

The Kirkintilloch Tragedy, 1937



The bothy where the migrant workers died.

Seventy-five years ago this month [Sept 2012] one of the biggest peace-time tragedies befell the Irish state when ten young migrant workers from Achill Island who were working on the potato harvest in Scotland died in a fire in their accommodation in the town of Kirkintilloch just outside of Glasgow. By Barry Sheppard.

On Wednesday 15 September 1937, at the height of the harvest season, a party of 26 Irish migrant workers – twelve males and fourteen females, many of whom were brothers and sisters – arrived in the town of Kirkintilloch from a farm in Edinburgh where they had been working over the previous three months. They were taken to town in two vehicles owned by the potato merchants they were about to begin work for. This was their last port of call before the journey back to Achill Island with the reward of their previous months toil. By the time they arrived in Kirkintilloch there was precious little time to rest, as work would begin early the next day on the land owned by their employers; potato merchants Messrs W & A Graham of Hunter Street, Glasgow.

In the 1930s the town of Kirkintilloch was a popular location for seasonal workers, and particularly those from the Achill area. It had been the destination of many of the Achill workers for a number of years, although its connection with Ireland was a longer one. The *Irish Press* noted in 1937 that of the 15,000 people who lived in the town in the late 1930s one fourth were of Irish descent. Although the town was surrounded by farmland, its history was closely linked to the linen industry and shipbuilding. Irish workers had also found employment in the construction of the local railway system and in the surrounding coal mines.

Ten migrant workers from Achill died when the bothy or shed they were sleeping in caught fire

Situated in East High Street on the outskirts of the town, the accommodation offered to the workers was basic to say the least and consisted of a shed, (or bothy as it was known among those engaged in this type of work) and an old four-roomed cottage adjoining the shed. The young men of the group were assigned to the bothy while the young females who made up the rest of the group were provided with the slightly more comfortable cottage.

The last room in the cottage was reserved for the foreman of the party, Mr. Patrick Duggan, and his young twelve-year-old son. Luxuries were rarely part of the deal for migrant farm workers. The bothy's entrance was a sliding door fastened by a basic slip-bolt, indicating that what was inside was of limited value. The windows were covered on the outside with wire netting and opened inwards. Inverted potato boxes covered with straw and old blankets served for beds. The accommodation provided for Irish potato workers showed how little thought for those who came to work on the harvest was given.

In the early hours of September 16, 1937, only a matter of hours after the party had arrived, tragedy struck. The son of the foreman, Tom Duggan, had trouble sleeping and discovered a blaze in the bothy around 1 o'clock. Tom raised the alarm and in the ensuing panic other members of the group attempted in vain to breach the entrance. It wasn't until one of the potato merchants who had been working on the harvest, John Mackay and others arrived at the scene that the door to the bothy could be opened.

By this time however, the building was engulfed in smoke and flames and no sound besides the crackling of flames could be heard from within. It was evident that a serious incident had occurred. The fire had claimed the lives of the ten young men and boys between the ages of 13 and 23 who had been asleep in the building, their bodies were found huddling together beside a wall opposite the door. It was reported that the local fire brigade had been hampered in their efforts to identify who had been in the building because their companions, in their distress only spoke in Irish.

As news of the previous night's events unfolded locals in the immediate area were shocked that such a tragedy had occurred in their midst. However, the shock which had engulfed the village was little compared with the news when it reached the village of Achill Sound. Large crowds gathered around the Garda station and the local post office anxiously awaiting any news which was making its way from Scotland. The *Connaught Telegraph* reported the, 'weeping of mothers torn with grief as the dreadful tidings passed quickly from lip to lip'.

Although this event shocked many, both in Scotland and Ireland it may not have been completely unexpected.

Context – Irish migration to Scotland



Irish migrant farm workers in Scotland

Emigration has been one of the constants in modern Irish history and migration between the neighbouring islands of Ireland and Britain has been of long duration and at times contentious. Numerous economic crises throughout the centuries have resulted in a flow of Irishmen and Irish women around the world. But despite bouts of political strife between the two countries, Britain has been the destination for many Irish people.

In the early years of the nineteenth century the passage between the two islands was made more accessible to many with the establishment of the first regular passenger steamships between Ireland and Britain in 1815. The steady flow of Irish emigrants to Britain and particularly Scotland, became a flood as a result of the Famine of the 1840s. Many of the poorer Irish who could not afford the transatlantic passage to America went instead to the west of Scotland and the industrial towns and cities there to forge some sort of livelihood, which was almost impossible to do at home.

