

THE FATHER AND THE FAMINE: THE TWIN DISASTERS THAT WRECKED KERRY'S BREWING INDUSTRY

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There have been suggestions by some historians that before the Great Famine, the economy of the west of Ireland was much less cash-oriented than the 'maritime' economy in Cork, Dublin and Belfast, and because of this the brewing industry in the region was badly hampered – it being easier to barter a pig for a cask of whiskey, which would not go stale quickly, than for a barrel of porter, which had only a limited shelf life. According to this view, only after the famine was over, with a subsequent rise in money incomes in the westernmost counties, which had been hardest hit by death and emigration, and a growth in the number of agricultural labourers paid in money, did 'the consumption of porter become widespread.' With no local brewing industry to react to this new opportunity, 'It was this reformed society that gave Guinness its great Irish market,' with the Dublin giant using the newly expanded rail network to reach these newly viable markets and block any chance of rivals appearing.¹

However, western rural Ireland was reasonably well endowed with breweries before 1840, with local entrepreneurs reacting from around 1790 onwards to an obvious demand for porter and stout among the local population by opening breweries, using as a raw material the barley that grew well in counties such as Cork and Limerick. The brewing industry in the west then collapsed under the twin blows of, first, the enormously successful temperance campaign of Father Theobald Mathew from 1838 onwards – in February 1841 it was claimed that 4,647,000 people in Ireland had signed the pledge and become teetotalers² – and then the Great Famine, which started in the autumn of 1845 with the failure of the potato harvest in Ireland's south-east, and continued until 1850, leaving hundreds of thousands dead, forcing vast numbers to rely on soup kitchens and the workhouse to survive and driving more than a million abroad.

The county of Kerry, in the heart of the region affected most by both Father Mathew's campaigning and the potato blight, had at least six breweries by the 1830s. The Killarney brewery, in Brewery Lane, was 'long-established' in 1825, when

it was put up for let, 'at full work', because the proprietor was 'desirous of retiring from business'.³ The brewery, which had been supplying the 'very considerable' demand for beer and porter in the town and neighbourhood, and which included a malthouse and kiln, coppers, vats, kieves (the Irish expression for mash tuns), and a two-horse mill, looks to have been in the possession of Richard Hore, who was given as the contact, and who had been the largest maltster in the Tralee registration district in 1822.⁴

The Killarney brewery was mentioned in passing in a court case in 1826,⁵ but ducks out of view until the late 1830s when it was in the hands of John Doherty.⁶ However, Doherty's 'rather sudden demise' saw the concern come up for sale or lease in June 1837,⁷ with Richard Hore again the man to whom applications should be made, suggesting that he had continued to own the brewery while it was leased to others. The brewery looks to have been acquired by Richard Murphy, a local businessman: in March 1838 'Messrs Murphy's brewery at Killarney' supplied the ale for a feast organized by the Knight of Kerry for 200 of the men employed at his slate quarry on Valentia Island, off the Kerry coast, which was 'crowned with abundance of whiskey punch'.⁸

But brewers were now coming under pressure from the teetotal campaigning of Father Mathew. In January 1840 it was claimed that the Earl of Kenmare, Killarney's big landowner, had given the temperance cause his 'most zealous support,' and every one of his laborers and workmen had become teetotalers, while of the 65 or so publicans in Killarney 'the greater part' had given up the licensed trade.⁹ That June, Father Mathew visited Killiney and administered the pledge of temperance to 5,000 people.¹⁰ The next month, July 1840 it was announced that the 'well known' Killarney Ale and Porter Brewery was about to cease working and would be let.¹¹

Then came the potato blight, and by December 1846, as famine hammered the district, the brewery was being used

as a temporary soup kitchen, with 600 quarts of soup being sold each week by ticket at a penny a quart.¹² A year later the Poor Law Guardians began leasing the brewery premises to provide accommodation for 500 paupers, on top of the 1,200 they were already housing elsewhere.¹³ 'All the Utensils required for a Brewery' were still on the premises in June 1848, when it was offered for sale, despite still being used as a temporary workhouse. However, it appears there were no takers, and the premises continued to be used as an overflow workhouse until August 1851.¹⁴

