

# THE NIGHT OF THE BIG WIND

Frank Watters

THERE have been many great storms in Ireland down through the years and hardly a year goes by without a severe gale or two, but the title 'The Big Wind' is reserved exclusively for the great storm which struck the country on the night of Sunday, January 6th and the early hours of Monday, January 7th, 1839. Opinion seems to be that, when everything is taken into account, this was the most extreme storm to hit the island of Ireland in the last 500 years at least. The amount of damage done was unprecedented with practically no corner of the country left unscathed and virtually every house or farm being damaged to some extent, the northern half of the country bearing the brunt of the storm.

The impression which this storm made on the minds of the people was such that it became a kind of 'land mark' in time from which other events were dated. People would say that an event was 'before the Big Wind' or 'after the Big Wind'. The late Jimmy Trainor told me that when he was a boy, the 'Big Wind' was mentioned in conversation almost daily, with people using the event in much the same way as people in this century might refer to events as 'before' or 'after the war'. Curiously he added that he never heard anyone mentioning the Great Famine in this way.

My own interest in 'The Night of the Big Wind' (usually pronounced *wine*) dates from my childhood. When the subject of storms was mentioned usually on a particularly windy day, my mother would tell us that the roof was blown off her grandmother's house on the 'Night of the Big Wind'. The house was in the townland of Carrickrovaddy near Belleeks, Co. Armagh and she said that "the roof was blown into Tully Bog", in the neighbouring townland of Tullyocallaghan. It was also part of her family tradition that every house in the that part of the country suffered similar damage. My father's grandparents, Conveys of Aghantarraghan, Poyntzpass had also had their house damaged and he said it was always their ambition (which was never realised) to build a new house in the sheltered meadow down near the Newry Road as their house was in a particularly exposed position.

Before dealing with the great storm it is as well to outline the state of the country at the time. The census of 1841, two years later recorded a population of 8,200,000 thought by many experts to be a considerable underestimate of the true figure. It would, therefore, be probable that in 1839, the population of the country was in the region of 8 million — about 60 per cent more than the population of the island today. Most of the people lived in the country. Towns and cities were very much smaller than they are today and houses were scattered all through the fields all over the countryside.

The houses in which the ordinary people lived were often mud walled and thatched with straw or rushes. The thatch would have been tied down with hand-twisted straw ropes. The main fuel was turf and tallow candles or rush lights were in common use. Many people lived in constant poverty and for many a state of near-famine was the norm. Conditions in Ulster are generally said to have been better than in the rest of the country with involvement in the linen industry as either spinners or hand-loom weavers providing a somewhat better standard of living, but only marginally so.

The following account taken from the Newry Telegraph of Monday, 7th January 1839 — the day after the great storm — illustrates how unsafe some of the housing was: "*Loughbrickland — An accident happened in the town of Loughbrickland on Friday the 28th ult., by the falling in of a house, the property of James Morgan, of that town. The house was occupied by a poor widow, who was at the time of working for some of the neighbours, and had left her children behind her in the house. About twelve o'clock in the day, the whole roof fell in with a dreadful crash, burying two children in its ruins. One of them was a little boy, belonging to a man of the name of Coun, the other was a little girl of the widow's. There was a third child, which fortunately happened to be at the door; its screams brought the neighbours to the spot. Sub-Constable Duff, at the risk of his life, gallantly rushed among the falling timbers, etc., and succeeded in getting out the two children. The girl had received little injury, the boy was brought out almost lifeless, with his thigh-bone broken, but it is expected he will recover.*"

This incident occurred just a week before the Big Wind and was reported in the edition of the newspaper which carried early reports of the damage caused by the storm.

We are all quite familiar now-a-days with weather maps which are used by the weather forecasters to describe the weather situation at a given point in time. One feature of these maps are isobars, lines joining places of equal atmospheric pressure. Atmospheric pressure is measured in 'millibars' with anything above 1000 millibars being high pressure and readings below 1000 being low pressure. Air moves from areas of high pressure to areas of low pressure and the greater the difference in pressure the more violent this air movement is. Now while 1030 mb. would represent a very high pressure area and would give us clear skies and fine calm, settled weather' a reading as low as 960 mb. would be associated with very strong winds, rain, etc. While regular and standardised weather observations were in their infancy in 1839, some reliable measurements were taken and a very thorough study of the meteorological situation on January 6th/7th

1839 has been reconstructed out by Lisa Shields and Denis Fitzgerald of the Irish Metrological Service.