Over 4,000 migrants left Mayo annually for seasonal work in Scotland

It was also at the beginning of the 1840s that the numbers of migratory workers were first collected in the census. In the year 1841, 57,651 migrant workers were counted at Ireland's three main ports of departure, Dublin, Drogheda and Derry (49,911 male and 7,740 female).

Migration between Ireland and Britain continued throughout the rest of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. An Irish Department of Foreign Affairs report shows the bleak existence of those people who were forced to migrate to seek employment. Migrant workers who travelled to parts of northern England and Scotland usually tended to find work with Scottish potato merchants during the harvest months from June until late October or November.

In 1915 the county of Mayo alone accounted for 4,274 migrant workers out of the 5,258 total for the Connacht region – indicating just how badly people of that county were affected by continued unemployment. The seasonal workers who toiled in the potato fields of Britain would live a near-nomadic existence, travelling throughout Scotland through Ayrshire, Wigtownshire, Fife, Perthshire, Angus and the Lothians, wherever there was work to be had.

Irish migrants to Scotland have been described as the 'Cinderellas' of the Irish diaspora, occupying the bottom of the league in terms of how far or how much impact they have had on public life. And so it was in Scottish society, Irish workers, especially temporary workers were the bottom of the league. They had even less rights than the Scottish workers who occupied the bottom rungs of the workforce. The reasons have been described as a combination of many things, clash of cultures, language, religious bigotry and Vatican geopolitics. As we have seen, so great was the need for employment that there were more than enough desperate workers willing to step in and accept such poor conditions.

Irish seasonal workers had even less rights than the Scottish workers and occupied the bottom rungs of the workforce

The granting of independence to the twenty-six counties which made up the Irish Free State made little difference to the flow of people leaving the country to find meaningful employment. The depression, not to mention the effects of the Anglo-Irish Economic War in the 1930s, had devastating consequences for a country which was heavily reliant on agriculture. Many were leaving the new state behind for good while many others would

travel back and forth to various locations in Britain where seasonal, cheap employment was offered.

The life of a migrant potato worker had many drawbacks. They had few rights and were in many cases the victims of prejudice on economic and religious grounds resulting in a degree of isolation from the local population. The sense of isolation the Achill workers at Kirkintilloch must have felt was captured by a reporter from the *Irish Independent* who discovered that while everyone was most sympathetic, the majority were 'rather startled at the discovery that such conditions existed right in their midst'. Nevertheless, the greatest danger posed to the safety of workers was the unsafe living conditions in the accommodation provided by many employers.

On a number of occasions tragedy had befallen those who worked on Scotland's potato harvests. On July 8, 1887 three Irish women and four Irishmen lost their lives in a fire in a bothy at Ardnahoe Farm in Bute County. Some years later another tragedy occurred at a farm near Dundonald in Ayrshire in September 1924 when nine potato workers lost their lives.

Although living conditions were in a lot of cases hazardous the journey to and from Britain had also proved to be highly dangerous. In 1894 a ship carrying 36 people bound for the potato fields of Britain sank in Clew Bay and only two years prior to the Kirkintilloch disaster nineteen people lost their lives when the boat on which they were travelling sank on the way home to Arranmore from Britain. The nineteen workers who lost their lives in that tragic accident had also stayed in the same bothy in Kirkintilloch on their last working trip to Scotland.

Nevertheless the Kirkintilloch Tragedy, in which 10 Irish migrants were killed, caused a particularly sharp outpouring of grief.

Burying the dead

The bodies of the ten young workers were brought on five hearses to St. Ninian's Church from the local police station. The *Irish Press* reported 'painful scenes' as Kirkintilloch's 3,000 strong Catholic population were joined by ten priests of Irish and Scots-Irish descent as well as other relatives and Gaeltacht inhabitants who had travelled north from England to accompany the funeral procession. Dignitaries from both the British and Irish Free State Governments were present in paying their respects. Mr. P.J. Rutledge, the British Minister for Justice, Mr. J.W. Dulanty, the Irish Free State High Commissioner in London and Mr. Sean Keavy, the Irish Free State representative in Glasgow.



Achill sound station

Mr. Keavy and his wife would later be singled out for special praise in a letter from the Irish High Commissioner to the Department of External Affairs in Dublin. It was stated that Mr. Keavy 'distinguished himself throughout', from the time of the earliest report of the fire until the remains were brought to Dublin. While Mrs. Keavy looked after and clothed three of the girls until they were fit to return to Ireland.

