

## **Dr Daniel Donovan – heroic figure of the Famine in Skibbereen**

**By Philip O'Regan, Skibbereen Heritage Centre**

SKIBBEREEN was synonymous with the Great Irish Famine (1845-52) with reports of pestilence, starvation and death from that area on an almost biblical scale. However, there are also stories of extraordinary courage and heroic deeds about those who ministered to the afflicted and who did so much to alleviate their great distress.

Canon John O'Rourke, who visited Skibbereen when carrying out research for his book, *The Great Irish Famine* (1874), referred to the 'bright and copious fountains of living charity which gushed forth.' A.M. Sullivan, wrote: 'No pen, nor tongue, can trace nor relate the countless deeds of heroism and self-sacrifice which the dreadful visitation called forth on the part, pre-eminently of two classes in the community, the Catholic clergy and the dispensary doctors.'<sup>1</sup>

Daniel Donovan was one such dispensary doctor, perhaps the most fervent and dedicated of them all.

In Skibbereen, the name of Dr Daniel Donovan should never be forgotten. Dr Donovan, or Dr Dan as he was familiarly known, more than any other person helped to focus world attention on the plight of Skibbereen and district during the Great Hunger. For this reason, and also for his great exertions on behalf of the people of this area, Dr Donovan emerges as one of the most heroic figures of that time.

Who, then, was this doctor that a whole countryside loved and mourned so deeply at the time of his death?

He was a bold and successful surgeon, an oculist and a general practitioner, a talented and prolific author and a champion of the oppressed and destitute Irish people.<sup>2</sup>

Friends and admirers advised him to leave Skibbereen and establish himself in Dublin or London where he would have a more extended field of operations and, in a few years, realise a fortune.<sup>3</sup> But Dr Dan was unambitious and unselfish and chose to remain in Skibbereen where patients came to consult him not only from other parts of Ireland but from England and Scotland, some even taking the long Atlantic crossing from America.

### **Studied in Edinburgh**

Daniel Donovan was born in Rosscarbery in 1808. He received his early education at a college in Rosscarbery run by Mr Armstrong and received a good classical education which was to manifest itself in his writings later on.<sup>4</sup> He proceeded to study in Dublin and from there went to Edinburgh, where, at the age of twenty-one, he graduated as an MD and obtained his surgical diploma. Edinburgh was one of the leading medical schools in the world at the time and was at the very forefront of surgical science.

Dr Donovan commenced his medical career in Skibbereen in the late 1820s and shortly after was appointed to the nearby Union Hall Dispensary and served as medical officer at Union Hall and Glandore.

At that time, Ireland was reasonably well doctored and doctors were distributed throughout the country. But while being well provided for in that sense, Ireland was crippling poor and the abject

poverty and squalid conditions of the vast majority of her people meant that the doctors had totally inadequate institutions and ancillaries to support them.

One of the recurring themes in medical discourse at that time was the relationship between sickness and disadvantage. Much of the illness and disease that afflicted the country in the half century before the Great Famine was attributed to poverty, to the inadequacies of diet, housing, clothing and fuel that characterised the period. Eighty-five per cent of the country's swollen population lived in the countryside, many in cramped, sub-standard homes, where domestic and personal hygiene were practically non-existent. The occupants of these wretched hovels survived largely on potatoes and buttermilk, a healthy and wholesome, if monotonous, diet. Potatoes offered many advantages as a primary food source, but in Ireland they were often insufficient in quantity, and prone to failure. Food shortages contributed to dietetic disorders and had a strong influence on epidemic infection, notably fevers and diarrhoeal diseases.<sup>5</sup>

As the population of Ireland increased rapidly in the first decades of the nineteenth century, social conditions deteriorated. In the predominantly rural population, many families, particularly in the south and south-west, lived on the edge of subsistence on tiny patches of land, divided and subdivided as their children married. Poverty was everywhere.

A government commission enquiring into the condition of the Irish poor during the 1830s found that for at least thirty weeks of the year, in 'normal times', at least 2,385,000 of the population were destitute. It was a population acknowledged by a further government report in 1845 as unparalleled in Western Europe for the depth of its poverty.<sup>6</sup>

Such was the dismal state of the country when Dr Dan began his medical career in the late 1820s.

### **Cholera epidemic**

Early in his career, while he was a medical officer at Union Hall and Glandore (1830 to 1839), Dr Donovan had all the resources of his medical expertise and resilience tested to the full during the awful cholera epidemic of 1832-34. However, the young doctor was not found wanting and his exertions on behalf of the local people were widely acknowledged.

