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The Impact of the 1839 January 6-7 storm (The Night of the Big Wind) on Loughrea.

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Introduction

Given Ireland's position sitting out on the edge of the North Atlantic dominated by a very strong westerly airflow, it is not surprising that Ireland has experienced and goes on experiencing many severe storms. These storms have caused much devastation and loss of life going back through the centuries. However, none of them that we know about compares to the 1839 January 6-7 storm known as 'The Night of the Big Wind'. The loss of life and level of devastation felt throughout the country will probably never be surpassed. Loughrea like many other towns throughout Ireland suffered severely as a result of this storm. But, as a result of the fire that swept through the town Loughrea suffered more destruction than almost all other towns of its size on the island of Ireland. The only other weather events to cause more death and destruction that we know about for Ireland was the period of intense cold and drought which lasted throughout most of 1740 and 1741 and as a result of harvest failures caused the deaths of an estimated 400,000 people around 25% of the population of the country at the time and of course the role of the weather in aiding the spread of the potato blight during the Great Famine years (Dickson, 1997).

The main focus of this chapter is to analyse the impact of this storm on Loughrea with particular reference to the major fire that occurred. This will then be put into the context of damage around Co. Galway before examining the cause of this storm by reference to the meteorological records that were around at the time and the extent of damage throughout Ireland.

Description of the storm in Loughrea

The word most used in the various newspaper reports was that of a hurricane and this reflects the wind speed both in terms of sustained speed and gust speed. For example the Galway Patriot of 9th Jan comments on 'the tremendous violence of the hurricane'. The Times newspaper of 10th January describes the storm simply as a 'hurricane'. The initial wind direction was from the NW which remained the same throughout the night of the 6th

January and eventually changed to W around 6am on the morning of the 7th of January after which the wind slowly started to abate in strength.

Impact of the storm on Loughrea

The evidence from the newspapers immediately after the event suggests that Loughrea was devastated by the effects of the high winds either directly or indirectly. The main effect of this wind was to generate a major fire and most likely this developed as a result of the destruction of chimneystacks. The wind would then have blown the sparks onto the thatched roofs rapidly spreading the fire especially where cottages were closely packed together. Once the fire got going it would have been almost impossible to put out as a result of the high winds fanning the flames and the flammable nature of the thatched roofs. In all 87 cabins and numerous outhouses were burnt to the ground in the western suburbs of Loughrea and a whole street was burnt in a fire that has started at 11pm and continued past 6am the following morning. Unusually, not one of the newspaper reports of the fire identify the street that was effectively burnt out or where exactly was affected by the fire in the western suburbs of the town.

The fear and confusion and the effects of the fire as it was progressing is captured by the Loughrea Correspondent of The Galway Patriot who states that

> "It was truly a most heart-sickening sight, to behold the poor inmates endeavouring to save some little vestige of their property while the screaming of children, the lamentation of parents and the universal terror and confusion that were visible on all sides, would melt the heart of the most callous spectator"
>
> (Galway Patriot 9th January 1839)

Only for the change in wind around 6am from NW to W the effects of the fire would have been much worse with even more houses would have been burnt to the ground. It is also noted that the wind blew a little to the rear of the affected houses and this helped to prevent the spread of the fire especially to the principal street.

The net effect was that at least 347 or possibly 600 individuals were made homeless. The figure all depends on which newspaper the information comes from, either way hundreds of people lost almost everything they possessed in the storm, primarily as a result of the fire. Most newspaper articles use the 347 figure and it is likely that this is the number of people made homeless by the fire only. The 600 figure probably includes all the people made homeless by the storm throughout the town and not just in the fire. Miraculously, no one was killed and this was partially due to Mr. Lawrence Fahy who allowed hundreds of people to shelter in his brewery and other people who sheltered the affected families for the night.

Some local individuals responded to the fire and the exertions of Mr. Joseph Henry Ridge, Mr. Armstrong and the Reverend Gentlemen of the Convent presumably the Carmelites also James Smyth, T. Walsh senior, S. Muldoon junior, P. Davy and D.

Larkin are noted in the newspapers, also the local RIC under Mr. Ireland, Sub-Inspector Lewis, Mr. Cannon and others. It is also noted that Mr. Cannon and a number of others suffered severe eye injuries as a result of the ash from the fire. Despite the efforts of these people and the RIC there were some complaints about the slowness of the authorities to respond. It is claimed that some detached houses could have been saved if the police had been deployed to their proper positions. This indicates the ferocity of the fire as it able to jump open spaces which should have been natural firebreaks. The RIC had two purposes in the disaster, the first was to help the people directly affected by the fire and secondly to protect their property from looting. This was needed as many people had thrown their belongings out into the street in order to save them. A number of people were arrested for robbing some bacon from a deserted house. It is stated that these were not from Loughrea and were described in the Galway Weekly Advertiser as a nest of vagabonds called thimblemen who lately came here and spread over the town.

