

Norton, Desmond A. G.

**Working Paper**

## Progress and distress on the Stratford estate in clare during the eighteen forties

Centre for Economic Research Working Paper Series, No. WP02/10

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

UCD School of Economics, University College Dublin (UCD)

*Suggested Citation:* Norton, Desmond A. G. (2002) : Progress and distress on the Stratford estate in clare during the eighteen forties, Centre for Economic Research Working Paper Series, No. WP02/10, University College Dublin, Department of Economics, Dublin, <https://hdl.handle.net/10197/1273>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/72378>

**Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:**

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

**Terms of use:**

*Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.*

*You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.*

*If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.*

*CENTRE FOR ECONOMIC RESEARCH*

*WORKING PAPER SERIES*

*2002*

**Progress and Distress on the Stratford Estate in Clare during  
the Eighteen Forties**

Desmond Norton, University College Dublin

WP02/10

March 2002

**DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS  
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN  
BELFIELD DUBLIN 4**

## PROGRESS AND DISTRESS ON THE STRATFORD ESTATE IN CLARE DURING THE EIGHTEEN FORTIES

Desmond Norton<sup>1</sup>

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the author acquired about 30,000 letters written mainly in the 1840s. These pertained to estates throughout Ireland managed by James Robert Stewart and Joseph Kincaid, hereafter denoted SK. Until the letters - called the SK correspondence in what follows - became the author's property, they had not seen light of day since the 1840s. Addressed mainly to the SK office in Dublin, they were written mainly by landlords, tenants, the partners in SK, local agents, etc. After about 200 years in operation as a land agency, the firm in which members of the Stewart family were the principal partners - Messrs J. R. Stewart & Son(s) from the mid-1880s onwards -- ceased business in the mid-1980s.

Since 1994 the author has been researching the SK correspondence of the 1840s. It gives many new insights into economic and social conditions in Ireland during the decade of the great famine, and into the operation of Ireland's most important land agency during those years. It is intended ultimately to publish details on several of the estates managed by SK in book form. The proposed title is *Landlords, Tenants, Famine: Business of an Irish Land Agency in the 1840s*, a draft of which has now been completed.

A majority of the letters in the larger study from which the present article is drawn are on themes some of which one might expect: rents, distraint (seizure of assets in lieu of rent) ; 'voluntary' surrender of land in return for 'compensation' upon peacefully quitting; formal ejectment (a matter of last resort on estates managed by SK); landlord-assisted emigration (on a scale much more extensive than most historians of Ireland in the 1840s appear to believe); petitions from tenants; complaints by tenants, both about other tenants and local agents; major works of improvement (on almost all of the estates managed by SK); applications by SK, on behalf of proprietors, for government loans to finance improvements; recommendations of agricultural advisers hired by SK, etc. Thus, most of the SK correspondence is about aspects of estate management. It seems, in the 1840s, that the only estate in Clare managed by SK was that of the elderly Col. Stratford. Although the files on the relatively small Stratford estate are much less extensive than those on some of the estates investigated in detail in the draft of *Landlords, Tenants, Famine*, they do refer to most of the core aspects of estate management mentioned above. But in the case of the Clare estate, the material on some of those themes is extremely thin.

## **The Wingfields and Colonel Stratford**

John Wingfield (1772-1850<sup>2</sup>) was a son of the third Viscount Powerscourt. A lieutenant-colonel, he was twin brother of Edward Wingfield, who had an estate managed by SK contiguous to the Moy estuary in northwest Sligo. In 1802 John assumed the additional surname of Stratford and became known by that name. He owned over 2,000 statute acres<sup>3</sup> in northwest Clare between Ennistimon and what is now the town of Lisdoonvarna. This district was remote: in the mid-1840s Lisdoonvarna had not yet become a village. On the other side of the Shannon estuary he owned over 2,000 acres in the Robertstown-Shanagolden district of west Limerick<sup>4</sup>.

The Stratford townlands in Clare were in a square-shaped cluster in the Union of Ennistimon. All but two of them (which were in the Parish of Kilfenora) were part of the Parish of Kilshanny. Amongst these townlands, Tooreen is at the northwest of the cluster and Boghil is at its northeast. Crosscoraun is between Tooreen and Boghil. Smithstown is in the centre of the cluster. To the east of the cluster, Stratford owned a small area of property in the village of Kilfenora. The SK correspondence strongly suggests that until the second half of the 1840s, a tenant named James Spellissy was resident there.