The epidemic reached its peak during the summer and autumn of 1832 and the officially recorded deaths from cholera in Ireland show a toll of 20,070 in 1832 and 5,308 in 1833 but these figures fall well short of the true picture, as deaths were not subject to statutory registration.<sup>7</sup>

A tribute by the subscribers to the Glandore Dispensary was published in *The Cork Constitution* newspaper in February 1834:

Address to Daniel Donovan ESQ, MD, Union Hall, February 27<sup>th</sup>, 1834. My Dear Sir – I am directed by the Subscribers to the Glandore Dispensary, to convey to you the high sense they entertain of your unceasing efforts since your appointment as Medical Superintendent to that Institution, towards the relief of the suffering poor of your district, and particularly on the late Visitation of Cholera, when your kind and disinterested exertions were beyond all praise: in testimony of which they have come to the resolution of presenting you with a small but not less sincere tribute of their approbation and respect for the eminent services rendered by you on the late melancholy occasion. I beg leave to add the pleasure it affords me as being the medium of communicating to you this information. And remain my dear sir, Very faithfully yours. Lyttleton Lyster, Secretary.<sup>8</sup>

If the cholera epidemic of the early 1830s was to be a test of the great doctor's resolve, it was but a mere prelude to what was to follow just over a decade later.

In 1835 Dr Dan married Henrietta Flynn and they had a family of six daughters and five sons. In 1839 he was appointed to the Skibbereen Dispensary and he was elected the first medical officer of the new Skibbereen Workhouse.<sup>9</sup>

With three inter-related problems in Ireland – huge population growth, widespread poverty and almost total dependence on one source of food (the potato) – and with so many living on the edge of subsistence, people managed to eke out a living, but only just. The problem was that they had nothing to fall back on in the event of a crisis. That crisis came with a vengeance in 1845.

### **Skibbereen at the epicentre**

About one million people died during the Famine and some two million people emigrated in the decade 1845-1855, so the size of the convulsion that Ireland suffered was enormous. Skibbereen was at the epicentre of this appalling tragedy and one of the areas that suffered most.

With the first appearance of potato blight in August 1845, few could imagine the scale of the appalling tragedy that was to follow. However, in Skibbereen, even at that early stage, there was great concern over the state of the potatoes and the likely consequences of a failure of the crop.

At the annual dinner of the Skibbereen Agricultural Society on 28 October 1845 the situation regarding the potato disease was discussed. Dr Donovan raised his concerns:

Dr Donovan said ... he had gone round through a great many potato fields ... and was sorry to say that none of the accounts were exaggerated ... He was also sorry to say that there was no remedy ... those left in the ground were bad – those exposed were bad – for the other day he went through six parishes and the wail around him was that those left in the beds were bad, those pitted worse, and those housed worse than all ... He thought that he might say that up to the present moment one-third of the entire crop was lost irretrievably, while he had heard people of experience say that one-half was gone ... he did not think that after 1<sup>st</sup> of March there would be one month's supply in the country. Dr Donovan regretted to think that his words would be found too true.<sup>10</sup>

The destruction of about thirty per cent of the potato crop in the autumn of 1845 caused great hardship but it was only with the almost total loss of the crop in 1846 that the scale of the disaster began to become apparent.

As the crisis deepened, Skibbereen became notorious as one of the areas of greatest deprivation and suffering. At a meeting held in Skibbereen to address the question of the second failure of the potato crop, Dr Donovan reported that cholera was now present, caused by eating rotten potatoes.

Throughout the winter of 1846 and 1847 horror stories from Skibbereen in local, national and international press became more and more frequent.

At this time, it was the endeavours and writings of one man, Dr Dan Donovan, more than anything else that helped to focus world attention on Skibbereen.

### **'Diary of a Dispensary Doctor'**

In 1846 and 1847 Dr Donovan wrote his 'Diary of a Dispensary Doctor' in *The Southern Reporter* newspaper which was published in Cork City. These detailed reports, often quite harrowing, were an account of what he saw as he went about his daily task of helping those who were suffering and dying from starvation and disease. Some of these incredibly descriptive accounts from the pen of Dr Donovan were copied and published in other newspapers, including *The Illustrated London News*.

We include here Dr Donovan's account in *The Southern Reporter* of 2 January 1847 —

## DIARY OF A DISPENSARY DOCTOR:

Dear Sir, Again, my duty to my humble patients obliges me to trespass on your columns, and harrow the feelings of your readers by the recital of the sad details which one day's practice among a famine stricken people affords.

**Monday, the 28th of December** – a day in which in former years the festivities of Christmas were in full operation – in the present season exhibited in this town the triumph of pestilence and the feast of death.