Using all the recordings available in Ireland, Western Scotland and NW England on that date in 1839 they have reliably established that the atmospheric pressure off the north coast of Ireland on that date was probably below 920 millibars — extremely low indeed and very much in keeping with winds of extreme severity.

On Sunday, 6th January 1839 much of Ireland was covered by a light snowfall. However during the day there was a very significant rise in temperature and in the evening, many remarked on how warm it felt. At 9 a.m. the temperature at Phoenix Park, Dublin was 37 degrees F while at 9 p.m. it had risen to 51.5 degrees F. At Carrickfergus the rise was from 35 degrees F at 9 a.m. to 49 degrees F at 11 p.m.

There are several accounts of a feeling of 'foreboding' as if something was about to happen, but this may be a case of being wise after the event. During the course of the evening a breeze sprang up which quickly became more and more severe and between 10 p.m. on Sunday night and 8 a.m. on Monday morning was described "as perfect-hurricane".

The following is an extract from an eye-witness' account: It was kept in a scrap book by Miss Sara Savage and was taken from a Canadian magazine at about the time of the First World War. It is entitled "The Big Wind — Storm in Ireland". No author's name is given:

*The greatest storm Ireland ever experienced was memorable "Big Wind" of January 6, 1839.*

*Although only a small boy the night of the "Big Wind", my memory of that awful storm is as distinct as if it had happened only last year. It fell on a Sunday. There was a few inches of snow in the County Westmeath, but the day was not cold.*

*But there was something awful in the dark stillness of that winter day, for there was no sunlight coming through the thick, motionless clouds that hung over the earth. There was a complete absence of wind up to 10 o'clock at night. It then began to blow a little, but grew stronger and stronger every minute, and was at its height about midnight.*

*The wind did not come in gusts with pauses between, but was one steady blow for ten mortal hours, or from about 10 o'clock at night unto 8 the next morning. The most terrible thing I have ever heard was the roaring of the wind on that awful night. I can never forget it, not could anyone who heard it ever forget it.*

*"I was too small a boy to go out with my elder brothers to assist in saving cattle and horses from tumbling down stables and outhouses, everyone of them was levelled, so I don't know how the wind sounded outside; but in the house it was the most dreadful thing I ever heard, and it made the stoutest and bravest who heard it quail. Some idea of it may be gathered from the fact that when the grownup people in the house wanted to say anything to one another, they had to shout into each other's ears in order to be heard. The roar of the wind, without a lull or a pause, drowned the human voice almost completely."*

The local papers, as with many other subjects of interest, are a great source of information. The Newry Telegraph of Tuesday, 8th January carried the first account of the storm and its aftermath although at that point the full extent of the damage caused was not appreciated.

*"Terrific Storm — On Sunday night, about eleven o'clock, the wind, which had been previously blowing hard from the North-East, rose suddenly to a pitch of fury rarely paralleled in this latitude, and resembling the hurricane which so frequently spreads desolation and ruin among the West India Islands. It con-*



**Prospect Hill, Latt, Jerrettspass.  
A stone dislodged from the chimney broke a hole  
in the front door.**

*tinued increasing in violence during the whole night, but abated considerably yesterday morning. There is hardly a single house in town unstripped; and a number of cabins have been, we understand, completely wrecked. The streets, yesterday, were thickly strewn with slates, tiles, etc.*

*"In the country, and along shore, the effects of the storm are still more disastrous. Several ships, it is said, have been driven on land, more or less damaged; reports add, that some dead bodies have floated in with the tide. Lofty and venerable trees, which for probably a century defied the storm, have been torn up by the roots; the Grain, Flax, and Hay crops, stacked in haggards, have been overthrown and scattered; and the dwelling and office houses, particularly those with thatched roofs, have been generally much injured. As one instance of the severity of the storm, it has been mentioned to us, that, in the Parish of Donaghmore, an immense stack of Turf was, in an instant, lifted up about a foot from the ground and then dashed to pieces. The loss will be seriously felt by the Agricultural population. The high wind, which still continues, will render abortive any attempt to secure the Grain, etc.*

*"Since the above was written, we hear, with deep concern that several lives have been lost in the immediate neighbourhood. In one case, a mother and her child were buried in the ruins of their little cabin; the latter was killed, but the other was rescued before life was altogether extinct. In the same district a boy was*

*killed, and rumours abound with respect to other deplorable casualties.*

*"We are informed that Dundalk has suffered very severely from the storm. The Postmaster and his Assistant were both so much injured by the fall of a stack of chimneys as to be unable to make up the mail-bags."*

The Newry Telegraph for January 10th carried fuller reports:

#### "THE HURRICANE

Seems to have been very general and awfully disastrous over the entire face of the country.

