

NARRATIVE OF A JOURNEY FROM OXFORD TO SKIBBEREEN DURING THE YEAR OF THE IRISH FAMINE

By Lord Dufferin and the Hon. G.G. Boyle

The scenes we have witnessed during our short stay at Skibbereen, equal anything that has been recorded by history, or could be conceived by the imagination. Famine, typhus fever, dysentery, and a disease hitherto unknown, are sweeping away the whole population. The poor are not the only sufferers: fever is spreading to every class, and even the rich are becoming involved in the same destruction.

We were advised to proceed at once to Skibbereen, in the county of Cork, which was reported to be the very nucleus of the famine and disease.

Skibbereen was till this year a "comparatively" flourishing place; shops were good, and the tradespeople very respectable; but now its wealth, trade, and prosperity, are completely prostrated.

It was with some difficulty we made our way through the dense crowd which loitered in the streets, principally composed of women and children. Nothing seemed doing, there was no stir and bustle of business, and the shop-keepers from lack of customers stood idle at their doors.

So universal and virulent was the fever, that we were forced to choose among several houses to discover one or more which it would be safe to enter. At length, Mr. Townsend singled out one. We stood on the threshold and looked in; the darkness of the interior was such, that we were scarcely able to distinguish objects; the walls were bare, the floor of mud, and not a vestige of furniture.

We entered another at no great distance: over a few peat embers a woman was crouching, drawing her only solace from their scanty warmth; she was suffering from diarrhoea: there seemed scarcely a single article of furniture or crockery in any part of the hut. The woman answered the enquiries of Mr. Townsend in a weak and desponding voice; and from what we could gather, there appeared to be several other human beings in different corners of the hovel, but in the darkness we were totally unable to distinguish them.

This case is cited, not as an instance of extreme destitution, but as proof of the miserable condition to which some, who were once in flourishing circumstances, have been reduced; for the woman, we were told, was the wife of a respectable tradesman, who but two months before was carrying out a thriving business.

Our next visit was to the churchyard; it was the burying place to an ancient abbey, the ruins of which still remained mouldering away in the midst of the surrounding tombs. There was nothing picturesque or beautiful about it, no ivy, no columns, no ornamented arch; loose walls and bare stones were the only vestiges of the ancient structure. It was a very large grave-yard, and most of the graves had evidently long since been made; but in one corner there was about an acre of uneven and freshly-turned earth. This was the portion allotted to the late victims of famine and disease; by these graves, no service had been performed, no friends had stood, no priest had spoken words of hope, and of future consolation in a glorious eternity! The bodies had been thrown in, many without a coffin, one over another, the uppermost hidden from the light of day by a bare three inches of earth, the survivors not even knowing the spot where those most dear to them were

sleeping. In one place, the ground had been hollowed out to a depth of two feet, where several Collins were piled up in layers one above another, with but a sprinkling of earth between them, the ends protruding into that part of the shallow trench which still remained unfilled.

The most fearful anticipations are entertained of a pestilence breaking out, as soon as the hot weather shall set in, from the effluvia that must necessarily arise from bodies decomposing so near the surface(d), and a pestilence once begun, who shall say how far its ravages may extend! It is found impossible to induce the people to dig to any depth, so feeble and languid are they become. At first a man was placed in the churchyard to see the bodies properly interred; but this precaution was found worse than useless, for the poor wretches used then to bury their dead in the garden behind their cottages, scraping a hole of them during the night. All these cases are more shocking, from the fact, that this people are very particular in paying due honour to the dead, and conducting the burial ceremonies with all the magnificence their poverty will admit.