On that day I commenced my professional labours by attending the Dispensary. I had scarcely entered it when a clamorous crowd rushed up stairs, and it was with the greatest difficulty that I could make way for the Commissariat Officer, Mr Hughes, who required from me some returns connected with the statistics of disease in this neighbourhood. Having arranged this matter with him, and attended many cases of disease for which I found out a new term in nosology, viz Road Sickness, from its being almost peculiar to the naked and famishing labourers who, at the expense of their own lives, are obliged to go through the mockery of work in cutting up the best ground in the country.

I had occasion to visit the Workhouse in conjunction with a respected medical friend, and was assailed on leaving by such a multitude of sick that it was with the greatest difficulty I could tear myself away, and for four hours my assistant, Mr Crowley, was engaged in dispensing medicine for those affected with fever and bowel complaints, which at this moment prevail to a frightful extent in this neighbourhood.

Prior to undertaking the return for the officer to whom I before alluded, I visited for a few moments my own house and soon discovered by a loud wailing that the work of death had gone on in my neighbourhood; a good hearted, benevolent woman had just expired, and under circumstances that make me shudder for the safety of my own family. On this day week a group of squalid, hungry, appellants had gathered at my door – among them was one exhausted by disease and emaciated by want. Patrick Shea, the man referred to in my last diary, 'had come to get a coffin for his little progeny', the puny pallid boy whose attention to his sick relatives I had so often occasion to admire, the kind woman whose funeral dirge is now ringing in my ears, came forward to assist him and direct my attention to his care ... That moment she was fever stricken; tonight, she is a lifeless corpse.

Oh! this should teach a lesson to the wealthy, and should show them that though they are beyond the reach of want, they are not beyond the influence of contagion; and that poverty, if neglected, will avenge itself, and retaliate with a death dealing hand on the rich if they fail to perform their duty towards the poor. To the English people also it should be a source of greater alarm than the bugbear of fire arms; the Irish, if driven from their own country by starvation, will carry with them Typhus, a weapon more destructive than the pike or blunderbuss; they will inundate England with pauperism.

Strongly contrasted with the exciting scene before me was the quiet funeral procession that now passed; two men bore on their shoulders a middle sized coffin, and another man tottering with weakness walked alongside. I enquired 'who is dead', and the answer, 'Batt Connell's daughter; we are burying her for him, as he is too weak to do it himself.'

From the dead to the dying, my attention was now directed, and I commenced my visits to the huts of the living, which have latterly become, in many instances, the sepulchres of the dead.

A man named M'Donald called upon me to see his step-daughter who was dying, and whom he wished to have removed to the Workhouse, in order that she may obtain the rites of burial; the girl was lying on the floor of his hovel in her filthy foetid rags – around her hands were the remains of a tattered garment – and though death was evidently hastening to her relief, she appeared quite conscious; in reply to my inquiries as to what was the matter with her hands, she answered that 'when her mother was dead for two days she was stretched on the same straw with her; that feeling the corpse cold she got up to warm herself at the fire, fell into it from weakness, and almost burned off her hands.' The back of each hand was extensively burnt and charred to a cinder. I said there was no use in removing her; but the step-father took the dying girl in his arms and conveyed her to the hospital, and in an hour after she expired. A few days before, M'Donald, not being able to procure a coffin for his wife, wrapped her in a sheet, placed her on his shoulders and conveyed her by night to a burying ground about a mile from Skibbereen where he left her exposed on a tomb stone until some labourers going to their work the next day discovered her remains and had her interred without a coffin, an act that a few months ago would be regarded as a sacrilegious abomination in this locality.

Were I to describe the scenes of misery which subsequently presented themselves to me in the house of the sick, at which I called for the purpose of making the official return that I promised, your columns would not afford me sufficient space; in all, disease and famine had established their strongholds; poverty in its most hideous form everywhere presented itself; and the squalid appearance of the inmates and the foetor from their clothes would have deterred any person unaccustomed to such scenes from prosecuting his enquiries. Where all are equally wretched it is hard to make a selection, and I shall only give such cases as exhibited some degree of novelty, and presented some peculiar features, amidst the hideous mass of misery that everywhere existed. Knowing that a light is a luxury unknown in the cabins of the Skibbereen poor, Mr Crowley, my zealous assistant at the Dispensary, has provided himself with a candle.