"Amongst the numerous devastations committed in this neighbourhood, we learn that in the demesne of Ballymoyer (Mr. Synot's), the havoc made by the storm was truly lamentable; at least 10,000 trees have been either separated, broken, or so completely mutilated as to require their being cut down. Not a tree of any remarkable beauty escaped, and it will require a fortnight in the clear avenue alone, and render it passable; and at present the public road to Newtownhamilton is blocked by immense trees which have fallen across it. Acres of beautiful trees, of twenty-five years' growth, have been levelled with the ground, and in many places the site of a wood resembles a fleet after a battle; the trunks of fine trees standing broken off at every height from the ground, shivered into splinters, and riven, as if by lightning. The oldest inhabitants of this part of the country do



**Donaghmore Church suffered severe damage.**

not remember such a hurricane; and the houses of the farmers are in many places stripped of their roofs, while corn-stacks, which stood in exposed situations, were literally blown over the country. One fatal accident occurred in the neighbourhood of Ballymoyer: a young man, son of a schoolmaster named Allen, was killed by the falling of his chimney, which also severely injured some other members of the family.

"We have received the following from a Correspondent in Donaghmore:

"I find that not only have thatched houses suffered, but in many instances slated houses lately completed, in the most permanent manner, have also suffered severely. For instance, the Church here, which underwent a general repair, and was newly roofed on the plan and under the inspection of the Architect to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, has suffered great damage; some of the stone pinnacles on its tower were broken off and precipitated through the roof. Barr Chapel, which was built under the inspection of Mr. Duff, a few years ago, has also, I hear, suffered severely: indeed there is scarcely a house, except in a peculiarly sheltered situation, which has not sustained injury. The damage done by overturning and scattering corn, flax, and hay-stacks, is very great — the loss will also be considerable. It is matter of gratitude that the storm has subsided, and that it has not been followed by heavy rains; though the snow which has fallen prevents the grain etc. from being collected."

From a correspondent in Portadown:

The night of the 6th and the morning of the 7th of January, 1839, will form an epoch of disasters in the annals of this district for many a year to come. The gale set in about seven o'clock in the evening, and continued to increase in fury until twelve, at which hour, and for several hours after, it blew a perfect tornado. Its roaring was terrific, resembling a continuous peal of thunder, or the uninterrupted bellowing of ten thousand bulls. At length the morning dawned on a scene of devastation such as has rarely been witnessed. Far and near, houses totally or partially unroofed — the owners seeking for shelter for their children in those which had suffered least; straw and hay strewed over the fields in every direction — (fortunately, the high price of grain had left comparatively few corn-stacks exposed to the fury of the elements, or the loss might have been much greater). I do not hear of any loss of life, though some of the escapes have been almost miraculous. In one house, the owner's wife had barely time to fling herself out of bed, with an infant in her arms, when the gable fell in and overwhelmed it. On the estate of Carrick, where great pains had been taken with the timber, the destruction has been sadly great. A row of stately elms which ornamented Elm Cottage, the villa of Lieutenant Hickson, were nearly all laid prostrate, as were some fine ones on the farm of Mr. Bradshaw. A new house, just built by the Rev. Mr. Foote, on the same property, has suffered severely. A vast number of valuable apple-trees, which contributed to ornament the country, as well as to profit the owners, have been literally blown out of the earth. In the demesne of Colonel Blacker, the

damage has been great: several noble trees, which had stood the blasts of nearly 150 years, have been blown down, carrying destruction in their fall, among their junior companions of the grove. Huge limbs of oak were seen flying like straws before the fury of the tempest. These are damages which no money can repair, and which it will require generations to make good. The damage done to the premises of Mr Wakefield, a little further on, are supposed to amount to some hundred pounds. The Castle of Tandragee, from its exposed situation, has also suffered considerably. The tempest has been succeeded by a heavy fall of snow, which has added, in no small degree, to the distressed situation of those whose dwellings have been laid open to it.