Another brewery stood about two miles to the south-east of Killarney at Turk View, or Torc View, otherwise Sheheree. John Eagar was the proprietor of the Turk-View Brewery, 'near Killarney' when a fire broke out in October 1833. Fortunately

the progress of the flames was speedily arrested by the exertions of the townspeople, who promptly repaired to the scene of devastation in consequence of which, and the Establishment having beer insured ... Mr Eagar has not, we are happy to state sustained any loss.¹⁵

(John Eagar had his insurance claim against the Royal Exchange Assurance Company paid within a fortnight, prompting him to insert a notice in the *Kerry Evening Post* praising the company's 'honorable and truly liberal dealing'.¹⁶)

In 1835 the business was being run as either Townsell and Harman, Turkview Brewery, Killarney,¹⁷ or Townsell and Hannan,¹⁸ or, possibly, Trowsell and Hannon:¹⁹ the names appear in a lengthy list of 'Noblemen, Gentlemen, Traders and Farmers of the County of Kerry' thanking the Agricultural and Commercial Bank of Ireland for averting a credit crisis that was printed in a number of papers, with multiple inconsistencies in spelling: at least a couple managed to call the concern the 'Foreview Brewery.' The business disappears after that, and by 1850 the premises were being used as a hotel.²⁰

The Eagar family were Kerry's biggest brewing entrepreneurs. Robert Eagar, born 1784, was running a brewery near the Bleach Green in Dingle, Kerry – probably the westernmost brewery in Europe – in 1826.²¹ Robert was still in possession of the Bleach Green brewery in 1835.²² His second son, Thomas Thompson Eagar, is recorded as applying in 1837 for the right to vote in parliamentary elections on the basis of a rent charge at the Bleach Green brewery.²³ When exactly the Dingle brewery closed is unknown, but it was before Robert's death at his home near the town in July 1843: that year 'the exertions of the Rev. Mr Mathew were so triumphant in Kerry' that the county did not contain a single working brewery, distillery or malthouse, and the post of Collector of Excise for Kerry was abolished.²⁴

A third concern run by the Eagar family was the Oakview brewery in Tralee, county town of Kerry, which stood close to the stream known as the Big River, on the south side of Brewery Road, by what is still called Brewery Bridge, just off the road from Tralee to Listowel. It took at least some of the water used in the brewery via a pipe from the river.²⁵ The brewery was open in 1829, when it was called 'Mr Eagar's brewery'.²⁷ John Robert Eagar, presumably Robert Eagar's eldest son, born 1811 was entitled to a vote in parliamentary elections as a householder in respect of the premises in 1835.²⁸ Robert Eagar was running a malthouse at Oakview in 1838, when he was prosecuted for 'treading' malt in the couch frame, an offence that brought a fine of £100, since it was designed to reduce the amount of tax the maltster paid.²⁹

In June 1838, John Daly, brewer, 'of Clounalour, in the town and borough of Tralee,' applied for the right to vote in parliamentary elections in respect of a warehouse, counting house and premises 'at Clounalour', while John Daly 'of Bigriver [sic], in the town and borough of Tralee, brewer' did the same.³⁰ Clounalour, or Cloonalour, is the townland on the other side of the Big River to the Oakview brewery, and the assumption must be that the Dalys' brewery was the Oakview brewery. The Dalys did not enjoy the brewery for long. On the night of Sunday 6 January 1839 the 'Big Wind,' the worst storm to hit Ireland for 300 years, hammered the country from Limerick to Dublin, demolishing or deroofting hundreds of buildings, sinking dozens of ships and felling thousands of trees. One of the victims was the 'compact and well furnished Brewery, the property of John Daly' at Tralee, which 'took fire, and notwithstanding prompt aid, was totally consumed with all its appurtenances'.³¹ At the same time 'Mr Newell's Distillery at Ballymullen received considerable injury'.³²