In the first house at which we called, a father, a daughter, and son were in fever, there were no bed clothes of any kind, but the father had made some provision for clothing his child by covering her with a tattered frieze coat, and only retained for himself a miserable nether garment, whilst at the same time a chill like that of death pervaded every limb. After witnessing a great many cases equally distressing, we called at the hovel of a woman named Swiney and enquired 'were any sick', the answer from within was 'we are all sick', and the circumstances of this case were near being so frightful as to warrant a detailed account of it. A woman with five children, her brother and mother occupied the den. 'What will I do now, Sir?' this wretched creature exclaimed as I entered her hovel, 'my messenger has the sickness' and on our lighting the candle she pointed out a child of six years old who had been for days the nursetender of this entire family – a low muttering delirium directed my attention to a recess inside a few sticks which had been raised as props for the walls of the cabin, and against these the remnant of an old dresser had been placed. Within it, I discovered a woman with the bloodshot and fiery eye of confirmed fever – 'we had to put her there, Sir,' said the daughter, 'for in the madness she got up last night and set fire to the straw, and myself and my children were nearly burned and my feet are roasted from putting out the blaze.' This

wretched being is still doomed to the companionship of her maniacal mother and she has not even the assistance of her 'little messenger' to aid her through her trials.

Before concluding my description of a few of the many cases which a single lane afforded, I think I ought to mention one circumstance that came under my notice, and that explains why so little clamour is made about deaths occurring from actual starvation which I know are of common occurrence. I called at the house of a man named John Murphy, where I knew the sickness had lingered on for months and enquired how many were in fever. 'It is not the fever that ails us,' replied the spectre-like woman to whom I addressed myself, 'but the want, and it was that killed my daughter, but I was afraid to say so, for fear that my fine girl would be cut and opened,' alluding to the inquests that had taken place on those who lately died of destitution in Skibbereen.

I now will wind up my diary of the 26th [December, 1846], with the statistics of disease in Bridgetown: a single lane in this Town, there are eighty-five cases of fever, out of a population of about three-hundred persons. Before concluding, I must, however, give my preface to my diary of the 27th. I was told this day by the police that a man had been for days unburied in a house on the Windmill: there, one of the most revolting scenes I ever witnessed was before me. In a nook in this miserable cabin lay upon a wad of straw, a green and ghastly corpse that had been for five days dead, and that was already emitting the intolerable exhalations of putrefaction. At the feet of this decomposing body lay a girl groaning with pain; and by its side was a boy frantic in fever. The wife of the deceased sat upon the filthy floor stupefied from want and affliction. I asked her in the name of Heaven why she did not get her husband buried, her answer was she 'had no coffin.' I enquired why she did not go out and look for one; decency would not allow her, for she was naked; the few rags that she had after the fever had rotted off her, and she hoped that a coffin would be her next dress – the children have been removed to the Fever Hospital, and are now improving. I know Sir, that I run the risk of having my statements disbelieved; but I solemnly declare that no words can exaggerate, and no pen can describe the misery that the people of this neighbourhood are enduring. Their cup of affliction is filled to overflowing, and I fear that they are doomed to drink it to the very dregs. Oh! If all could feel for us as the generous and liberal citizens of Cork have done – to whom I now make my most grateful acknowledgements, what assistance may not have been afforded, and I now call upon those living in more favoured localities, in the name of God of Mercy, to give from their superfluities for the relief of a people whom I believe in my soul are the most afflicted upon earth.

I remain Dear Sir, yours very faithfully, Daniel Donovan.

PS: For the satisfaction of those persons who have sent me remittances, and for my own also, I think it right to state how I mean to dispose of the funds that they have committed to my care. They shall be reserved for some of the extremest cases of distress that I meet within my practice among the poor. The expenditure shall be regularly entered in a book I keep for the purpose, which book shall be every week submitted to the Relief Committee of Skibbereen.

### **No way exaggerating**

In his diary entry in *The Southern Reporter* for 20 March 1847, under the heading 'Distress in West Carbery' Dr Donovan again emphasises that he is in no way exaggerating the level of suffering of the people in the Skibbereen district.

Skibbereen, March 15<sup>th</sup> 1847. Dear Sir, In my last letter I intimated the intention of not renewing my Diary, from the conviction that misery as great, scenes of suffering as revolting, and mortality as frightful are now everywhere to be found as general as in Skibbereen, which for a long time enjoyed the deplorable notoriety of being the most afflicted part of Ireland; but in justice to the suffering poor of this locality I cannot remain silent. I cannot refuse to proclaim the miseries of the working class when I see them reduced from a fine robust peasantry to a horde of hungry shivering wretches with whom the naked and half-starved savages of Terra Del Fuego [sic] would make a favourable contrast. I cannot relinquish my efforts to arouse the benevolence of the wealthy when my fellow creatures are drooping around me like windles in the snow; where I know the living to be poisoned by exhalations from the dead, and where I see the domestic animals converted into beasts of prey that feed upon the bodies of their former owners. And let it not be supposed that our distress is becoming less in proportion to the frightful falling off in the numbers of the people; for want of food is keeping pace with reduction of the population; mortality is not less, for no sooner does death sweep the ranks of the destitute than other victims who are every day falling into this class are found to take their places; and disease is in no way wearing itself out, as there is still abundant food for it, and like the fire of a burning house it seems to gather strength with the destruction that it is creating.

