

THE AMERICAN IRISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY



THE RECORDER
VOLUME 41 1980



Dominic Corrigan and the Great Famine

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In the autumn of 1845 the Irish peasant was performing the most important task of the year. From his small patch of land he was digging the potato crop that had been planted in the spring. The "Lumpers" as the commonest variety of potato was called would normally provide enough food for him and his family for the next year, and monotonous though the diet might be, it was nutritionally adequate. He could not afford to plant other crops such as corn, and only a small number of enterprising communities had learned to fish the plentiful waters of their land.

In this autumn of 1845 there were some who viewed with trepidation the increasing dependence of the populace on the potato for nourishment. From England had come news of a new and devastating blight that had spread from the Isle of Wight to Kent. Dominic Corrigan, a Dublin doctor, was convinced that if this blight spread to Ireland the results would be catastrophic. He had more reason than most to fear the consequences. As physician to the Sick-poor Institution in Meath Street, he had experienced the terrible misery of the great epidemic fever of 1826, and had warned the authorities then that sooner or later there would occur an even greater pestilence if the people were not provided with an alternative food to

the potato. His counsel went largely unnoticed, and little was done to make the peasant less dependent on the potato.

As reports of blight in the Irish potato crop began to reach Dublin in 1846, Corrigan published a pamphlet directed towards the authorities and the wealthy minority of Irish society. Aware that he might be labeled an alarmist, he nonetheless made no apology for anticipating "how helpless on occasions of great panic is the public mind." By analyzing the epidemics of the previous century Corrigan demonstrated that important though contagion, poor sanitation, poverty, and climate were in propagating epidemics of fever, there was one outstanding feature common to all epidemics—famine. Furthermore, he wrote, the commonest cause of famine in Ireland had been failure of the potato crop.

The people of Ireland are peculiarly liable to become the victims of such a pestilence. The effect of competition among a superabundant unemployed population has been to reduce their wages to the lowest sum on which life can be supported. Potatoes have hence become their staple food. If this crop be unproductive, the earnings of the labouring classes are then quite insufficient to purchase the necessary quantity of any other food. . . . The potato has, I believe, been a curse to our country. . . . When a bad crop occurs there is no descent for them in the scale of food: the next step is starvation.

He deplored the fact that corn was abundant but out of reach of the poor: "they STARVE in the midst of plenty, as literally as if dungeon bars separated them from a grainary. When distress has been at its height, and our poor have been

dying of starvation in our streets, our corn has been going to a foreign market. It is, to our own poor, a forbidden fruit." He urged the political economists to study Ireland's needs so that future epidemics might be prevented. The remedy, he claimed, was "to be found, not in medicine, but in employment, not in the lancet, but in FOOD, not in raising lazarettos for the reception of the sick, but in establishing manufactories for the employment of the healthy."

He quoted descriptions from previous famines in an attempt to motivate the charitable instincts of his readers.

On the road leading from Cork, within a mile of the town, (Kanturk) I visited a woman labouring under typhus: on her left lay a child very ill, at the foot of the bed another child just able to crawl about, and on her right the corpse of a third child who had died two days previously, which the unhappy mother could not get removed.

The mortality from the epidemic fever was often startling but a statistic did not give any real impression of the terrible suffering that was endured by the survivors. To many, Corrigan declared, death would have been a happy release, and he warned that "the offspring will inherit for generations to come, the weakness of body and apathy of mind, which famine and fever engendered."

Corrigan was too astute a judge of human nature to rely solely on a humanitarian appeal to "those who are placed in power, and who possess wealth." Drawing on the statistics from previous epidemics he commented on the surprising fact that fever affected the wealthy far less often than

the poor, but that when it did so the mortality among the rich was ten times higher. "It seems, therefore," he wrote, "that while the rich possess constitution and means which enable them to resist the ordinary contagion of fever, the seizure, when it does come, is in itself demonstrative of a greater amount of virulence."

He was critical of the recent Poor Law Act which allowed for the conversion of workhouses into fever hospitals in times of emergency.

Sickness should not be made a chain to drag a man into a poor house. An hospital should be an institution provided for the decent, the honest, the industrious, who may be suffering from temporary sickness, or accident, to enable them to obtain what is only thus within their reach; the highest professional aid, to restore them as soon as possible to their former station in society, and should never be permitted to be made the medium of degrading its inmate to the level of a pauper.

Hospitals were necessary in epidemics but more important Corrigan believed, was the provision of food to the populace. He advocated a simple method of dispensary relief. As physician to the Sick-poor Institution in Meath Street he had seen the charitable ladies of the city provide both food and medicine to the sick poor. Medical attendants were provided with tickets which they could give to their patients who were then entitled to "so many pints of whey, gruel or broth, as may be ordered, each pint of gruel being accompanied with half a pound of bread, and each quart of broth with one-fourth of a pound cut up in it." Corrigan saw this as "the most perfect and most economical system of out-door relief for the

sick poor that could be devised, and would moreover form the most grateful link of union between rich and poor, the link of active charity."

