalry over alleviation of distress

[CSO/RP/1822/2671](#) . An even more serious charge was directed at the county grand jury and officers of public works in County Mayo by Benjamin Pemberton, civil engineer of Castlebar, over alleged misuse of public funds on a road laid to Erris, County Mayo. Pemberton reserves his greatest condemnation for those responsible for the 'Greatest Frauds and Impositions' in construction of the road and accuses them of receiving 'thousands' in cess payments raised by 'Presentment never Legally accounted for, or the Works for which they had been Presented never performed' [CSO/RP/1822/2458](#) .

The industrial base of much of Ireland in the late 1810s displayed many of the underlying economic weaknesses and tensions that were to dominate the following half decade and beyond. The end of the Napoleonic wars ushered in a general era of economic stagnation and instability.³ Evidence of the trauma that followed is apparent in many of the principle industrial sectors in Ireland. For example, it has been estimated that the number of 'master-manufacturers' engaged in woollen output in the city of Dublin fell by half between 1800 and 1822, and operatives in the silk industry were reduced by one-fifth between 1815 and 1841.⁴ Tenants, labourers and those dependent on agriculture were increasingly squeezed by rental arrears and, as the population grew, a diminishing labour market.



Still, rural industry, textile production in particular, was a well established and important feature of the economic landscape. This was especially true of the north-east, which built much of its initial industrial success on woollen and cotton manufacture and output.⁵ Unlike the other provinces of the island, where rural diversification was less developed, 'Ulster was primarily a manufacturing rather than a food-producing region'.⁶

The 1821 Census of Ireland reveals an impressive array of artisans and tradesmen who regularly engaged in work in addition to or aside from agriculture. Irish cities and towns were natural magnets for early industrial enterprise and investment, and by the close of the eighteenth century, the country 'contained hundreds of factories and workshops, embodying traditional and modern technologies'⁷ One such establishment was the linen factory at Castlecomer, County Kilkenny, under the proprietorship of Charles Hamilton Teeling. In an application to the Under Secretary for financial assistance, Teeling expressed hope of employing many in his operation: 'a linen factory has lately been established, and filled with machinery on the best construction – a valuable Bleach Mill has just been completed on an improved and extensive scale, and a scotch Mill is also in a considerable state of forwardness' [CSO/RP/1822/887](#) . The opportunity to achieve practical industrial skills was not confined to the labouring classes. In the view of some reforming contemporaries, it could usefully be extended to those in public institutions and to prisoners. Females confined in the Richmond General Penitentiary were supplied with wool for occupational purposes by John Malone, of Henrietta Place, Dublin. He hoped his initiative 'may have the effect of turning their thoughts from crime, vice & immorality, to habits of Industry' [CSO/RP/1822/1829](#) . Skilled artisans sought to visually demonstrate their commercial vigour, as can be seen from the carefully crafted business card of Messrs Ward and Goodland, saddlers and harness makers, of Dame street, Dublin [CSO/RP/1822/2374](#) .

Maintenance of commercial productivity in a contracting economy was to prove impossible for many entrepreneurs without government assistance. A number of agencies to stimulate economic growth were already in existence before 1822. These included the Trustees of the Linen and Hemen Manufactures of Ireland, the Directors General of Inland Navigation and the Commissioners of the Irish Fisheries. Of greater significance to the fledging manufacturing sector were the Commissioners for the Issue of Money out of the Consolidated Fund, who were voted a sum of £250,000 by Parliament in 1817. Out of this considerable figure, funds were distributed to a variety of causes. In 1820, a special body, the Commissioners for the Assistance of Trade and Manufactures, was appointed by the Lord Lieutenant 'to advance loans to merchants and manufacturers who were temporarily distressed'.⁸