It was reported that among scenes of extreme distress local men from the Kirkintilloch area shouldered the ten coffins into the church. None of the coffins, besides that of John McLoughlin, had names on them as the rest of the bodies could not be recognised. The names of the dead were: Thomas Cattigan, Patrick Kilbane, Thomas Kilbane, John McLoughlin, Michael McLoughlin, John Mangan, Thomas Mangan, Michael Mangan, Owen Kilbane and Patrick McNeela. A short ceremony for the deceased and the relatives was conducted by the clergy as the bodies were to lie in the church before beginning the long journey back to the west of Ireland.

Survivors of the fire, 'were very reluctant to return to Ireland for reasons partly of the burden of their sorrow and partly because of money shortage'

A number of the survivors were reluctant to accompany the cortege back to Achill. The High Commissioner reported 'they were very reluctant to return to Ireland for reasons partly of the burden of their sorrow and partly because of money shortage'. Their reasons for wanting to remain in the country while the bodies of their kin were brought back home highlights the dire financial situation the migrant workers were in. One of the victims, Thomas Cattigan, aged just 19 years of age had not been back at Achill for almost two years as he had been on the road constantly earning money for his family back home.

Back on Achill Island, the local community were in preparation for receiving their dead. Arrangements had been made for the conveyance of the bodies from Dublin where they would be arriving from Glasgow. Due to intensive coverage of the disaster in the Irish press a large crowd gathered in Dublin to see the arrival of the deceased and their relatives. The *Irish Independent* reported on 'heart rendering scenes' as the *SS Lairdsburn* made its way up the Liffey with its flags at half-mast watched intently by crowds of people which lined the quays, among them Vice-President of the Executive Council Mr. S.T. O'Kelly, Deputy Lord Mayor of Dublin P. S. Doyle and other members of the cabinet.

The large funeral procession made its way to the railway station where a special train was waiting to take the bodies on the final stretch of the journey. It was noted that the country had been moved to its 'innermost heart by the horror of the disaster' and this was evident by the scenes that marked the passage of the train throughout its journey.

At bridges, level-crossings and stations people had gathered to express their sorrow and sympathy. The expressions of sympathy seemed to be even more heart-felt by the time the train reached Mayo, with crowds in Castlebar and Westport train stations kneeling en masse on the platforms. By the time it reached its final destination it was met by '3,000 rained-soaked Gaels', approximately half the island's population.

So strong was the public feeling of sympathy around the events at Kirkintilloch that a number of funds were set up for the victims and their relatives. The evening after the fire on Thursday September 16 a meeting of the Kirkintilloch Burgh Housing Committee agreed to open a public subscription fund for the survivors. Several other funds were opened by the

Irish Independent, the *Irish Times*, the *Irish Press* and the *Mayo News*. The Gaelic League in London also raised funds among the Irish community in England's capital.

In Scotland the Directors of Celtic Football Club contributed to a fund and in a separate initiative a large sum of money was raised at a collection at Celtic Park by the members of the Irish diaspora who made up a large number of the club supporters. The Scottish newspaper the *Daily Record* also contributed some funds and by September 24, 1937 almost £664 had been collected, this number was to rise substantially over the weeks and months which followed. Contributions came from people of all ages, it was reported that an elderly lady called at the Town Clerk's office in Kirkintilloch and left an envelope with four £5 notes. In another incident of generosity children in Ardagh National School, Ballina Co. Mayo collected £1 2s 6d for the fund.

Press reaction: 'insult to every person of Irish blood'

While the response from Irish newspapers and some in Britain had been wholly sympathetic to the lives which had been lost, some reporting in the British press on the burial caused some consternation. The *Irish Press* claimed that its attention had been drawn by several sources to reports in the British Press regarding the funeral and the state of the homes on Achill which were 'so false and misleading' that they gave the deepest offence. It went on to state that what purported to be a description of funerals in Achill was 'not merely false and wounding, but was an actual insult to every person of Irish blood'.

Some British papers had painted the picture of a backward society where people lived in such deprivation that the ten dead were transported on horse-drawn carts and where the parents and near relatives of the deceased would sit on top of the coffins until the, 'hastily dug', graves were ready and that, 'absurd pagan customs', survived among the people of Achill. It was argued that this kind of baseless sensationalist reporting would compound the already palpable grief which the relatives and friends of the deceased were feeling.

Inquest and government reaction

Once the morose task of burying the ten young people had taken place, attention turned to the inquest as to how such a catastrophe could have unfolded. The High Commissioner Mr. J.W. Dulanty conducted his own report into the tragedy and commented:

"When I was in Glasgow immediately after the deaths of the ten young men the general impression was that the employers *W&A Graham* would come in for serious censure for the lack of proper accommodation for the Achill harvesters".