The Oakview brewery was evidently rebuilt after the storm, and advertised to let in May 1843, together with the Ballymullen distillery, by the river on the south side of town, with the contacts given as John Frederick Eagar of Ballymullen (cousin to Robert Eagar) and Frederick John Eagar, John Frederick's eldest son.³³ Robert Eagar's son Thomas Thompson Eagar, who entered the church, and became a cleric in Manchester, was also one of the contacts when the Oakview Brewery was put on the market in March 1848, alongside John F. Eagar of Tralee, presumably John Frederick.³⁴

The Oakview brewery was open again by August 1853, under a man named William Johnstone, who sold that month seven half-tierces of 'inferior' porter, six at 13s 6d a time and one at 14s 6d, and two half-tierces and five quarters of ale to a retailer in Killarney named John B. Falvey. Falvey

claimed the porter was undrinkable and sued for the return of his money: the subsequent chain of court cases only ended in March the following year, when Falvey was awarded £5.³⁵ Four years later, in April 1858, Johnston advertised for sale 'the interest of the unexpired term of 25 years' on the Oakview Brewery, consisting of dwelling house, brew house, malt house 'and other offices', including a gig house, fowl house and stables.³⁶ By 1862 the premises were being used as by a boarding school, which had moved out of Tralee itself to 'the very healthy situation of Oakview'.³⁷

John F. Eagar was also involved in the 1840s in another Tralee concern, the Ballymullen distillery.³⁸ Later statements suggest that his younger son, John Eagar junior, who became a brewer in Batavia, New York state, entered the brewing trade in 1839, when he was 18. The most likely places he learnt to brew and distil look to be the Oakview brewery and the Ballymullen distillery, given his father's involvement. His leaving Kerry is no surprise, with the county one of the hardest hit by the Great Potato Famine; there was little enough money for local laborers to buy food, let alone beer, and the four brewery premises associated with the Eagar family, in Dingle,³⁹ Tralee and Killarney, were all turned into auxiliary workhouses during those years, to house the increasing numbers of the starving and wretched poor.

The Dingle brewery which became an auxiliary workhouse early in 1848, still had the large brewery coppers inside: in March 1852 a Dingle shopkeeper, John Lynch, was prosecuted for abetting the theft of the coppers, worth £200, which he had bought from the thieves for £5 or £6. Lynch had the coppers, which still belonged to the Reverend Thomas Thompson Eagar, broken up, before the remains were shipped 'by Flaherty's sloop' from Dingle to Cork for sale.⁴⁰ The case eventually reached the Kerry Assizes that July, where Lynch and his 'servant, Kevane' were found guilty and sentenced to ten years' transportation.⁴¹

John Eagar junior left Ireland early in 1849,⁴² and in 1850, in partnership with a Mr Smith he bought the stone-built former Methodist church on West Main Street, Batavia, Genesee County, western New York state, converting it into the Genesee Brewery.⁴³ The partners boasted that they had 'been in the business for many years, both in Canada and the Old Country'.⁴⁴

By 1855 Smith had gone, and Eagar was advertising XX Porter 'brewed expressly for Summer use'.⁴⁵ The church brewery was burnt out by a fire in 1862, and Eagar built a new three-story brewery on the other side of the street, converting the former church premises into a maltings. By 1864 he had added whiskey distilling to his operations, claiming

to be the only manufacturer of 'genuine' malt whiskey in the country, and was boasting 'a practical knowledge of the brewing, rectifying and distilling business extending over a period of 25 years,' with XXX porter, stock and pale ales and malt whiskey on sale.⁴⁶ Eagar died in 1869, aged 48, with his eldest son aged only 13, but the brewery continued, still making ales and porter, with, by 1876, a depot in Buffalo, 35 miles away,⁴⁷ despite the fact that Buffalo had 28 breweries of its own, all but one producing more than Eagar's 762 barrels a year in 1879.⁴⁸ Seven years later, however, in 1886, John's widow Emily and their youngest son, Wellington Tallis Eagar put the brewery and malt-house up for sale, 'easy terms',⁴⁹ though the family business continued as a wholesaler and retailer and agent for other breweries' beer.