From a correspondent in Loughgall:

*I am sorry to say that Loughgall House and demesne have suffered considerably by the storm of Sunday night. A vast number of splendid trees adjoining that beautiful house, the growth of at least two hundred years, have been torn up by the roots. The village and surrounding neighbourhood have equally suffered.*

From the same paper for January 12th, 1838, there are reports from correspondents and quotes from other papers giving details of damage throughout the length and breadth of the country. The following are typical:

#### THE LATE AWFUL STORM

From a correspondent in Downpatrick.

There is hardly a house in Downpatrick that has not suffered, more or less, by the late storm. Several chimneys have been blown down; roofs of houses partly destroyed, and slates and thatch dashed about in every direction. The public buildings have not suffered much; there are some slates off the Cathedral, and some windows broken in the Court-house and Infirmary. The Slaters seemed to be in great spirits; they have now a plentiful harvest, or, I should rather say, a fortunate windfall. The Roman Catholic Chapel has been much injured.

*Lurgan — This handsome town is grievously injured. Many roofs are clean off, several houses fallen, and a great number of chimneys blown down. The beautiful spire of the Church has been nearly all overthrown, the roof smashed, and the windows battered in; in fact, almost a complete wreck, as regards these three — Ulster Times.*

The combination of wide chimneys, strong winds and thatched roofs led to hundreds of fires throughout the country. It was said that on that night there was "a fire in every townland". While fires in isolated country houses were bad enough they were as nothing compared to the dangers of fire driven by the wind in streets of thatched houses. There were disastrous fires in Kells, Kilkenny, Moate and Loughrea, Co. Galway. This description is taken from the 'Newry Telegraph' January 10th.

*"Loughbrea, January 7th — One of the most awful fires ever witnessed broke out in this town last night, about eleven o'clock, caused by the falling in of a*

number of houses, during the hurricane. The fire raged with undiminished fury until six this morning, destroying every thing in its progress. The aid of man was totally unavailing; but, providentially, about six o'clock, the change of the wind from N. W. to W. gave the flames a different direction, and the Police and the inhabitants were unable to cut off the communication with the house; and thus the greater part of the town was preserved from impending destruction.

The Police under Sub-Inspector Lewis and Mr. Cannon, patrolled the town until eight o'clock this morning, to protect the vast quantity of property thrown into the streets. As far as I can learn, no lives were lost; but I grieve to add that there are eighty-seven houses burned to ashes, and thirty blown down by the storm.

Nearly six hundred human beings have been left totally destitute by this calamity, without a home, clothes or food. A meeting was held this day to afford temporary relief.

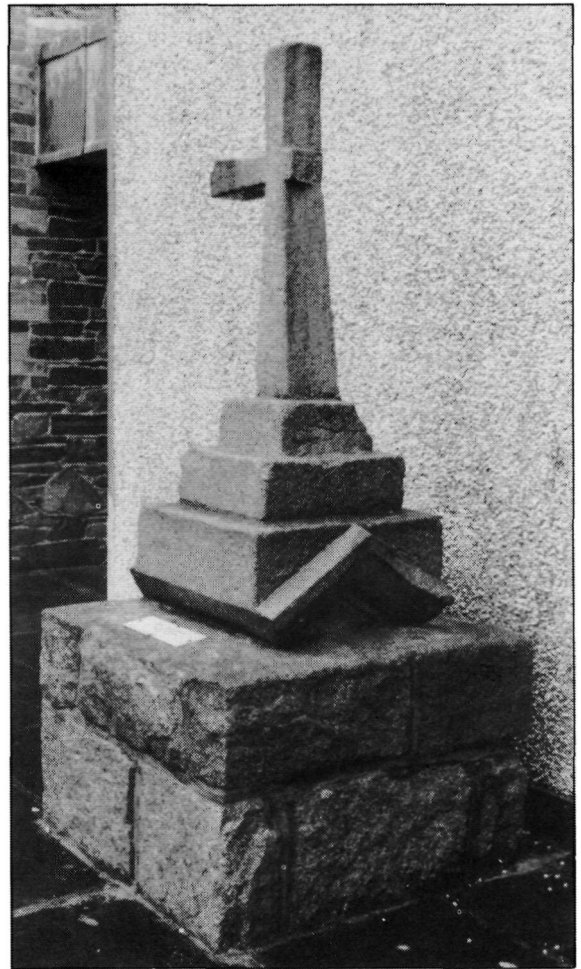
Several persons, including Mr. Cannon, of the Constabulary, received severe injury in the eyes, from the hot ashes during the conflagration.