This was by no means the end of the damage in the town and immediate surrounding area. Another 30 cabins were completely blown down, many houses on the main street were unroofed, the Courthouse was also badly damaged and it is fair to assume that very few properties escaped without some damage. In addition many trees would have been blown down, as were all the trees on The Walk and was described as a complete wreck. In the suburbs of the town the damage was incalculable and the ravages committed to the different plantations, haggards, farmyards was most disastrous around the outskirts of the town. The newspapers also note that Dunsandle (The Daly family estate), St Cleran's, Dalystown and Marble Hill all had extensive numbers of trees blown down. Again, this was a very common feature of the storm throughout the country. In addition, Roxbro' had suffered damage totaling £8,000 a vast sum in those days, although it is not clear whether this was to Roxbro' House or the estate or more likely to both.

Relief effort

In the immediate aftermath of the devastation caused by the storm and fire a relief committee was organised. This was in response to the obvious needs of many people in the town as the The Galway Patriot notes in published letter from the Dublin Evening Post

> "In no other locality in Ireland has the all but destructive storm of Sunday, the 6th instant, been attended with so much destruction – so much destitution – so much misery and we fear alas so much starvation, as in Loughrea. We had recently the mortification of witnessing the truly melancholy scenes and we feel ourselves totally unable to express the feelings of horror which filled us on witnessing them. The direful effects of destitution and starvation is depicted in the countenances of the numerous paupers who flock the streets, and desolation awaits the eye of the stranger in every direction"
>
> (Galway Patriot 30th January 1839)

This letter was obviously written by somebody who was probably unfamiliar with the town of Loughrea and was probably passing through in the immediate aftermath of the

storm and fire and were clearly distressed at what they saw. The report in the Dublin Evening Post as reprinted in the Galway Patriot goes on to say of the people who lost their cabins in the fire or were blown down that

> "The wretched occupiers of those dwellings , with their wives and starving families, now call on all indiscriminately - for real charity knows no distinction – to assist them. They humbly rely on public charity and public benevolence that their call will not be made in vain…"
>
> (Galway Patriot 30th January 1839)

The relief committee seems to have three identifiable purposes. The first of these was to call on the Government and the Poor Law Executives and Commissioners to immediately respond to the disaster. This call for action was common throughout Ireland as a result of numerous relief committees being set up. The second purpose was to write to Lady Clanricarde to inform her of the devastation in the town and finally to gather and donations in order to immediately help those who were most affected in the town as many families had lost their homes, all their possessions and food. Mr. Robert D'Arcy the agent to the Clanricarde Estate chaired the committee and he also undertook to inform Lady Clanricarde of what had happened.

At the initial meeting of the relief committee just over £200 was raised, a not inconsiderable sum at the time. Only a small number of those who contributed to the overall relief effort are identified. The first of these is Lady Clanricarde who in the absence of her husband donated £20 and also the proceeds from the sale of fallen timber on the estate that is likely to yield an additional £40. The cash donation from Lady Clanricarde is more then likely from her own money as opposed to her husband Lord Clanricarde. He was away in Russia at the time of the disaster carrying out his duties as Russian Ambassador and only donated £5, an amount that was ridiculed in one letter to the Galway Patriot given his enormous wealth. This was compared unfavourably with many other landlords who responded in a much more generous fashion . However, the writer of the letter did note that subscriptions were pouring in thanks to the efforts of the Relief Committee and that it is hoped that the most indigent of the sufferers will soon have their dwellings re-roofed. This implies that at least some of the houses that were burnt or destroyed by the wind still had their walls intact and that it was only a question or re-roofing them and other repairs to make them habitable once more.

Other donors to the relief effort included the Protestant Rector the Rev. Mr. Mendlicott who donated £6 and also sent £50 to Dublin to purchase blankets for the poor. Mrs. Daly of Mount Pleasant gave £10, the Catholic Bishop Dr. Coen gave £5 and many other unidentified individuals gave £5 each or lesser amounts. It is also noted that the Catholic Priest the Rev. Anthony Daly gave much succor to the poor and was everywhere helping the needy throughout the aftermath of the disaster. Also, a Mr. Bricknell is identified as having given an unspecified but significant amount of money to the relief committee.

Impact on Galway County

Extensive damage and a large number of fatalities were recorded for Co. Galway. Table 1 below contains a brief summary of what happened throughout the county with the exception of Loughrea. This table shows that considerable fatalities occurred throughout the county and in addition a large number of bodies were washed up onshore from vessels that had been caught and wrecked in the storm. It is also clear that the whole county was affected and that damage of all kinds was widespread. As a result of the damage being so widespread detail that would normally be recorded are not because of the scale and severity of the damage so only the most important incidents and impacts are recorded.