The Wingfields obtained the greater part of their Clare estates<sup>5</sup> in the seventeenth century. In 1788 Stratford became entitled to the family's properties there and in Limerick under the Will of his father. He had no residence in Ireland in the 1840s. He dwelt at Stratford Place in London and at Maidstone in Kent. Documents dated 1752 and 1761 indicate that his holdings in Clare and Limerick in the 1840s were almost surely the same lands as those owned by Lord Powerscourt in those counties in the mid-1700s. The relative valuations of the two estates are suggested by noting that in the mid-1700s, annual rent receipts<sup>6</sup> from that in Limerick were close to £600, while those from the Clare estate were less than £400. The difference in receipts reflects the fact that the quality of the land in Clare was generally inferior to that in Limerick. Today, some of the townlands on the former Clare estate are boggy or swampy; however, land quality generally improves as one moves to the east in the direction of Kilfenora.

In 1761 Powerscourt's Clare estate was held under leases by twelve tenants<sup>7</sup>, probably middlemen. There were still middlemen there in the early 1840s, but by then most of the occupants were tenants-at-will to the head landlord. SK commenced<sup>8</sup> active management of the Stratford lands in Clare in 1841. SK implemented many improvements on the estate, and paid Stratford's annual subscription (£3) to the Kilfenora dispensary<sup>9</sup>.

In the years just before the famine, Stratford's Clare tenants were peaceful and hospitable people. On 8 September 1843 Arthur

Vincent, SK's agent resident at Shanagolden in Limerick, wrote to SK about a recent visit to the Clare estate: 'I heard Mrs Considine [probably the wife of James Considine, who seems to have been SK's most important tenant resident on the estate<sup>10</sup>] was greatly disappointed I did not call in as she had lunch prepared for me. I find the people remarkable for their Hospitality'.

An obvious link with the Powerscourts can be found in Clare today. This is the house called 'Wingfield' (the Powerscourt family name) near Kilfenora. As indicated by Weir<sup>11</sup>:

A seventeenth-century house ... stood on the site of the present residence .... Honora ..., wife of Richard Wingfield ... was the eldest daughter of Teige O'Brien of nearby Smithstown Castle. Their son, Sir Edward Wingfield, was progenitor of the Lords Powerscourt of County Wicklow .... Honora's Will was dated 1650. Her ... descendent, Edward Wingfield-Stratford, who in 1855 leased the house ... to John O'Dwyer<sup>12</sup>, was declared bankrupt in 1886 when his estates passed to his principal creditor [who] held them until they were purchased by the Congested Districts Board and re-distributed amongst the tenants between 1915 and 1920. Wingfield Lodge has been in the hands of the Caher [Cahir] family ever since.

### **The Blackwells**

Himself a tenant on Stratford's Tooreen, John Blackwell, a Catholic whose forebears had long been on the estate<sup>13</sup>, was SK's local agent in Clare from 1841 onwards. Until his death in December 1840, a man named Shawe had been Stratford's agent there. Blackwell had been employed by both Stratford and Shawe: in a letter to SK dated 28 February 1841, Blackwell wrote that 'I have no doubt but that you ... will continue me in the same employment. My salary was but low, £10-10: £5-5 from Col Stratford for acting as Land Bailiff and £5-5 from Mr Shawe as acting under agent'. Blackwell's role under SK's management was similar to what it had been when Shawe was alive: he was both bailiff and under-agent to the aforementioned Arthur Vincent.

Although a road intersected Crosscoraun to the east of Tooreen, there was no road through hilly and swampy Tooreen in the early 1840s. However, a side road entered Tooreen from the northeast: this was a spur from that through Crosscoraun. The side road ended at Blackwell's house beside the stream called the Tooreen River<sup>14</sup>. Roadworks during the famine years were to ease Blackwell's access to the southwestern part of the estate.

Blackwell usually sent rents to SK in the form of half-notes.

The SK letters refer to two instances (both in 1843) in which a half-note, sent from Clare, was lost in the post. However, the fact that half-notes were missing probably did not cause SK any financial loss: following presentation to the banks of the other halves, the banks (the Provincial Bank and the National Bank at Kilrush<sup>15</sup>) seem to have paid the full amounts. Sending money as half-notes could be awkward in another respect: in 1846 the serial numbers on two halves sent by SK to Blackwell's son Thomas (then at an agricultural college in Derry) did not match<sup>16</sup>. At least once, Blackwell transferred rents to Dublin by means of a letter of credit. This method of transfer involved going to a bank in Ennis (a round trip of about 35 miles).