The view that the dire standard of accommodation was a major factor in the tragedy was one shared by members of the Irish community in Scotland. One second-generation Irishman said that conditions which Irish people were supposed to live and work in had not improved since his father came to the country years earlier. He said that his father and his companions were housed 'under conditions comparable only with those enjoyed by the other beasts of burden on the farms'. While another stated that 'these conditions are simply deplorable. (Workers) are housed in any old building or bothy, where the Scottish farmer would not put his cattle'.

It was felt that the employer, Mr. Graham would attempt to deflect away from his own responsibilities by suggesting that the young men had been drunk at the time of the fire. As Kirkintilloch was a 'dry' town since 1920 when the people under the local 'Veto Act', voted that drink should not be sold anywhere in town, this would have painted the victims in an unfavourable light in the eyes of the jury. It was stressed that, 'it was naturally very important to rebut this suggestion, which from all accounts could not be supported by even the most slender proof.

The inquest found that men died of carbon monoxide poisoning caused by overloading with coal of the stove or hot plate in the bothy where the men slept.

The inquest took place on October 18, 1937 under the Fatal Accidents Inquiry (Scotland) Act. The proceedings began at 10 O'clock in the morning and continued until after 7 that evening when a jury of five men and two women retired to consider their verdict. Approximately two hours later a verdict was reached that the men died of carbon monoxide poisoning caused by overloading with coal of the stove or hot plate in the bothy where the men slept. It also recommended that all accommodation for seasonal workers should be inspected and passed as safe and proper by the appropriate local authorities.

While this verdict was cold comfort the relatives of the deceased, it did highlight the need for further reform in the laws protecting seasonal migrants in Scotland. In the British Houses of Commons on November 3, 1937 the Secretary for State for Scotland reiterated the Inquiry's recommendations and stated that in the wake of the disaster he was immediately issuing a circular to all local authorities through the department of health pressing them to review their health and safety procedures by making new byelaws or revising existing byelaws in their areas.

This became known as the 1937 Housing (Agricultural Population) Scotland Act. It built upon previous legislation such as Section 45 of the Housing, Town Planning (Scotland) Act 1919, where local authorities were given power to make and adopt byelaws which regulated all aspects of the accommodation given to seasonal workers, including the migratory potato workers. Other provisions contained within the 1937 act were the requirement for separate entrances for sleeping accommodation and living areas, separate bed and bedding for each worker, adequate heating and the premises to be painted and cleansed at regular intervals. However, it is unlikely that this made a big difference to the lot of seasonal workers as the new laws were enforced to various degrees depending on the local authority.

Fianna Fáil, the Irish governing party of the day, also sought a solution to the ongoing problem of seasonal migration and the dangers faced by migratory workers. Sean Lemass was chosen to head an Inter-Departmental Committee on Seasonal Migration to Great Britain. This was not the first time that a group from Ireland had attempted to address the dire conditions which Irish workers were exposed to in Britain. In 1920 The Gresham Committee, composed of several Bishops and a parish priest from Achill, was set up to address these issues. They had two main aims, to 'bring about by every legitimate means the immediate, the complete, and the final destruction of the insanitary, unspeakable bothy', and, 'to secure for the workers such housing accommodation as the law of the land and the dignity and efficiency of human labour demand'.

However well-meaning this committee may have been, its powers as a church-led group were limited and higher hopes were placed on a committee of government officials. The Lemass-

led committee met on seventeen separate occasions producing a report, which appeared around a year after the tragedy. Part one of the report highlighted the plight facing people on the Western seaboard and the conditions they survived in at home. It then attempted to deal with what the Irish authorities could or couldn't do in the areas where Irish people were flocking to work. The first two conclusions would have made for depressing reading for anyone hoping that their government could act swiftly and decisively:

1. Short of imposing restrictions on the liberty of migrants of so serious a character that, in the opinion of the Committee, they should not be attempted, the Committee are unable to suggest any effective means by which the Government of this country could bring about any improvement in the conditions under which migrants are recruited.
2. The improvement of the conditions under which migratory workers are employed lies...entirely in the hands of the workers themselves. It is not a matter in connection with which any department of the Irish Government could appropriately or effectively take action.

A memo in the from J.P. Walshe in the Department of Foreign Affairs to the Secretary of the Department of Industry and Commerce, R.C. Ferguson, revealed serious misgivings on the production of the report, in particular part one:

“my first reaction on glancing through it is that part one should not be published...those who wish to throw stones at us on the other side are already amply provided with ammunition...you know what nasty things have been said by the British press from time to time about these poor people, and I am very much afraid that the publication of part one of the report would provoke new outbursts. The quieter we keep about this unfortunate aspect of our relations with the neighbouring island the better”.