It is stated that there have been destructive fires, during the storm, in Kells, Kilkenny, Moate and other places. — D.E. Post."

Thatched roofs were a favourite hiding place for items of value, etc. During times of unrest pikes, swords, etc. were often hidden in the thatched roofs and apparently it was common enough for a man to hide his savings there. It was said that "Manys a one lost a fortune the night of the Big Wind — And that manys a one found a fortune the morning after!"

Cities such as Belfast and Dublin did not escape and the following extract from 'The Northern Whig' gives some idea of the chaos caused in Belfast:

"Belfast, and the North of Ireland, generally, have been visited with a hurricane, such as we have not experienced more than once within the memory of the oldest residents of our town. On Saturday night, after a slight fall of snow, the ground was covered, on Sunday morning, with a dark, dense frost; which, about noon on Sunday, began to resolve itself into rain; and this most uncomfortable change of weather continued until about one o'clock next morning, when it was succeeded by a perfect hurricane. The wind, in the first symptoms of violence, blew from W.N.W.; but, as its rage increased, it shifted from W. to W. by N., and augmented in force, till, finally, it settled due S.W. Melancholy, however, is the tale of desolation which marked the track of the tempest; and lamentable are the accounts (too numerous for insertion) of the destruction which it has brought, even in our immediate neighbourhood. Wherever we turn our eyes, the most dreadful ravages of the hurricane are to be traced — in our streets, squares, lanes and unprotected suburbs, where — and especially in the latter — thousands have been bereft of shelter. Such a scene of utter desolation we were never before called to witness. Houses erected but a few years; — And some of them only a few months — left totally roofless; — hundreds of upper stories rendered untenable; and

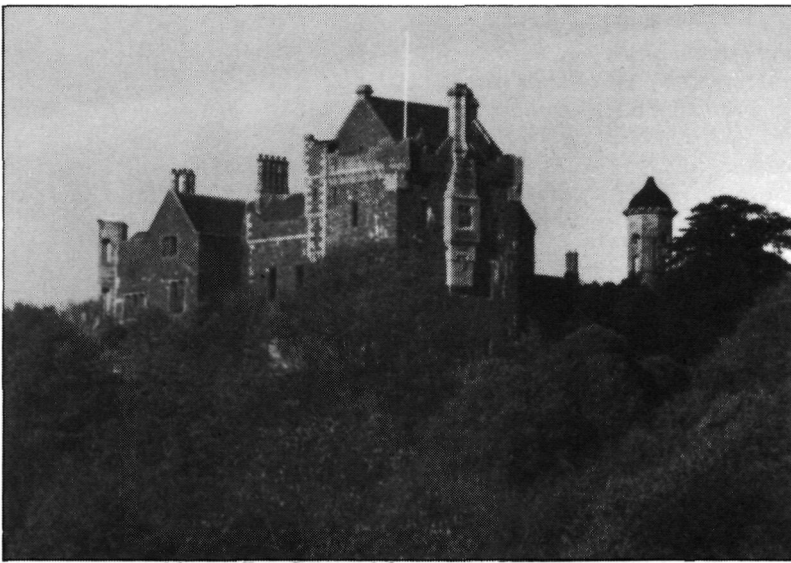


According to local tradition, this cross, now in the grounds of Glenn Chapel was blown off Donaghmore Church on 6/7th January, 1839. It was broken when it fell through the roof.

scarcely a roof, in the wide boundary of Belfast, unscathed by the unsparing tempest. From eleven till half-past four, the gale was so terrific, that it created universal alarm for the safety of life and property. And when the grey dawn of Winter broke on the afrighted citizens, a scene of universal wreck and ruin met their eyes, in houses unroofed, chimneys overthrown, walls prostrated, and lives destroyed.