On quitting the churchyard, we returned towards the town; at a spot where the road diverged into two different directions, we came to a small cottage, built as usual of mud and loose stones, and raised a little above the level of the road; there was only one window, and that almost blocked up, the door was shut, and the hut had every appearance of being deserted. At this moment, the funeral cart with its attendant came towards us; it stopped opposite the cottage; a deal coffin of a large size, in order to suit the dimensions of all persons, lay jolting at the top. With some difficulty, the man backed the vehicle up the ascent. In the mean time, the clergyman beckoned us to one side, and we prepared for one of those scenes of which we had often heard, but never expected to witness. We learned that the coffin was for a woman who lay dead in that house, and that four others of the same family lay sick of the fever, unable even to assist in removing the body of their relation. The man with the cart called to another, the same whom we had seen in the churchyard, bidding him assist in carrying out the corpse; and upon his refusal, began to curse and swear in the most awful manner, unchecked by the very presence of death, and the almost visible manifestations of the judgment of God. At last, however, the man consenting, both disappeared within the shadow of the door way. Presently they returned, bearing between them the dead body, over which a scanty tattered yellow rag had just been thrown, not sufficient however to cover the whole length of the figure, or to prevent ones seeing the livid lifeless arms as they hung down swinging and knocking against the ground. They hastily flung it into the shell, the cart drove off, and the remains were hurriedly consigned to the earth without a coffin, and without the offices of religion.

At dinner there were three other gentlemen beside ourselves. A good deal of the conversation was occupied in enquiries after different persons suffering from typhus; for, as I've said before, the upper classed, and especially those charitable persons who superintended the distribution of soup &c. were beginning to succumb to attacks; and on that very evening, the principal gentleman in the town, a clever man too, and one who had distinguished himself at the University, lay delirious with fever.

Our tea at the parsonage was sad and gloomy enough. Desirous of diverting the poor man's attention from the thoughts which were constantly preying on his mind, we tried a little general conversation; but though partially succeeding, he too often involuntarily returned to the pressing topics of the place. He told us, as he was obliged to keep his outer gates locked, to prevent the influx of applicants whom he could not relieve, and who might bring with them infection. He

distributes daily large supplies of bread, much of which is given to those found by the road side, unable from debility to proceed, or apply themselves to their work. One poor woman, some time after the rest of the applicants had dispersed, was found lying in the ground in a pool of water before the windows, for when they have reached a certain stage of hunger, food is often of no avail, and even fatal. After bidding good bye to the poor Clergyman and his wife, we returned to the inn for the night. On our way, we called on Dr. Donovan, the zealous and indefatigable Physician of the place; he is night and day employed in ministering to the poor, and although he has visited every scene of death, and incurred every risk of infection, that merciful protection has been hitherto extended to him, which so often shields the priest and the physician in the execution of their duties to the sick. He corroborated all Mr. Townsend's statements, and added an anecdote from his own knowledge. At some distance from Skibbereen there was a cottage, in which lay a man and his wife both sick of the fever; the woman died, and the husband had just sufficient strength to crawl out and bury the body in his garden. During the night he distinctly hears dogs scratching and howling over what he but too well knew was the lately made grave; he sent out his little girl to drive them away, but they only bit at her, and frighten her back into the cottage. The following day one of the neighbours brought head of the unfortunate woman, saying "that his dog had brought it home!"

After a delay of three or four hours, we succeeded in hiring a outside jaunting car, to which an extra horse was attached. While this was being prepared, we sent out for an immense basket full of loaves, intending to distribute them to the occasional starving beings we were sure to meet with by the way; but some of the people of the town had learnt our intention, and collected in a great group under the window to number of 100 or 200, mostly women. It was a frightful sight to see those pale eager faces staring up at us, uttering all manner of entreaties. Of course there was no hope of carrying off the bread, indeed it would have been cruel to have made the attempt; the only question was, how to divide it. At first we sent it down to the door, but the rush was so great, that that scheme became impracticable; and it only remained, to throw it out of the window. One can never forget what followed; the fighting, the screaming, the swaying to and fro of the human mass, as it rushed in the direction of some morsel, the entreaties and gesture by which each one sought to attract our attention to herself, and above all the insatiable expression of the crowd as it remained unsatisfied and undiminished at the exhaustion of our loaves – for what were they among so many! By two o'clock they announced the car to be ready, and it was with some difficulty that we got to our places amidst the crush and noise. At last, however, we were fairly off, the horses careering about in all directions, and the strongest of the multitude running by our side, asking for bread.