He ends his pamphlet with a plea. "If there be no famine, there will be no fever—and if active and timely exertion be made to afford sufficient employment and wages to our people, I believe there will be neither FAMINE nor FEVER."

How much this pamphlet influenced Government policy is difficult to ascertain. Corrigan's warnings were at least noted, and the Government in anticipation of an epidemic passed the Temporary Fever Act in 1846, which empowered the Lord Lieutenant to appoint commissioners of health to constitute a Central Board of Health. This Board was empowered to establish temporary fever hospitals, to provide medical assistance and to appoint extra medical officers. The Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, ratified the appointments of Dr. Dominic Corrigan; Sir Philip Crampton, the Surgeon-General and President of the Royal College of Surgeons; Professor Robert Kane, a distinguished chemist who had studied the potato blight; and Mr. Twistelton, the resident Poor Law Commissioner.

Corrigan was now in a position to effect the reforms which he had so ably stated in his publications, and yet the Board seems to have run into trouble from its earliest moments. To begin with, it completely underestimated the risk of an epidemic, a surprising miscalculation in view of Corrigan's conviction that a major famine must lead inevitably to an epidemic. The Board noted that the fever admissions of 1840 were very much higher than those of 1846 and concluded that because no serious devastation had followed in

1840, there was no need for alarm. The Board's greatest error was in assuming that the next year's potato crop would be normal, as indeed had been the case in previous blights. In fact, the Board seemed in agreement that many circumstances favoured a major epidemic, but surprisingly it assured the government that such would not occur.

By 1847 this optimism proved ill-founded. One and a half million acres of potato had been lost in the blight. Epidemics of the louse-borne typhus and relapsing fevers swept through a starving nation. The populace was prostrated and the next year's crop of potato was not planted. By the end of the decade somewhere around 1½ million perished through starvation and fever, and a million emigrated of which nearly 700,000 went to America. The Great Famine, as it was to be called, and its epidemic fevers, were to bring about the largest population movement of the nineteenth century.

Once the Board of Health appreciated its error in underestimating the danger it did set about establishing temporary fever hospitals throughout the country and appointing extra medical officers. Corrigan became in effect the Board of Health, attending twice as many meetings as any other member and working very long hours. However much his efforts were appreciated by the government (he was later to be created a Baronet of the Empire) the medical profession had never been happy with the Board's constitution as the government had not consulted with the Royal Colleges.

The Royal College of Surgeons was still smarting from a public correspondence it had had some

The Board had become the scapegoat for a nation in the throes of an appalling catastrophe, and Corrigan's name was the one most associated with the Board. He was in an invidious situation. On the one hand he was doing all he could to see that the Board's role of providing adequate facilities was achieved, while on the other he was up against an obdurate government which did not wish to put its hand into its pocket for the Irish poor, and when it did so it only threw out a few coppers. Did the profession or the public seriously believe that Corrigan and the other medical members of the Board had not pressed the treasury as far as possible for remuneration for the services of their medical officers? There were in fact a few doctors who considered five shillings a day quite adequate when compared to previous awards.

But the most vitriolic personal attack of all on Corrigan was to come from his senior colleague Robert Graves of the Meath Hospital. To appreciate fully the significance of Graves's censure it is necessary to remind ourselves that he was one of the most respected figures in Dublin medicine. Kings' Professor of the Institutes of Medicine, author of the celebrated and much translated *Clinical Lectures*, and past-president of the Kings and Queen's College of Physicians he was renowned internationally by the eponym "Graves's Disease" for his account of exophthalmic goitre. He was, moreover, held in high regard as a man of personal integrity and a doctor whose devotion to his patients was absolute.

In a thirty-page letter to the *Dublin Quarterly Journal of Medical Science* Graves expressed his indignation at the way in which the government

had constituted the Board without consultation with the profession, and in particular he resented the fact that for many weeks when Corrigan was the only active member of the Board, neither of the Royal Colleges were represented. He accused Corrigan of seeking personal aggrandizement through his involvement with the Board. "But Dr. Corrigan may be excused from becoming a little giddy when he ventures into the same car with Sir Philip, and, to the amazement of all, suddenly finds himself at an altitude so elevated, that his companion, although a veteran aeronaut, betrays distinct evidence of alarm." Many of the points raised by Graves were valid, but his personal rejoinders on Corrigan were unkind, excessive and bearing in mind the difficulties under which Corrigan was labouring to make the Board function at all, the attack was misdirected, and should have concentrated more on the other members and on the government.

Corrigan chose to remain silent, and resisted suggestions from the journals and the press that he should resign from the Board. He continued to work toward the relief of fever, and with a cholera epidemic following immediately on the great famine there was plenty for him to do. He would have done well to let the storm clouds pass but unwisely chose this time to seek election to Honorary Fellowship of the Kings and Queen's College of Physicians in Ireland, and was ignominiously black-beaned by his colleagues. The government watched in silence, and showed its appreciation of Corrigan's untiring work by appointing him Physician-in-Ordinary to Queen Victoria in Ireland, a decoration never before given to a Catholic.