There were a few families named Blackwell on the Clare estate in the 1840s. One of the earliest letters from there to SK is from Mrs Henry Blackwell of Smithstown, whose husband had recently died. Dated 10 February 1842, it requested a waiver of £6 in rent arrears. Margaret Blackwell of Tooreen was another Blackwell widow. On 7 November 1845 John Blackwell wrote to SK stating: 'I send half notes from her amt. sixteen pounds. She requested of me to let you know that she lost a cow'.

The fact that Blackwells on the estate were related to him must have made John's job more difficult. Thus, on 30 January 1843 he wrote to Kincaid: 'I take the liberty of sending you a hare by this day's mail car .... I distrained ... James & Robert Blackwell'. They were John's own brothers.

On 18 May 1843 John Blackwell sent SK half-notes for rents, some of which pertained to James Blackwell who was then seriously ill: in the enclosed letter, John informed that 'my brother James is confined to the bed ... with a lump on his belly .... I wrote for Doctor Armstrong who came gratis'. But tension between James and John was mounting as James approached death. On 29 March 1844 James sent a petition to SK stating that his late father lived several years on the lands of Smithstown and that he [James] 'got a part of his father's holding as a marriage portion .... He has got very bad health .... Some evil disposed persons are endeavouring to get his land and to through [throw] petitioner and his poor helpless wife and children out .... These evil persons are his own nearest relatives'.

James was dead by 3 May 1844, when John Blackwell informed SK: 'I demanded possession according to your directions .... Widow Blackwell refused to give possession'. This widow was the wife of James Blackwell. John threatened to distrain her property in 1845. On 30 September of that year Anne Blackwell (wife of the late James) wrote to Kincaid:

The widow of the late James Blackwell ... begs ... to express an Astonishment at the treatment she has received from John Blackwell .... Revenge and ill-

will prompted that man ... to be cruel against her .... What private motives this would-be-tyrant has, is unknown, but the common say of the country is 'to oblige her ... to flee her holding, in order that some one of his family, or well-wishers may get it' .... The rent ... is forthcoming .... The price of three pigs and a cask of butter will be ready ... on about the tenth of October next. She is mother of six orphans ... and it is evident that their uncle must be absolutely of an unfeeling disposition, when he acts against their mother ... [like] a wolf .... God ... rescue your poor applicant from the grasp of him, who means to ... send her a beggar on the wide world.

Anne Blackwell did pay, close to the amount promised, in October 1845. But in April 1846 SK sent John notices to quit to be served on her, and some months later he indicated that he wanted her land. On 29 October he wrote to SK:

I was told ... that the widow J Blackwell is preparing to go to America .... I trust your Honrs. will have the kindness of not allowing any strange name in my brothers place but have myself the possession of it .... Will I distrain her if I find out that she is for going. I suppose she will if she be in the Family way as reported from that unfortunate man she is keeping in spite of her brother & friends. A man that is married before & his wife still living.

John Blackwell again expressed his desire for the land held by his sister-in-law in a letter to SK dated 7 November 1846:

She ... told me there were two or three messages sent her to know whether she would sell her [interest in her] holding when the report went about that she was talking of going abroad .... Now that I see that she is laid out on going ... I trust your Honrs. will have the kindness of giving me some money to enable me to settle with her .... I would repay back the money by instalments .... Mrs James Blackwell requested of me to tell you that she expected your Honrs. would ... let her know which would be the best place to go with her helpless family, 6 children .... The poor unfortunate creature is an object of charity now abandoned by her friends & relations.

John was worried when he wrote to Kincaid on 23 November 1846: 'The widow of James Blackwell is disposing of her [interest in her] holding .... I ... desire your kind interference from prohibiting her from disposing of it to strangers .... I am willing to pay her as much as any other bidder'.

John Blackwell had a son named Thomas who, on 3 July 1844, wrote to SK stating that he intended 'going to the Templemoyle Seminary [an agricultural college in Co Derry] for a couple of years, from the account of Mr [John] Stewart the agriculturalist [employed by SK but not a close blood relative of J. R. Stewart] gave me of it'. In the same letter, he sought financial support from SK for going 'the first year, and take it back by instalments at 6 or 10 per cent'. It seems that SK did provide some form of assistance<sup>17</sup>: Thomas Blackwell was a student at Templemoyle in 1845 and 1846. It may be the case that there were two students from Stratford's Clare estate at Templemoyle in 1846. The second of these, 'son of James Spellissy' may have later become an attorney in New York<sup>18</sup>.