It was to the Commissioners for the Issue of Money out of the Consolidated Fund, that Richard Griffiths, mining engineer, forwarded a report on the operating costs of Lord Audley's copper mines in Cappagh, near Ballydehob, County Cork, in 1822. Griffiths estimated 'In the course of next year from £1000 to £1200 will be requisite to carry forward the proposed under-courses in the Mine, and afterwards should a Steam Engine be required to raise water, from £2000 to £3000 will be requisite according to circumstances' [CSO/RP/1822/254](#) . For other applicants, failure to



secure financial assistance from government could prove fatal. John Brady, representing the manufacturers of linen and cotton in Dublin who sought consent to hold a weekly 'Market for the Sale of their Cloth', claimed in November 1822 that such was the depressed state of their industry that numbers of local merchants were obliged to emigrate to the United States of America to establish their trade there [CSO/RP/1822/2626](#) .

Irish manufacturing interests in 1822 also fought a rearguard battle against imposition of duties and removal of protection on goods exported to the United Kingdom or beyond. Protection of vital overseas trade interests informs the correspondence of William Chaine, linen dealer of County Antrim, with General Sir Hercules Pakenham, MP, in May 1822. Chaine expressed strong opposition to a clause in a bill intended 'to regulate the Trade between His Majesty's Possessions in America & the West Indies'. If the act were allowed to pass into law, he complained, markets in the West Indies would be open to foreign supply, exposing home producers to a competitive climate 'fatal to our Linen Trade' [CSO/RP/1822/2465](#) . For Irish cotton and woollen producers, an even more serious emergency arose through parliamentary proposals to remove protective duties which had insulated manufacturers since the Act of Union. Some measure of the panic caused by the proposed measure is apparent in a letter sent by John McCracken, chairman of the Committee of Merchants, Belfast, to the Chief Secretary's Office, early in 1822. Speaking as an advocate for manufacturing in the north of Ireland, he contended the 'Cotton trade alone affords employment to upwards of fifty thousand persons and it may safely be said that upwards of two hundred thousand are supported by it, but should the protection be withdrawn, this immense multitude may be reduced to want and wretchedness and perhaps driven to commit crimes that are the disgrace of our Country' [CSO/RP/1822/1835](#) .

Despite such vocal protests from Irish producers, the bill (5 Geo. 4. c. 47) progressed into law early in 1824, its passage being more immediately related to the 'contemporary crisis in the textile industry in England'.⁹ By the mid-1820s it was clear that both the woollen and cotton industries were in decline, the latter having depended for its survival to a great extent on 'parliamentary grants and bounties' or other financial incentives.¹⁰ Linen, in contrast, saw spectacular growth during this period, especially in the northern 'linen triangle', largely as a result of timely transformation to mechanisation and use of the 'wet-spinning process'.¹¹

- [1](#) R. B. McDowell, *The Irish Administration 1801-1914*, (London, 1964), pp 194-195.
- [2](#) W. E. Vaughan (ed), *A New History of Ireland, Vol. V, Ireland Under the Union 1801-70*, (Oxford, 1989), p. 72.
- [3](#) R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972*, (London, 1988), p. 318.
- [4](#) Jacqueline Hill, *From Patriots to Unionists: Dublin Civic Politics and Irish Protestant Patriotism, 1660-1840*, (Oxford, 1997), p. 286.
- [5](#) J. C. Beckett, *The Making of Modern Ireland 1603-1923*, (London, 1966), p. 291.
- [6](#) Liam Kennedy and Philip Ollerenshaw (eds), *An Economic History of Ulster 1820-1939*, (Manchester, 1985), p. 2.



- [7](#) Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland: Ireland: A New Economic History 1780-1939*, (Oxford, 1994), p. 274.
- [8](#) McDowell, *The Irish Administration*, p. 202.
- [9](#) Beckett, *The Making of Modern Ireland*, p. 290.
- [10](#) Vaughan, *A New History of Ireland*, p. 140.
- [11](#) Beckett, *The Making of Modern Ireland*, p. 290.

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