Let us close this sorry chapter in Irish history by looking more closely at the enigmatic *persona dramatis* of this piece—Dominic Corrigan. Born in 1802 in his father's hardware shop in Thomas Street, he was brought up in a middle-class Catholic home, and sent for schooling to the Catholic Lay College at Maynooth. He studied medicine initially in Dublin, and later at Edinburgh where he graduated in 1825. Returning to Dublin he practiced among the sick-poor of the City and was Medical Assistant in the parish of St. Catherine.

Corrigan was determined to overcome the obstacles that lay in the way of a Catholic achieving a staff appointment to a Dublin hospital. He equipped a small laboratory in his rooms in Upper Ormond Quay in which he studied the physiology of the heart and circulation in animals, and he observed and recorded carefully the manifestations of heart disease in his poor patients. A series of brilliant papers in the medical journals assured him an appointment as physician to the Charitable Infirmary, the oldest voluntary hospital in the United Kingdom. Here with only a few beds at his disposal he published a paper on incompetence of the aortic valve of the heart and achieved for himself eponymous immortality; the disease is still known as "Corrigan's Disease" and its peculiar pulse as "Corrigan's Pulse." It was not the only disease to be named after him; a fibrosing condition of the lungs was for many years known as "Maladie de Corrigan." In 1840 he was appointed physician to the House of Industry Hospitals, better known today as The Richmond or St. Laurence's Hospital.

He published frequently on medical advances

and was renowned as a teacher and lecturer. Always interested in education both general and medical he was a member of the General Medical Council and of the Senate of the Queens University of which he became Vice-Chancellor in 1871. As we have seen he was black-beaned from the College of Physicians when he sought honorary fellowship, but he then sat humbly for the Licentiate examination of the College after which he was eligible for full fellowship. He then went on to become President on five successive occasions, a feat not since equalled. Furthermore, during his presidency he instigated and saw to completion that which the College had lacked for the previous two hundred years of its existence—the college hall at Kildare Street. In 1866 at the age of 60 the government in recognition for public services created him Baronet of the Empire. For most men this would have seemed a fitting climax to a remarkable career as doctor and humanitarian, but Sir Dominic Corrigan remembered the difficulties he had had to overcome and in 1870 he sought election to Westminster and was returned in the Liberal cause for the City of Dublin.

Corrigan's parliamentary career was to last less than four years and in this time he tried to temper Britain's reaction to disturbances in Ireland and was probably successful on a few occasions in pouring oil on troubled waters. His reputation with the Catholics of Ireland reached its zenith at this time, but he was viewed with some apprehension by the Protestant stock.

For the people of Ireland he had a character of which, perhaps, he was not himself altogether conscious. They regarded his career with peculiar interest, and

his success with gratified pride; because they saw in him evidence of a Catholic rising against all opposition to the highest position possible for him to acquire. This feeling was nowise sectarian, it was rather racial and national; they felt that intellectual triumph was their best and noblest vindication against the contumely which had fallen on them, in consequence of the ignorance enforced upon the nation by the penal laws.

Indeed Corrigan was very aware of the disability under which Catholics laboured by virtue of not having adequate educational facilities and was a staunch supporter of equal rights in education. When the University Education (Ireland) Bill came before the House he made his position quite clear. "The State," he said, "should be equally impartial to all denominations, giving equal aid to all—to those who desire to have denominational education and to those who do not." While supporting certain aspects of the Bill he was vehemently opposed to the proposal that the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland should be Chancellor of the University. "I consider it an indignity little short of insult to do it," he told Parliament, "and that, if done, it will destroy the independence of science; and the Conviction will be that the only way to University distinctions and emoluments under such Chancellorship, will be up the back stairs of the Castle." The Castle, of course, was the seat of officialdom in Victorian Dublin. He deplored the method of educational endowment whereby "Trinity College is left in possession of at least £50,000 a year wrung by oppression and confiscation from the Catholics; while Royal and endowed schools are scattered through the length and breadth of the land all devoted exclusively to

Protestants, Catholic Colleges and Catholic Schools derive nothing from the State." He begged Parliament to give the Catholic a fair chance, and if he could not avail of it, he then had only himself to blame.

Let them have a fair start in this educational competition. If they then fail in the competition for degrees, emoluments, and honour, they will not be able to say that they have not had fair play; but if they fail under the proposed Bill, which leaves thousands on thousands with Protestant and Presbyterian Colleges, and gives nothing to them, they will attribute their failure to injustice; and every rejection of a Catholic candidate that will occur will be a never failing repetition of heart-burning, sectarian discord, and disaffection in Ireland.

Corrigan had pleaded his case strongly and sincerely. Like Daniel O'Connell with whom he had been acquainted he believed that Parliament could be persuaded by reasoned rhetoric. However well his performance may have appeared to Catholic Ireland, there were many to whom "his strictures gave deep offence." He decided not to contest his seat in the election of 1874 and retired to his seaside home at Coliemore in Dalkey. He died on February 1st, one hundred years ago, in his 79th year.

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