

"We entered a cabin. Stretched out in one dark corner, scarcely visible, from the smoke and rags that covered them, were three children huddled together, lying there because they were too weak to rise, pale and ghastly, their little limbs perfectly emaciated, eyes sunk, voice gone, and evidently in the last stage of actual starvation. Crouched over the turf embers was another form, wild and all but naked, scarcely human in appearance. It stirred not, nor noticed us. On some straw, sodden upon the ground, moaning piteously, was a shrivelled old woman, imploring us to give her something, - baring her limbs to show how the skin hung loose from the bones, as soon as she attracted our attention. Above her on something like a ledge, was a young woman, with sunken cheeks, - a mother I have no doubt, - who scarcely raised her eyes in answer to our enquiries, but pressed her hand upon her forehead, with a look of unutterable anguish and despair. Many cases were widows, whose husbands had recently been taken off by the fever, and thus their only pittance, obtained from the public works, entirely cut off.

We entered upwards of fifty of these tenements. The scene was one and invariable, differing in little but the number of sufferers, or the groups, occupying the several corners within. The whole number was often not to be distinguished, until - the eye having adapted itself to the darkness - they were pointed out, or were heard, or some filthy bundle of rags and straw was perceived to move. Many were the remnants of families crowded together in one cabin; orphaned little relatives taken in by the equally destitute, and even strangers, for these people are kind to one another to the end. In one cabin was a sister, just dying, lying by the side of her little brother, just dead. They did but rarely complain. When enquired of, what was the matter, the answer was alike in all - "Tha shein ukrosh", - indeed the hunger. We truly learned the meaning of that sad word "ukrosh".

The Temporary Relief of the Destitute Persons (Ireland) Act, the so called 'Soup Kitchen Act' was enacted in January 1847 and continued the policy of making Ireland pay for its own relief. This scheme was operated by the Boards of Guardians which were already over burdened. Many Boards resigned in protest.

Soup thus became the main item of diet for the poor but there were not enough soup kitchens and where they existed the soup was virtually useless as nourishment. In Swinford Union by the Spring of 1847 84% of the entire population depended on the Soup Kitchens for their food. In the nearby parish of Kilmovee 5,928 people receive soup in one day. This figure was 84 persons greater than the Census figure of 1841 for the same parish. The involvement of evangelical New Reformer Protestant clergymen with the operation of soup kitchens caused many Catholics to distrust the system. People who changed their religious denomination in order to secure food and employment in evangelical missions came to be known as 'souters'. 'Souperism' left an indelible mark on the Irish folk memory.

As malnutrition weakened the population 'famine fever' killed the weaker sections of the population. There were five categories of fever: Typhus (Black Fever or Spotted Fever) which was the main killer, Relapsing Fever (Yellow Fever) the second most common form of death, Dysentery, Hunger Oedema (Famine Dropsy) and scurvy (Black Leg). Those suffering from disease were left to die in their homesteads while the healthier members of the family headed for the local workhouse or began the long trek eastwards in search of a passage to