Table 1 Death and destruction in Galway caused by the storm of 6th-7th January (as abstracted from Carr 1991 and various newspapers from 1839).

Aran Islands - most thatched cottages lost their roofs, boats in the harbours either damaged or destroyed, some livestock killed.

Bearna – many trees in wood blown down.

Ballinasloe - nearly 20 houses destroyed, Garbally House damaged and many trees in the estate destroyed.

Claregalway – chapel lost its principal aisle and the old Castle lost one of its gables.

Clifden - 17 bodies were thrown onshore near the town from a shipwreck.

Galway city - 7 people killed and 4 injured as a result of house and chimney collapses and flying debris especially slates and chimney pots. Many houses unroofed and glass windows blown in. In addition three vessels, which left the harbour on the morning of the 6th, have been lost with all 23 on board. Many other vessels wrecked or badly damaged.

Gort - 44 houses destroyed, the roof of Loughcooter Castle damaged (lost coping stones) and many trees in the demesne uprooted.

Headford – Mr. St. George's Castle damaged.

Oranmore - 20 houses blown down, much corn blown away by the wind.

Oughterard - a scene of misery and woe (no details).

Rossmore – Police Barracks raised to the ground.

Roundstone - the 12 men of the lifeboat were drowned and only 1 body recovered.

Salthill - nearly all houses damaged.

Spiddal – the accounts of the damage and destruction are frightening.

Tuam - 2 houses destroyed and many others unroofed and damaged, damage to most of the churches in the town and St. Jarlath's College. Many trees in the Archbishop's demesne were blown down.

Woodford – 12 houses destroyed of which 2 were burnt to the ground.

Cause of the storm

Because of the early date of this storm, the evidence for the actual storm itself is based on two types of information. The first type of data is early meteorological measurements from a few sites around Ireland and Britain, for example a twice-daily series of meteorological readings were taken at Armagh Observatory from 1796 onwards (Hickey 2003). To put this in context most modern meteorological services in Europe were not set up until the 1850's and 1860's or later. The second type of information is from the numerous written description of the storm itself from all over Ireland and Britain and as far as Denmark (Hickey 1997).

A number of reconstructions of this storm have been carried out and they show a very similar pattern (Shields and Fitzgerald 1989, Lamb 1991). On the morning of the 6th January 1839 there was very little evidence of a major oncoming storm, the weather was described as cold with some sleet and snow with little wind. By mid-afternoon however the wind was freshening and the temperature began to rise. This rise in temperature would have helped the storm maintain its energy levels. By evening time the wind was gale force (8) strength from the west and by midnight most of the country was in the grip of hurricane force winds (12), which lasted for at least 2 to 5 hours depending on location.

After this the wind slowly began to abate and by evening of the 7th January there was no winds of any significance around Ireland. Clearly, a very deep depression tracked across the NE Atlantic and across the northern tip of Ireland and mainland Scotland from a WSW or WbyS direction. The storm eventually crossed the North Sea and reached Denmark before eventually petering out in mainland Europe. This depression has been estimated to be as low as 922 millibars just off Ireland (Figure 1.). To put this into context, the lowest ever recorded pressure in Ireland was in 1886 in Belfast when 927.2 millibars was recorded (Rohan 1986). So, this storm was exceptionally severe under this criteria.

This was also a fast moving depression and brought with it very unstable weather conditions, there is plenty of evidence of whirlwinds and mini-tornadoes occurring throughout the country, adding to the damage and destruction. At the height of the storm it is estimated that sustained winds reached or exceeded 75mph. In addition to this, gusts may have reached or exceeded 100mph. Any wind speeds in excess of 50mph per hour even today have the potential to cause significant damage and loss of life, but when you

go back over 160 years with most people in the country living in small often poorly constructed thatched cottages, many of which were located in exposed coastal and upland areas the potential for damage was far higher (Lamb, 1991).

All sorts of non-natural causes were put forward in an attempt to try and explain why this event had happened. Many people noted that the storm occurred on the Night of the Epiphany when Christ made himself known to the world and as a result the storm was of divine origin. Others thought it was a punishment from God, brought down on the population by priests, others believed that it was the day before the Day of Judgment believed by many to occur on the 7th January. Others believed that the Freemasons had brought up the devil from hell and were now unable to control him. Many Catholics saw freemasonry at this time as being associated with demonic practices (Delaney, 1995).

Many people associated this event with the activities of large numbers of fairies. Some blamed the fairies for raising this storm, the same as they had raised other storms in the past, or possibly a battle between Irish and English fairies (Carr, 1991). Traditionally the 5th of January was the feast of St. Ceara, when it was believed fairies held a night of revelries, some believed that most of the fairies left Ireland that night and the wind was as a result of their departure (Delaney, 1995).