I wish it to be known that in any communications I have made to the public, I am not disposed to exaggerate one tittle, or overpaint in any degree the pictures of woe that I am every day doomed to look on; on the contrary my greatest difficulty is to find words in which to cloak the horrible reality of the scenes that if exhibited in their naked hideousness they would harrow the feelings of a sympathising public.

### **Firsts for Skibbereen**

Dr Donovan goes on to refer to the outstanding work done by the voluntary relief committee, The Committee of Gratuitous Relief, and lists a number of firsts for Skibbereen.

The Skibbereen Committee will pass unscathed through any ordeal, and the members may without flattery claim to themselves the merit of having done some good for the country at large. They were the first who called a public meeting as early as the month of August, at which the perilous position of the country was made known; they were the first who sent a Deputation to England, and aroused the generous sympathies of that benevolent people; they were the first who, in conjunction with some estimable members of society now stricken with pestilence, the consequence of their meritorious exertions for the poor, established a Soup Kitchen, and they (a service never to be forgotten) were the first who instituted inquests on those that died of starvation on the public works. That a searching enquiry will be made into the truth of the charges is anxiously desired, but it is hoped that pending it public sympathy will not be withheld from a people whose suffering may be imagined but cannot be described. I remain, dear Sir, your obedient servant, Daniel Donovan, MD, Physician to the Skibbereen Dispensary and Union Workhouse.

The *Nation* was just one of the many newspapers which published extracts from Dr Donovan's 'Diary' and under the heading 'West Carbery' reproduced the following piece on Saturday, 30 January 1847:

The subjoined appalling details of the condition of West Carbery, county Cork, are extracted from the diary kept by Dr Donovan of Skibbereen dispensary. This gentleman says in *The Southern Reporter* of Tuesday — 'Legions of half-naked starving people parade the streets of this town, (Skibbereen) from morning until night, whose

importuning to us are unceasing, and in every direction nothing but misery the most extreme is to be witnessed. Starvation is stamped upon every countenance; men that were once athletic on their fleshless hands to implore assistance, and the cry of 'I am starving,' 'I am hungry,' is dinned into your ears by hosts of famishing women and dying children. The sufferings of the poor from cold are more poignant, if possible, than from hunger. To what extent they must suffer privations from want of clothing may be judged of from the fact that in this town, with a population considerably under five thousand persons, forty thousand pawn tickets, some representing eight or ten articles, have been issued within three months'.

Dr Donovan's contributions to various medical journals – *Lancet*, the *Dublin Journal of Medical Science* (quarterly) and the (weekly) *Dublin Medical Press* (edited by Sir William Wilde, Oscar's father) – earned him a reputation as an expert and accurate observer of disease, and his contributions on the causes and methods of grappling with these scourges were greatly valued. He won great praise for the originality and the vivid descriptive power his contributions exhibited. He also performed a great many autopsies during the Famine and his observations were so accurate and original as to establish him in the medical world as the chief authority regarding the distinction between death from starvation and from disease.<sup>11</sup>

In the *Dublin Medical Press* in 1848, Dr Donovan wrote a chilling, clinical description of starvation that he saw with his own eyes:

I have made particular inquiry from those who have suffered from starvation relative to the sensations experienced from long fasting; they described the pain of hunger as at first very acute, but said that after twenty-four hours passed without food, that pain subsided, and was succeeded by a feeling of weakness and sinking experienced principally in the epigastric regions, accompanied with insatiable thirst, for cold water particularly, and a distressing feeling of coldness over the entire surface of the body.

In a short time the face and limbs become frightfully emaciated; the eyes acquire a most peculiar stare; the skin exhaled a peculiar and offensive foetor, and was covered with a brownish, filthy-looking coating, almost as indelible as varnish.<sup>12</sup>

These observations by such an authentic and astute witness to the effects of hunger and disease were seen as a powerful and accurate testimony of the awful conditions in the country, and especially in Skibbereen.