It would appear that far from wanting to protect individual workers from verbal attack in Scotland, any reservations about the publication of the report may have been about saving the Government public embarrassment in British eyes over the economic state of parts of independent Ireland.

Part two of the report suggested a few incentives to keep the people of the west working at home. Among the proposals put forth in the conclusion of this part of the report was regeneration of the congested districts of the west wherever possible, the establishment of a power generating station reliant on peat and a host of ‘minor employment schemes’. Several conclusions were dedicated to the division of untenanted land in large blocks (such as those which had taken place in the areas around Athboy Co. Meath over the previous number of years). However, the committee was strongly insistent that in, ‘any reorganisation that takes place the position of the Irish language should be safeguarded’.

In truth the report was without teeth and some have questioned why it was commissioned at all. Whatever recommendations were made for industrial development of the Achill area in particular were surely killed off before the report even began. On September 30, a mere two weeks after the disaster the Government, in an obscenely short-sighted move, closed the Achill rail line for both goods and passengers and shortly afterwards removed the tracks. No industry could flourish without an effective means to connect it to the country at large.

These were the same tracks which had only a short time before shouldered the burden of the ten dead sons of the island on the final part of the journey home. The rail line had also,

somewhat ironically, carried as part of its first cargo the victims of the drowning in Clew Bay in 1894.

Reactions in Ireland: ‘Our much-vaunted freedom’.

Professor J.B. Whelehan criticised the government in their ‘half-hearted’ measures in finding a meaningful solution to the problem migrant workers faced.

“Now that we are masters of our own land, are spectacles like those of Arranmore and Achill to be symptomatic of the use of our much-vaunted freedom? What matters political freedom to people who know not whence the next meal will come? What matters political freedom if our finest lads must still slave for the foreigner, and return, caskets of ashes”?

‘What matters political freedom to people who know not whence the next meal will come?’

The sadness members of the Achill community felt soon made way for frustration directed at an Irish government which seemed powerless to prevent tragedy befalling its people in neighbouring countries. The League for Social Justice released a pamphlet on October 6, 1937 calling for land and labour reform and the end to emigration. In the pamphlet they made a direct appeal to the Irish people ‘not to allow the conditions which produced these recurring tragedies to be forgotten again until some new horror occurs to shock the public mind’.

This echoed the feeling of the people of Achill who in the weeks after the tragedy formed an Anti-Emigration and Industrial Development Committee, presided over by a local clergyman, Rev. T McEllin, C.C. and attended by some from the local business community. Suggestions were made for the establishment of many local enterprises such as a shirt factory and other cottage industries, the extension of the woollen industry, the provision of fishing vessels, the establishment of industrial alcohol factories and for the development of land reclamation and forestry. The two hundred people who gathered for this landmark meeting were a lot more realistic than their elected representatives in that they recognised that the successful regeneration of Achill depended on the now closed rail-line.

Migration to Britain continued nevertheless after the disaster which shook many in both nations. Some things did change, many Achill workers decided that steps had to be taken to improve their lot. Some of the potato workers organised themselves into a union, the Achill Migratory Workers Union, on January 2, 1938. While the organisation of migratory workers was mooted in the Irish Inter-Departmental Committee report, it may be wrong to suggest that this influenced the workers.

A mere ten days after the Kirkintilloch fire the general secretary of the Scottish Farm Servants Association, Joseph Duncan, stated the necessity for Irish workers to organise themselves. In an agreement of sorts the Scottish Farm Servants Association assumed a number of functions in helping to organise the Achill workers, they helped collect and utilise union contributions and bargained on behalf of the Achill workers with the potato merchants for better pay and conditions. The Union had various small victories but overall were ineffective.

There were several reasons why the events of September 16, 1937 in Kirkintilloch made such an impression on the public at large, both in Ireland and Britain. The youthfulness of the victims, the number of them who were siblings and that a number of the young female survivors were also related shocked the public at large. And the fact that it came so close after the Arranmore disaster made a significant impact on the public psyche. It shone a spotlight onto an area which many would prefer to have remained hidden. Young people, forced to move to another country in order to provide for their elders at home.

This was not the preferred image of a free and independent state. The report which followed was didn't address the issues satisfactorily. Legislation which was brought into law in Britain after the tragedy was hard to enforce, some progress was made in the accommodation of migrant workers but this varied from place to place. However, with the onset of World War II in 1939 domestic matters such as these became less important and took a backseat for a considerable time to come.

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