"We this morning found our streets, without one exception, strewed with slates, tiles and debris of chimneys, while during the day the shops were closed as if a universal calamity had befallen the town. We repeat that within the memory of the oldest resident, such a storm has never been witnessed. Not a roof in Belfast has escaped; and it was supposed at one period, that many more lives would have been lost than have been. Among the numerous accidents we have to detail are the following:

"Every enclosure wall, protecting building ground, has been partially or wholly levelled, more particularly those in the neighbourhood of Mary-street, Montgomery-street, Great George's-street, etc. The chimney of Messrs. Mulholland and Co.'s flax-



**Tandragee Castle**—suffered severely because of its exposed position.

spinning factory, 184 feet high, has been almost wholly blown down, having destroyed a preparation-room in its fall, and a packing-loft was so seriously damaged that it will be impossible to work in it for two weeks. The chimney thrown down at this manufactory was the most handsome specimen of masonry in the North of Ireland, and was supposed to be proof against the most violent war of the elements. We are informed that £1,000 will hardly cover the injury done at those extensive works. The chimney of the Falls Flax Mill — a beautiful column of 150 feet in height has also been blown down — but will not occasion more than two or three days stoppage of the factory — and a short distance up the same road the chimney of Howie and Co's bleach-works was nearly levelled though newly erected; but did not, as we are happy to say, occasion a suspension of operations there, as there was a sufficiency of water-power to drive the machinery. We regret, also, to have to announce the fall of the splendid funnel shaft of Graymount bleach-green, near the Cave-hill."

One of the greatest dangers, particularly in large town houses, was the danger of a large chimney stacks being blown down and falling through the house. The following extracts from "The Dublin Evening Packet" illustrate this danger:

*"The chimneys of the house at the corner of Clare-street fell into Mr. Lawrence's glass warehouse in Nassau-street, and brought down all the inmates to the lower story; providentially not one was injured; even an infant sleeping in its cradle escaped unhurt.*

*"A large pile of chimneys belonging to the house occupied by a respectable stationer at the corner of Merrion-row and Baggot-street, was hurled down, and fell into a bedroom occupied by some of the family, who had providentially, not retired to rest — at least a ton weight of brick and beams of timber falling over the very bed which, in a few minutes more, might have*

*been occupied by individuals, who were thus preserved from a most horrible and awfully sudden death.*

*"A large stack of chimneys belonging to a house in Cork-street, near Dolphin's Barn, was thrown down and carried with it the roof of several floors, until it reached the ground. The inmates had sufficient warning to escape, with the exception of a poor woman, who was unfortunately buried beneath the falling mass, and killed on the spot."*

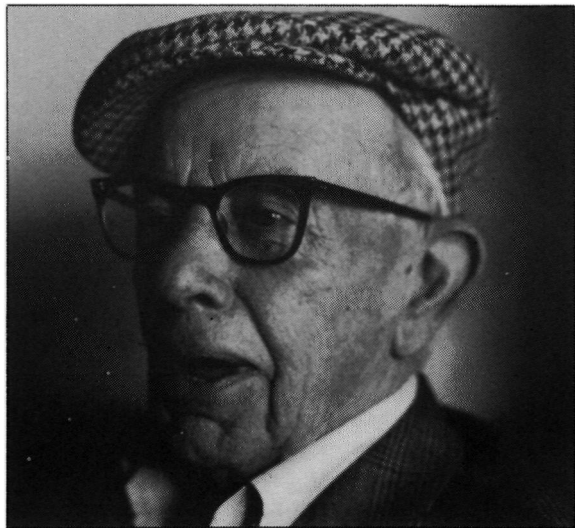
The same accounts are repeated over and over again from all round the country — houses demolished or unroofed, farm produce scattered and hundreds of thousands of trees uprooted. There were of course deaths reported who like the poor woman in Cork Street, Dublin, were usually buried in the ruins of their homes. However the number killed was not as high as was at first feared although it has been variously calculated as being between 150 and 300. Considering the severity of the storm and the amount of damage caused, the number of lives lost could have been very much greater. Many of those who did lose their lives, were lost at sea. Without the benefit of shipping forecasts and gale warnings, many set sail just as the storm was about to break. Along the west coast in particular many seafarers lost their lives. The storm, of course, did not stop at the Irish coast and North Western England, and Southern and Western Scotland were very seriously affected.

As well as 'hard news' stories there were soon anecdotes circulating which told of freak occurrences. One such story was that, following the 'Big Wind' herrings were found six miles inland from the West Coast. It was supposed that they have been lifted up out of the sea and blown through the air. It was also reported in the Dublin Evening Post of January 12th, 1839, that trees up to 12 miles inland were covered with salt brine and that vegetation in the very centre of Ireland had a salty taste.

It was reported that at Kilbeggan, Co. Westmeath, the water was blown out of the canal and that it was nearly dry.