Impact on Ireland

The impact of this storm on Ireland was exceptional, causing every conceivable type of destruction and damage and significant loss of life. It is true to say that not one parish in Ireland was unaffected by this storm. This was true not only of Ireland but also the Irish Sea, Northern England particularly Liverpool, Southern Scotland and across the North Sea to Denmark (Lamb 1991).

In terms of fatalities and injuries it is virtually impossible to come up with an accurate number, however it is possible to imply approximate numbers of fatalities and injuries. Shields and Fitzgerald (1989) quote a figure for Ireland of approximately 90 fatalities based on a limited newspaper search. However, based on the much more comprehensive survey of Carr (1991) the true figure is probably well in excess of 300 and this includes vessels lost at sea and their crew and unknown bodies washed onshore around the coastline of Ireland. At least another 300 people died in England and Scotland with Liverpool being particularly badly affected with 115 fatalities (Lamb, 1991). In addition to the fatalities, thousand of people were injured as a result if building collapses, flying debris, falling trees and fires and it is likely that a significant percentage of these would have died subsequently as a result of their injuries and the state of medicine at that time.

In terms of housing, thousands if not tens of thousands of cottages and houses were damaged or destroyed. This involved them been blown down, unroofed, the thatch being set on fire as a result of chimney collapses, doors and windows blown in and the contents blown around and damaged (Carr 1991). It did not seem to matter whether they were thatched cottages of the ordinary people or the mansions of the rich with slate and lead

roofs. In the latter case many of them had the lead stripped from their roofs and as a result were partially or completely de-roofed. There was extensive damage to and destruction of all sorts of other buildings in the country from shops to farm buildings. However it is clear that two types of building suffered more than most and these were windmills and churches. In the latter case many spires were damaged or destroyed, often their toppling inflicting much more damage on the church buildings than the initial wind damage (Carr, 1991).

From an agricultural and forestry perspective this was a disastrous storm. There was very significant destruction and damage to thousands of barns and other farm buildings. Much unthreshed corn, hay and straw were blown away causing financial loss and suffering to individual farmers and their families and in some cases the local community. Considerable numbers of farm animals were killed either by building collapse, fires, falling trees and lightning. Many smaller farm animals particularly hens and other poultry were blown away, never to be seen again (Carr 1991). This is also true of many wild birds and it was noted that year that there was an absence of many species of smaller songbirds.

There is no doubt that the biggest impact on the landscape of Ireland was the destruction of trees. No part of the country escaped this impact but demesnes with large stands of trees seemed to have been most affected. For example Shields and Fitzgerald (1989) note that in the Earl of Belmore's estate near Enniskillen in Co. Fermanagh around 100,000 trees were felled by the wind. Lamb (1991) suggests an overall total of a half million trees blown down but based on Carr's (1991) more detailed survey the figure is more likely to be in excess of 2 million and that figure could still be a considerable underestimate as virtually every road in the country was covered in fallen trees. This enormous loss of trees would have a dramatic impact on the appearance of the landscape which would look much more bleak and exposed and this would not have been rectified for many decades as new trees were planted and slowly grew back to mature heights.

The marine environment was also badly affected. This included shipwrecks and in many cases considerable loss of life and this occurred from the west coast to the Irish Sea (Shields and Fitzgerald, 1989). In many harbors throughout the country there was immense destruction and damage to vessels of all sizes and purposes. There was also considerable damage done to the coastline particularly in the form of coastal erosion and the movement of coastal sediments.

The storm is also notable for the variety of unusual phenomenon that was recorded throughout the country. These phenomena included large amounts of salt being blown inland, which in some cases temporarily affected local freshwater supplies, and caused vegetation to taste salty. There were also a number of reports of fish being found on dry land well away from water bodies and this includes the sea and these were more than likely sucked up by tornadoes, water spouts and whirlwinds and deposited a few miles away. Sea birds were found in the center of Ireland obviously blown there by the winds (Shields and Fitzgerald, 1989). It is clear that the winds were so strong in certain places that large bulky objects like trees and turf stacks being lifted and moved significant

distances. Again these could be due to tornado activity, although they are rare in Ireland they are documented on an almost annual basis (Tyrrell, 1997).

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Loughrea was one of the most devastated towns of its size throughout the country as a result of the storm particularly the conflagration that occurred. Although no one was killed this storm, this was another setback for a town that was already struggling. As was noted in the Galway Patriot that the trade and commerce of Loughrea was in a state of progressive decay and poverty was on the increase. At least 1,000 people in the town were in utter destitution and only a considerable sum contributed to the poor can save them. This was also in the context of food prices nearly doubling as a result of the storm. The effects of the storm would have carried on in Loughrea long after the event had taken place.

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