In another contribution titled: 'Observations on the Disease to which the Famine of last year gave origin, and on the morbid effects of Deficiency of Food', Dr Donovan wrote:

Whilst starvation and squalor, the causes that engendered this plague, continue to prevail among the people of this country, it is absurd to think that fever will limit its ravages to the poor, or confine its visitation to Ireland. Generated in the damp, dark cabins of the half-starved peasants, it will reach the mansions of the wealthy despite of stone walls, and iron gates, and sturdy janitors, and will spread to our more fortunate neighbours at the other side of the channel, in defiance of vagrancy acts and quarantine regulations; and in vain will the sewerage of London be improved, and the cellars of Liverpool be rendered less pestilential, unless that the physical and social conditions of the Irish people be raised; for so long as their present abject misery continues, so long will the generation of wide-spreading epidemics be perpetuated.<sup>13</sup>

In yet another excerpt from Dr Daniel Donovan's 'Observations' he warned medical personnel to be careful in the manner of interments as he believed that many may be buried alive.



In warm or moist weather, few last winter died in the open air; whilst during the prevalence of frost or snow, dead bodies were every day picked up on the highways and in the streets. The establishment of night asylums in districts likely to be this year visited by famine would (in my opinion) be the most important and least expensive sanatory measure that could be adopted by the benevolent for the preservation of the lives of the poor.

Great attention should likewise at such times be paid to the subject of interments, as from the influence of cold on those suffering from starvation, many may be buried alive whilst in a state of asphyxia. I witnessed one case in the market-place of Skibbereen, where a child was supposed to have died, the dead-cart was sent to convey her body to the burying ground, and she would have been immediately committed to the grave but that I happened to pass by. On close examination, I discovered that she still breathed, and had her removed to the hospital of the workhouse, where heat was applied to the body, restoratives given, and life preserved for seven or eight days. In another case, a boy, still living, was found after a cold night on the public footpath, stiff, and apparently dead: he was thrown into the parish coffin, conveyed to the graveyard and flung into the common pit; the heat of the coffin restored animation, and to the surprise and alarm of the bier carriers, the supposed corpse raised itself from its lifeless companions and walked away: the little fellow afterwards became an inmate of the workhouse, and was under my care for a contusion of the chest, received from his fall into the grave.<sup>14</sup>

### **Tom Guerin**

This is of course very similar to the story of Tom Guerin who gained great notoriety in the Skibbereen area as the ‘boy who came back from the grave.’

Tom Guerin was just two or three years of age when, in the winter of 1848, his mother believed he had died. She placed him on the dead-cart bringing bodies to Abbeystrowry Cemetery. In the cemetery, Tom was placed in the infamous famine pits with the other bodies for that day. The grave attendants were straightening the line of bodies to cover them with a light covering of straw or earth when they struck Tom across the knees with a shovel. Tom let out a little whimper and he was taken from the grave. He was revived and lived on in the Skibbereen area until 1910. *The Skibbereen Eagle* newspaper carried an obituary to Tom Guerin in its issue of 10 August 1910.

By a peculiar coincidence, Tom was laid to rest in the same graveyard in which is erected a monument to the famine victims, the same graveyard in which he himself was buried alive in the dark days of ‘Black 48,’ and from which he was marvellously rescued after having his legs broken by the shovels of the burial squad who left him to his fate.<sup>15</sup>

Dr Donovan performed many autopsies during the Famine and was called on to give evidence at a number of inquests held in the Courthouse in Skibbereen.

*The Cork Examiner* of 16 October 1846 reported, under the heading ‘Death from Starvation’, on the evidence taken at an inquest on the body of a labourer named Jeremiah Hegarty.

Daniel Donovan, Esq, MD, sworn: Stated that he had examined that day the body of the deceased which the Police had brought into town yesterday; saw no mark of violence nor of disease on it; the stomach and the upper part of the intestines were totally devoid of food ... His opinion as to the cause of death is, want of sufficient nourishment was the remote, and exposure to cold, the direct cause of death.<sup>16</sup>

A report of another inquest held at Skibbereen Courthouse appeared in *The Cork Examiner* of Friday, 6 November 1846. Dr Donovan carried out a post-mortem on the body of Denis M'Kennedy, a labourer for one of the public works.

Dr Donovan swore the body was the most attenuated he ever saw: there was no appearance of fat either on the surface of the body or within the abdomen: there was scarcely a vestige of omentum, so complete was the absorption of the adipose matter, and from the appearance of the body, from the flaccid, empty, and blanched condition of the intestines, and the fact of having a small quantity of cabbage in the bowels, he was clearly of the opinion that he died of starvation.<sup>17</sup>

At the inquest the jury, which included Dr Donovan, gave the verdict that Denis M'Kennedy had 'died of starvation owing to the gross negligence of the Board of Works.'<sup>18</sup>

### **Witness accounts**

Many people who came to Skibbereen to see for themselves the true extent of the suffering in the area met with Dr Donovan and quoted him as a reliable and authentic source in their published witness accounts.