Another bizarre incident reported was that a guard at the Vice-regal Lodge in Phoenix Park, Dublin, was lifted off his feet and carried right across the park before coming back to earth and sustaining a broken arm. It was also reported that a small pig was lifted from a field at Scrabo, Co. Down, and carried a quarter-of-a-mile before coming to rest in the branches of a tree from which it was rescued.

There is in our locality a considerable amount of oral tradition regarding the 'Big Wind'.



Harry Campbell.

**Harry Campbell:** "That was the night the crows walked from Tandragee to Jerretspass for shelter. That was the worst night ever.... *Jemmy Kinney* left a stone-roller in a field at Ballyorgan the night of the 'Big Wind'. It was about 5 cwt. It was found the next day at the foot of the Glebe Hill (Tandragee). *Jemmy* said he put it on his shoulder and carried it back to Ballyorgan".



Misses Sara and Minnie Savage.

**Misses Minnie and Sara Savage:** "A young man was taking his grandmother to a place of safety at the height of the storm when she sent him back to get her purse. He tied her to a whin bush but when he returned both the bush and the granny had gone .... A man, who as a youth worked at the building of our house, told how his family spent the night on their knees praying for protection. He said he would never forget the roar of the wind. They thought every minute that the house would be lifted ... Our uncle *James Best* lived at Mullaghglass. On the night of the 'Big Wind', a stone was dislodged from the chimney of his house. It fell into the house and rolled down the stairs. It knocked a hole in the front door."

**Annie Smyth:** "According to her late husband, *Billy*, the trunks of several very ancient oak trees which until recently lay in a stream at M'Kay's, Loughadian were remnants of trees blown down the night of the 'Big Wind'."

**Lewis Smart:** "I remember a story that was told to me by *Barney Conlon* of Drumsallagh. Apparently at the height of the storm a man in that townland was out on his roof trying to keep the thatch from blowing off. His wife who was a very religious woman, brought out a bottle of holy water and told him to sprinkle it on the roof. He did so but a minute later there came a gust that took away a large patch of thatch. He gave her back the bottle saying, 'To hell with that! Hand me up the harrow!'"



Norman Cole.

**Norman Cole:** "My family lived at 'Cole's Corner' on the Tandragee Road at that time. My grandfather *Andrew Cole* (1834-1924) was born there. He was five the night of the 'Big Wind'. The day before the storm there was a yellowish-red mist hanging over everything. It was calm but there was a feeling that there was 'something coming'. The house was thatched, as most houses were, with rushes tied down with hand twisted ropes. The house was stripped by the

wind — every house in the country was..... The people left their houses for they were falling in round them. They sought shelter in sheughs and behind banks. If they were caught in the open they had to hold on to the grass.

"There was a great deal of flying debris — branches, timber — even hens — The wind that did the damage was a North West wind from the direction of Tandragee. All his days my grandfather and my father James (1872-1961) dreaded 'the Tandragee Wind'.

"It was our family tradition that the wind came in prolonged squalls with periods of absolute calm in between. When a squally passed there would be silence but then they could hear the awful roar of the next squall coming maybe 5 or 6 miles away.

"My mother's family (Devine) lived at Newtownstewart, Co. Tyrone. Her father was coachman for the Duke of Abercorn. The wind overturned the coach on the Strabane Road. The Duke's estate was very badly damaged. In one plantation of 100 acres there was one single tree left standing — it became a sort of curiosity.

"It was the 'Big Wind' and not the Famine that started the emigration from round here. The people thought the country was finished."

**Mrs. Rachel Henry (Loughgilly):** "On the night of the 'Big Wind', a daughter was born to the Patterson family of Cavanakill, Whitecross. In memory of the occasion the child was named Aeola after Aeolis the Greek God of the Wind. The name remains in the family to this day. Her great-granddaughter Mrs. Aeola Gray, lives in Ballybay, Co. Monaghan."

**John King (Lurgana, Whitecross):** "I remember my grandfather talking about Synott's plantation (referred to earlier). He said it was like a field of corn battered down. Only three or four larch trees remained standing. It was re-planted with ash trees but was always referred to as 'the larch plantation'."

**Joe Mackle:** "Acton village was badly damaged and some of the houses were more or less demolished. A relation of my grandmother's called McCabe who lived at Acton at the time was supposed to have slept through the storm although the chimney was blown down and the door blown off its hinges and carried down the street."