John Blackwell's son Thomas may have been assigned the lands in Smithstown formerly farmed by James Blackwell and his widow. Only two Blackwells were listed on Stratford's Clare estate in the Griffith *Valuation* of 1855. They were John, who held about 160 acres in Tooreen and 4 acres in Smithstown, and Thomas (who might have been John's brother rather than his son of the same name), who held 42 acres in Smithstown. Although there are some Blackwells residing in Ennistimon, today there are no Blackwells in the entire Parish of Kilshanny<sup>19</sup>. It seems that the Blackwell line on Smithstown ended long ago. But a field there is locally known as "Blackwell's meadow".

The remains of John Blackwell's house can today be seen beside the road, completed during the famine, which cuts through Tooreen ('Tooreen Road'). Starting on the former side road mentioned near the beginning of the present Section, and moving towards Tooreen Hill, this is at the bridge over the Tooreen River. The structure is now in a ruinous state. The last male resident here was a James Blackwell, who had married but died childless circa 1946. As was the case in the 1840s, some of the land between the house and the river is today a swamp. Continuing along the road in the direction of Tooreen Hill, the next house on the right was also a Blackwell dwelling, in which the last male resident was named John who, like his brother James, married, and who, around the time of his brother's demise, also died childless. This house is still a family residence<sup>20</sup>.



## **Developments on the Estate, mainly before the Famine**

### Distress and Improvements

Early in 1842 SK sought to have the sparse roads on the Clare estate repaired. The work was by the tenants themselves who, in return for their labour, were given rent allowances<sup>21</sup>. The Summer of 1842 was a time of distress among the tenants. On 15 June, Blackwell wrote that 'some of them were in a State of Starvation'. SK responded with works of improvement: it was hoped that the resulting employment would enable them to buy food. Blackwell indicated that he was about to commence drainage beside his own holding. Also on 15 June he reported: 'It is a real quagmire .... There was a cow of mine drowned there a few years ago & another cow of mine nearly drowned there last Spring .... The usual wages in this country is 8d. @ day .... The tenants are complaining of the wages .... I'll give but 8d. until I hear from yr. Honr. again & find what is given in other places'. This passage indicates that on the Stratford estate in Clare, no significant works of improvement, involving the hire of labour, had been implemented in the years immediately before SK actively commenced as Stratford's agent.

On 19 June, Blackwell informed SK that he had '15 men of the most distressed each day [on drainage]. The tenants are in such distress that they are pushing for work. Would you allow more than 15 men @ day .... There are some of the tenants that's not able to come forward to work through weakness for want of provision .... I am in want of provision 2' [too]. He did get permission to increase numbers employed. Furthermore, late in June, SK sent (from the Stratford lands in northwest Limerick) John Stewart the agriculturalist, to plan further drainage as well as roadworks on the estate. In August, Arthur Vincent, the SK agent in Limerick, came and laid out further work. On 17 August, Blackwell sent SK details of work in progress and works which were planned, and added 'now that there are jobs ... if your Honr. thought fit to allow those in arrear to work in part payment of it I am sure they would be glad to do so'. His suggestion does not seem to have been implemented. In fact, most of the work came to an abrupt halt late in August<sup>22</sup>.

Many of the tenants were distressed in the Summer and Autumn of 1843, when the prices of their produce were lower than usual. On 18 May, Blackwell informed SK that he had been 'expecting to get a good deal [of cash] after the fair day of Ennistymon [but] such of the tenants as had a beast for sale must wait for the fair of Kilfenora'. On 6 October, Blackwell wrote that he and other tenants had been selling butter in Kilfenora but that the price 'is remaining very low'. On 16 November the SK employee Griffith wrote to Kincaid that Blackwell 'fears the Potato crop is "slack" that many of them are rotten & will not keep'. And on 19 December the middleman Perse Stamer sought a waiver of

rent, on account of 'the depressed state of the times'.

John Stewart, the agriculturalist employed by SK on estates in Sligo, Clare and Limerick, returned to the Clare estate in March 1843. On 4 April he wrote to SK: 'I have been here for the last fortnight during which time I have gone through the tenants and advised them to alter their system of husbandry & ... to turn ... to the draining of their land .... They are busy sowing their oats & planting their potatoes & most miserable tillage it is ..., the land in general so wet that they could not dress it but even where there is a dry field they dont do it .... I brought ... turnip ... seed & gave a little to each of the tenants who I find has a spot for such ... green crops'.