One such visitor was James Mahony, an illustrator, who was commissioned by *The Illustrated London News* to visit the Skibbereen district so that it could place before its readers the 'graphic results' of his journey with 'unexaggerated fidelity.'

Mahony met with Dr Donovan and in his account insisted that the doctor's reports were not 'highly coloured' simply because 'neither pen nor pencil could ever portray the misery and horror, at this moment, to be witnessed in Skibbereen.' The artist accompanied Dr Donovan on a visit to Bridgetown, which he described as an 'abode of death'.

Mahony and Dr Donovan proceeded to the old Chapel Yard which was a burial ground. A small house or hut had been built there for a watchman to protect the remains of the dead against exhumation for research. Mahony includes in his account this report from Dr Donovan:

On my return home, I remembered that I had yet a visit to pay, having in the morning received a ticket to see six members of one family named Barrett. They had struggled to the burying-ground, and literally entombed themselves in a small watch-house that was built for the shelter of those who engaged in guarding against exhumations by the doctors when more respect was paid to the dead than is at present the case. The shed is exactly seven feet long by about six in breadth. By the side of the western wall is a long newly made grave; by either gable are two of shorter dimensions, which have been recently tenanted, and near the hole that serves as a doorway is the last resting-place of two other children. In fact, the hut is surrounded by a rampart of human bones, which have accumulated to such a height that the threshold, which was originally on a level with the ground, is now two feet beneath it. In this horrible den, in the midst of a mass of human putrefaction, six individuals, males and females, labouring under the most malignant fever, were huddled together as closely as were the dead in the graves around.<sup>19</sup>

As the ravages of the Famine continued from 1846 into 1847, '48 and '49, Skibbereen not only became synonymous with the crisis because of the reports of suffering and death in the district, but the name of Skibbereen became the unit of measurement for the devastating effects of the Famine and was used as a reference when describing the awful conditions in other parts of the country.

Although none of the poor law unions for which statistics on farm sizes were compiled in 1847 consisted entirely of good quality lowland, Ballinrobe had a larger share than any other union in Mayo. During the Famine, the union was ravaged by death and evictions, especially in 1848, compelling *The Telegraph or Connaught Ranger* to compare its fate to that of Skibbereen in County Cork.<sup>20</sup>

As the *Times* was to put it with characteristic pungency, if electoral-division rating were conceded, it would allow estate-clearing landlords to create a multitude of 'traps for human vermin', a Skibbereen in every poor-law union, or '130 vast almshouses maintained from the public exchequer'.<sup>21</sup>

In *The Great Irish Famine: Ireland's Agony 1845-1852*, Ciarán Ó Murchadha, referring to the early months of 1847 says:

Counties which had so far been relatively unscathed by distress were badly stricken in these months. Of County Down, in February, *The Banner of Ulster* declared that it 'would be impossible to find more distressing cases, short of the horrors of Skibbereen ... than those narrated by our reporter from the eastern divisions of Down'.<sup>22</sup>

There's no doubt that through the pen and appeals made by Dr Donovan the Skibbereen area received a substantial and perhaps inordinate amount of attention from other contemporary writers and journalists. An interesting issue which arises of course is whether this media attention and publicity contributed to relief measures in Skibbereen because of its notoriety, and, in contradistinction, whether other areas not so much in the public eye were left to rely more on their own very limited resources.

If the comments of James Daly, Editor of the *Connaught Telegraph*, are anything to go by, then it seems that Skibbereen did indeed attract relief at the expense of other areas, and that Dr Donovan's exertions on behalf of this area were well known in other parts of the country. Writing on a very contentious Land League issue concerning the Ballinasloe Tenant Defence Association in the late 1870s, Daly welcomed the arrival of representatives from the Dublin papers:

It is the first time they ever discovered the unfortunate County Mayo on the map of Ireland. They were never done poking at the famine pits of Skibbereen because there was a smart local doctor who wrote them up ... two hundred thousand people died of hunger in Mayo, after living on nettles and asses flesh, and the world never said as much as 'God be merciful to them'.<sup>23</sup>

While Daly greatly exaggerated the incidence of famine mortality in Mayo, he clearly illustrates the effect Dr Donovan's writings had in bringing to national and international attention the situation in Skibbereen.

Not satisfied with his exertions at home, Dr Donovan also raised large collections elsewhere, and by his personal intervention secured employment for many in London.

In October 1847, a local miller, who did an amount of work to help relieve the distress of Famine victims, announced that he had a ship going empty to Newport in Wales for corn on which he would give 100 free passages. Dr Donovan soon had eighty applicants. They had no food or clothes for the voyage but the doctor obtained two shillings for each of them from the relief committee for 'sea-stock'.