Tralee had a third small brewing concern, the Rock brewery, by Castle McEllistram (now demolished), on the north side of Pembroke Street, Balloonagh, Tralee. This looks to be the 'Green's brewery in this town' where in 1834 'a fine little boy, aged about two and a half,' son of a brewery employee called Landers, fell into a tank containing 'not much more than three feet of water' and drowned. In October 1839 Stephen Green, brewer was listed as a parliamentary voter in respect of a house and brewery in Rock Street, Tralee.⁵⁰

It was still 'Mr Green's brewery' in November 1840, when complaints were made about a nearby well flooding the road.⁵¹ Then in September 1842 Stephen Greene (sic) advertised as 'to be let or the interest sold' the brewery at the Rock, 'which is in perfect working condition,' a 100-foot-long corn store with three lofts and an 'excellent kiln,' a six-horse stable, a coach house, and a 'never-failing Spring of Pure Water'.⁵²

However, a couple of sources suggest the Rock brewery was run by Morgan Flaherty (or O'Flaherty) at some time.⁵³ Morgan Flaherty was one of three maltsters from Tralee listed in a report from 1824.⁵⁴ In 1854 the brewery was described as 'known for some years ... before the days of Father Mathew as O'Flaherty's Brewery'.⁵⁵ Morgan was involved in a court case over, *inter alia*, 'the Brewery Tenement and the Rock Tenement at the Rock' in 1842.⁵⁶

No brewer seems to have taken up the lease when Green(e) advertised it in 1842, and around this time it was used as a slaughter-house by a local provision merchant, William Lunham. Soon after it, too, became an auxiliary workhouse as the district struggled to cope with the destitution brought by the potato famine.⁵⁷

In 1856 the brewery and premises at 'Castle McEllistram, Tralee' then 'in the occupation of Mr Murto Slattery' were

put up for lease as part of a Chancery court case involving 'O'Leary v. O'Flaherty,' presumably the ongoing case from 1842.⁵⁸ A year later the brewery premises, 'unlet for years,' were sold to William Lunham, the former tenant.⁵⁹

One Kerry brewing operation did eventually pick up again after the Great Famine, though it was to last barely more than a decade. The Ballymullen brewery, on the south side of Tralee by the Lee river, was in existence by 1811 at the latest, when, in November that year, 'a poor man, named Healy, while viewing some of the process of brewing ... was precipitated into the boiler, and so scalded as to occasion his death'.⁶⁰ The topographer Samuel Lewis called the Ballymullen brewery in 1837 an 'extensive ale and porter brewery,' producing 2,300 tierces of beer a year.⁶¹ In December 1839 it came into the hands of Robert Stephens & Co., who declared that 'from the long experience R.S. has in the management of this Trade, the Public may rely on being supplied with very superior Ale, Porter, and Beer'.⁶² However, it appears to have ceased brewing by 1843, and in 1847 the Ballymullen brewery, too, was rented to the local poor law board for £150 a year as 'overspill' workhouse accommodation for children and female paupers, which would enable the board to give 'workhouse relief' to a total of four to five hundred people.⁶³

The brewery never appears to have brewed again, and when the nearby Ballymullen distillery, a short distance down the River Lee and on the same mill race, was advertised for sale or lease in March 1858, would-be buyers were told that 'there is no distillery or brewery nearer to Tralee than Cork or Limerick,' respectively 60 and 50 miles distant.⁶⁴ The premises evidently failed to find a buyer, and when the Ballymullen distillery was advertised for lease again the following year, prospective lessees were again informed that there was not

in the County of Kerry a single Distillery or Brewery at work. The entire of this large County and Populous Town at present is supplied from Dublin and Cork with large quantities of Whiskey, Ale and Porter.⁶⁵