John Stewart left Clare around the middle of April but he was back on 11 August, when Blackwell informed SK that 'Stewart ... is ... measuring roads ... & teaching the tenants how they would drain .... He brought some tools. Five crow bars, three sledges, three hammers & six picks'. In the same letter, Blackwell indicated that the tenants probably had to pay for the tools. Thus, it seems that many of the improvements on the estate circa 1843 were implemented by the tenants themselves. In some cases<sup>23</sup> they received allowances in their rents for their labour on such improvements. It appears that in one case, SK agreed to allow a tenant who had a lease the sum of £35 for building 'a substantial residence'<sup>24</sup>. John Stewart was staying at 'Wingfield Lodge' on the Clare estate on 1 June 1844 when he reported to SK that 'most of the subsoiled plots [there] have been treated [by the tenants] according to my directions'.

By the eve of the famine there had been very considerable improvements in both the infrastructure and the practice of husbandry on the Clare estate. On 3 May 1845 John Stewart wrote to SK from the Wingfield estate (that of Stratford's twin brother) in Sligo: 'It is now near the time I usually go to the Clare estate for to measure and inspect the drains and other works ... & to give the tenants instructions [on] how to drill & prepare their turnip .... I dont see such lasting improvements going on in any part of the country as ... on the Clare estate, that is as regards thorough draining & subsoiling and the growing of green crops .... There was as good a crop of Turnips, Potatoes & Clover on plots on the Clare Estate last year as there was in any part of the country'. Whether Stewart came to Clare during the Summer of 1845 is unknown. However, the SK correspondence of that period contains references to allowances for furrow drains and main drains in Clare.

The then recent improvements in Clare suggest an atmosphere of optimism on the eve of the famine. However, the abundant potato crop of 1844 started to rot early in 1845. Thus, on 7 April 1845 Blackwell wrote to SK that he wanted 'to buy Potatoes for Seed as I would not continue to sow any of my own in consequence of

the rot. I'll come short of eating Potatoes too'. On 28 April he asked SK for financial aid. By mid-year, disease had broken out in the Blackwell household. On 20 July, Blackwell informed SK that his twelve year old daughter had 'a low typhus fever. She is speechless'. On 31 August he wrote that 'the rot in Potatoes in many parts of this neighbourhood is dreadful'.

### Distrain, Surrender and Emigration

Distrain on the Clare estate in the years immediately before the famine was frequent. In fact Blackwell, in one of his earliest letters in the SK correspondence, suggested that the properties of certain tenants should be distrained<sup>25</sup>. Formal ejection, by contrast, may have been nonexistent in those years: the pre-famine letters on the estate do not provide a single reference to any ejection decree. However, in the face of rent arrears, Blackwell asked several tenants to surrender their holdings. On at least one occasion the initiative came from a tenant. Consider the case of Thomas Reidy. On 31 January 1842 Blackwell wrote to SK: 'Thomas Riedy of Toureen has his mind made up to remove to Van Diemens land with his family, ten in number .... If he had his portion of Toureen rent free he could badly support & clothe his long family by the produce of it. That being so he expects your Honrs. will have the kindness ... of sending off himself & family. He has no means ... His brother Darby Riedy<sup>26</sup> ... is satisfied to be under the arrear & keep the holding'. SK responded favourably to Thomas Reidy's request for assistance to emigrate. On 9 April 1842 Blackwell informed SK: 'Thomas Riedy ... requested that I would state to your Honr. as vessils were not going out to Australia; that he has his mind made up to enjoy the offer your Honr. was very kind to promise, to send himself & family to America which is only 8 now, as two of his children died since he wrote first to your Honr. on the subject'.

The departure of the Reidy family is the only case of emigration from the Clare estate mentioned in the pre-famine SK letters. Although SK did organise a programme of emigration from the estate in the Spring of 1847 (see below), the correspondence yields only one other case of a named tenant on the estate -- Marty Considine -- whose emigration was assisted by SK.

Early in 1846 Marty Considine<sup>27</sup>, who held eight acres of land on Gortnaboul townland, announced that his family of seven and his sister wanted to go to America. Blackwell wrote to SK on his behalf requesting assistance. Marty's brother Michael<sup>28</sup>, a tenant on adjacent land, offered him £40 for his interest in the eight acres. It was from this £40 that Marty expected to pay the passage to America. SK agreed to lend the money to Michael. Marty Considine and his family sailed to America from the port of Galway on 1 April 1846. His brother was probably the Michael Considine who was buried in Kilshanny churchyard in 1890. Today another Michael Considine resides in Gortnaboul, on 50 acres.