**Mrs. Kathleen McVeigh:** "My family lived in the townland of Dinnahorra, Markethill at that time. I remember my grandmother telling us stories about the 'Night of the Big Wind'. Before the 'Big Wind' the fairies were often heard singing or playing music in that part of the country. A man called Whiteside was on his way home through the fields the night before the storm. He heard the most beautiful music in a field beside the River Cusher. After the storm they were never heard again. My grandmother confidently believed the fairies were blown away that night."

**Pat Turley:** "There was a great deal of damage done to nearly every house in Ballyargan but the chapel escaped undamaged."



**Mrs. Kathleen McVeigh.**

There were several local examples of children born on that occasion.

**Miss Savage:** "Mrs. Baird of Ballenan told me she was born on 'The Night of the Big Wind'. She said her father started off for the midwife or 'handy woman'. He was away for a long time and the baby was born before he returned. The mother was sure he was lost and that she would lose the baby too. The baby lived to be 98!"

**Jimmy Clulow:** "A Mrs. Doran from Lissummon was in Newry on 'The Night of the Big Wind'. She gave birth to a son James who lived to be a very old man."

The diary of a Mr. Shanks of Loughadian, now in the Public Records Office, records that haystacks in his farmyard were blown away. William Fivey's mills and lime kiln had roofs blown off and that many trees around Union Lodge were blown down.

One tradition which grew out of the 'Big Wind' is that the storm marked the end of the fairies in Ireland. It was believed by some that the wind was a fairy storm brought on to transport the fairies away to another land. Others believed that it was as a result of a great battle between several tribes of fairies, or that the fairies had been literally blown away that night.

The storm made a lasting impression on the minds of the people for several reasons — because of its severity, because it came so suddenly, because it came during the night and because it came on the feast of Epiphany (Old Christmas Day) people thought that the end of the world had come.

However with the passing of time the event would have been largely forgotten had it not been for the fact that the Old Age Pension was introduced, for people of 70 or over, in January 1909. In the days before Birth Certificates were standard it was sometimes difficult for an old person to prove his/her age. The 'Night of the Big Wind' took on a new significance. If a person could prove he was born on or before the 'Night of the Big Wind', he qualified for the pension.



Old people in Ireland were not reluctant to claim the Old Age Pension and there are numerous examples of people who appear to add on a year or two in order to qualify. The Chancellor of the Exchequer produced figures which showed that "the percentage of the persons claiming old-age pensions to the population over 70 years of age was in Ireland 128 per cent."

Comparing ages stated in the census returns for 1901 and 1911 shows the trend. In 1901 for example one farmer gave his age as 51 and his wife as 50. The same pair stated their ages as 73 and 71 in 1911.

The pension was of course a wonderful boon for the old and inspired John Quin, the Acton poet, to write the following lines: (The 'Colonel' referred to is Colonel Alexander of Acton House for whom John Quin worked for many years).

### THE OLD-AGE PENSION

1

In Acton I was born and I wish to blow my horn,  
As I often did before — without attention,  
Then your hand I'll warmly shake  
And with joy the statement make —  
That I've lived to be the master of a pension!

2

As a tiller of the soil for the Colonel I did toil,  
Through hours of sleet and rain to suffer drenching,  
While the snarling winds do roar  
In my cot I'll snugly snore  
As a I enjoy the pleasure of my pension.

3

It's no wonder that I'm cracked  
O'er the Old-Age Pension Act  
— For it must have been an Irishman's invention!  
Sure the English brains and Scotch,  
Would have only made a botch,  
When granting to an Irishman his pension.

4

Since I have turned three score,  
Many times my heart felt sore,  
Of the workhouse I had gloomy apprehension.  
Indeed even at the best, poor relief I did detest  
Little dreamt I of the advent of the pension.

5

On the morn I drew my crown,  
Oh a naggin I let down  
In a house in Poyntzpass town that I won't mention!  
Though it was not out of place —  
And I thought it was no disgrace —  
To celebrate the lifting of the pension.

6

Now while I sing this song  
May the Colonel live as long,  
And his good wife who to me has paid attention;  
May they pass the three-score years  
Without any doubts or fears,  
Or the need to go and lift the old-age pension!



**The Inspector and the Claimant for the Pension.**

**"I was old enough to ate a potato out of me hand  
the night of the Big Wind".**

**(from the memoirs of Sir Henry Robinson).**



The house at "Cole's Corner", Tandragee Road, where Norman Cole's great grandparents lived in 1839.



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