In 1865, the old distillery was acquired by a Dublin malt merchant, Joseph Butler, and turned into a brewery, equipped with a 25-quarter mash kieve, and a steam-heated 'wort boiling back' capable of boiling 70 barrels of wort at a time. The business was run by Butler's 21-year-old son Michael and a Tralee businessman named Laurence Redmond, as Michael Butler & Co. of the Castle Desmond Brewery,⁶⁶ a name taken from the ruined castle at Ballymullen usually known locally as Castlemorris. The venture was hailed by a Tralee newspaper, the *Kerry Evening Post*, which said: '

It has supplied a want long felt in Kerry, which has been obliged to draw its porter and ales from distant counties. It has created a good home market for barley, which is now, we believe, the principal grain crop of this county. It has created a manufacture which, we trust, every year will further develop, and which even now gives employment to a large number of hands.⁶⁷

It was brewing in 1870 'superior kinds of stout and porter' made 'of the sound and sweet malted barley of the county in which the establishment is placed,' as well as East India Pale Ale.⁶⁸ Castle Desmond Brewery ales and stouts were now on sale in Limerick and Tipperary, with orders 'even from Dublin,' while local commentators insisted that the company's brews 'rival Bass and Guinness'.⁶⁹ However, by 1872 Michael Butler was at war with the Great Southern and Western Railway Company, which was charging almost half the rates to bring English ale to Tralee as it charged the Castle Desmond brewery to ship ale to the British Army camps on the Curragh, with the *Tralee Chronicle* calling the disparity 'monstrous,' and revealing that because of the high tariff, 'Mr Butler is unable to comply with the orders that daily pour in on him'.⁷⁰ Butler told a meeting of the Kerry Farmers' Club in June that year that he was charged 26 shilling per ton for shipping beer by rail the 170 miles to the Curragh, while the railway company charged English brewers 22s 6d per ton, 13.5% less, for shipping beer the 280 miles from Liverpool to Tralee.⁷¹

Hints that the business was struggling came in May 1874 with the announcement by Butler of the auction of a huge range of items at the brewery, including 'two good draft horses,' nine brewery carts, a float (low-bodied cart), a van, a gig, 'a large number of puncheons,' a bottling machine for bottling porter, 'a large quantity of corks,' 10cwt of sugar, coopers' tools, hand pumps, stable fittings and 'sundry other articles too numerous for insertion'.⁷²

Two years later, in May 1876, the brewery, now described as a 16-quarter plant 'filled with the newest appliances and in complete working order,' and 'an inexhaustible well of excellent water for all brewing purposes,' was itself put up for sale by auction, together with two malthouses on the same site, and another malthouse in the nearby town of Blennerville, plus 'the large dwelling house recently occupied by Mr Michael Butler' on the street side of the brewery.⁷³ It was advertised from Belfast to Cork, but no brewer or distiller seems to have come forward, and in the spring of 1878 it was announced that 'the large and spacious building known as the Castle Desmond Brewery, for some time vacant, has been rented by the Government to serve as supplementary barracks'.⁷⁴ Eventually the premises were bought by a tweed weaving company, Joseph Revington and Sons, and turned into the Ballymullen Mills.⁷⁵

Michael Butler, meanwhile, had one of the strangest career swerves of any brewer ever: into opera. Born in Dublin in 1844, he trained for the stage in his natal city and in London, and made his stage debut aged 33 in 1877, the year after the brewery was put up for sale. He worked briefly for Richard D'Oyly Carte's touring Comedy Opera Company, before a successful 35-year career as a singer and manager under the name Wilfred Esmond, appearing in operas such as *Carmen* and *The Marriage of Figaro*, ended in his death aged 69 in 1913.⁷⁶

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