However, the scheme didn't receive universal approval as, on landing, they were accused of bringing 'pestilence on their backs and hunger in their stomachs.' Dr Donovan was accused of 'shovelling paupers' into England. A woman and her son were brought before a London magistrate for begging.

She said she had come from Skibbereen and that Dr Donovan had paid her passage; the indignant magistrate wished he could punish the doctor.<sup>24</sup>

Dr Donovan was also vociferous in his defence of tenant rights and at a Tenant Right meeting in Skibbereen on 24 November 1847 he was applauded when he made this appeal: 'Give the people employment at home and they would exhibit the same amount of industry as they did on the other side of the Atlantic and then no more would be raised such mounds of dead as there has been at Grosse Ile or the Pottersfield at New York.'<sup>25</sup>

### **Temperance movement**

Dr Donovan was a prominent member of the Temperance movement in Skibbereen where the first Total Abstinence Society in Europe was founded in 1817. A great advocate of temperance, he often used his great powers of oratory to make the Temperance Hall ring with his impressive and sonorous voice and his classical selection of language.

On Friday 15 January 1841, the Skibbereen society held their Anniversary Festival at their 'new and superb Temperance Hall just completed.' Dr Donovan, in proposing a toast to 'Old Ireland', said he spoke 'not for the old degraded Ireland, but for a new, moral and regenerated Ireland, for the country in which the greatest moral reformation of modern times had been effected.'<sup>26</sup>

Dr Daniel Donovan MD died at his residence at North Street, Skibbereen, on 30 September 1877, aged 69 years. His obituary in the *Skibbereen and Cork County Eagle* of 6 October 1877, stated:

When we consider what he must have endured in visiting the sick, in this then extensive Union on those cold and dreary nights – entering sooty cabins, dens of pestilence, the inhabitants of which could not procure a candle, and, by the light of a splinter of bogwood, examining and prescribing for the destitute creatures stricken down by fever and pestilence – we, after a lapse of some years, are astounded how human nature was capable of such endurance. But his elastic frame and constitution of steel were equal to the occasion – strengthened by his indomitable will and a desire to ameliorate the condition of his fellow creatures in their last sad extremities.

He was described as 'a philosopher, a philanthropist, a scholar, an orator, and a polished gentleman ... and nothing that could elevate his fellow creatures in a moral or social position were foreign to him.'

The *Dublin Medical Press* said of him:

It was owing to his heroic and great exertions during the terrible crisis of 1847 that his name has become a household word for pure philanthropy and most earnest and unselfish devotion to the poor when famine and pestilence swept over Ireland. During the terrible years of 1847 and 1848, Dr Donovan was in the prime of mental and physical vigour.

All the resources of his intellect, all the energies of his mind were devoted with the most self-sacrificing zeal and courage, grappling with disease in its most dangerous type, and fighting bravely in the glorious cause of suffering humanity. At this period, the letters which emanated from his facile and graceful pen, written to the *Cork Daily Reporter* and London papers, exposed in their true colours before the world, and in powerful and explicit language, all the harrowing details, the melancholy suffering and privations the poor people in the south of Ireland, especially about Skibbereen, were undergoing at the time.

## One of the heroes

In an obituary, *The Freeman's Journal* of 2 October 1877 said of Dr Donovan:

There has just passed away at his residence, Skibbereen, county Cork, Dr Daniel Donovan, one of the heroes of the most melancholy chapter of our melancholy history – the great Irish Famine. The achievements of Dr Donovan during the famine will be found recorded in all the annals of the time. His exertions day and night in succouring the poor and afflicted were almost superhuman. He was the soul, the centre, and the organiser of all the plans of relief by which aid was brought to the agonised people. In letters to the leading London papers he laid bare the awful truth, and thus obtained thousands of pounds for the relief of the poor.

We know of no other case in which a man who never left a small provincial town is regarded in the world of medical science as a great original authority. Though Dr Donovan survived the Famine thirty years, he never recovered his superhuman labours and his closing days were those of a confirmed invalid. He leaves a widow and large family to lament his loss. In other lands the services of such a man would have been amply recognised by the State. No such recognition was, we believe, ever made of the labours and researches of Dr Donovan.

At the Skibbereen Heritage Centre the name of Dr Donovan is perpetuated through the inclusion of a special panel dedicated to his memory in its Great Famine Commemoration Exhibition. Also, the Skibbereen Famine Commemoration Committee erected a plaque to the memory of Dr Donovan at the entrance to Abbeystrowry Cemetery, unveiled on 4 June 2002 by the late Dr John O'Keeffe MD: 'In memory of his care and compassion to the people of Skibbereen during The Famine years. *Ar dheis De go raibh a anam uasal.*'

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