Following the distress of 1842, assets of several tenants were distrained early in 1843. One of them, James Considine, wrote to SK on 4 January 1843 requesting that he be allowed to defer sale of his hay until the price increased, and he added: 'Should you give directions to sell it by auction ... it would not sell [at a sensible price] .... In case you give directions to sell the hay, and the four head of cattle, what would become of myself and my poor family .... I will conclude in imploring your mercy'. Considine again wrote to SK on 26 April 1843, claiming that he had spent 'upwards of £500 [probably the equivalent of about £50,000 in purchasing power at the beginning of the twenty first century] during the past 14 years' improving his farm. He stated that his harvest in 1842 had been poor, and that he now feared ejectment because of rent arrears. He was still on the estate on 2 November 1843, when Blackwell reported to SK: 'I got no money yet from ... James Considine'. It seems that Considine did manage to settle with SK: On 27 September 1845, Blackwell wrote that 'Stewart [the agriculturalist] is [staying] at James Considine's'.

On 28 April 1843 Blackwell wrote that he had 'served [notices to quit on] Corbits wife in her own cabbin, Hallinan & [his own brother] James'. Six months later he informed SK: 'I demanded possession of James Blackwell, Hallinan & the widow Corbit .... They all said that they would sooner sell what they had ... than go out of their houses this time of the year'. In his letter of 28 April he indicated that he hoped to serve notices to quit on two other named tenants, but there was a problem. He informed: 'I am on the watch & prepared to serve them but it is unknown what part of the country they are in .... O'Connor's door is locked & no smoke in it but I saw smoke in old Davises house now & then but no way of puting in a notice & even if a man got an opportunity of puting in the notice it is unknown who is inside'.

Blackwell continued to threaten distraint up to the time of the potato failure in the Autumn of 1845. He also placed keepers on land in order to prevent clandestine sale. For example, on 12 September 1845 James Spellissy requested SK to 'write Blackwell to take the keepers from me, and not to put me to the expense of paying them'. On 27 September, Blackwell wrote to SK about Widow James Blackwell's produce: 'My Brother Robert is watching it for me not wishing to put the creature to the expense of keepers. She came here yesterday to tell me that she would have what she promised by the time you would come to Clare, £18'.

## Famine<sup>29</sup>

On 1 November 1845 Blackwell reported to SK that 'the general accounts of the potatoe crop are dreadful. Oatmeal ... in Ennistymon ... is now so high as 2/4 [two shillings and four pence] @ stone'. Thus, the price of a stone of oatmeal was then so high that it required about three and a half days of work by a labourer (if he could obtain work) to buy it. Blackwell sent SK further details on 16 November: 'I travelled through the Estate ... to take a view of the Potatoe crop which is dreadful .... The people ... would be satisfied if the seed remained alive but I am much in dread it will not'.

The failure of the potato in the Autumn of 1845 had little immediate effect on rent receipts. Thus, on 4 December the SK employee Maxwell wrote from Ennistimon to J. R. Stewart: 'This day I began work here and have got as much as usual say in round numbers £400 and £300 cash out of that. I expect to get about a hundred more. The Potatoe Rot among the small tenants I hear has done great damage and I suppose that as the spring comes on we will have to give them work to keep them from starving .... This country is very quiet and I dont see any turn out against paying rents'.

The 'hungry months' - usually those of Summer - began early in 1846. On 14 March, Blackwell inquired of SK: 'Let me know what your intentions are respecting relieving the tenants in want .... There are a great many tenants now trusting to the handful [of potatoes] they are striving to preserve from rotting by ... keeping them dry. I am sorry to have to state that I am one of those in immediate want<sup>30</sup> of provision but what I am striving to preserve for seed'.

Blackwell again wrote to SK three days later: 'The ... tenants ... are out of provision except what [seed] they intended to sow .... The Parish Priest and the Flock met after mass last Sunday & he pointed out a decent man out of every quarter in the parish to take a list of the families in their own neighbourhood. He called on me to take a list of the families in my own locality in order to have characters to produce before the [Relief] Committee' [which, until the Autumn of 1846, issued employment tickets for engagement on public works].

Arthur Vincent arrived in Ennistimon from Limerick at the end of March 1846 in order to prepare a report for SK on the condition of the tenantry on the Clare estate. He informed Blackwell that John Stewart, the agriculturalist, would come soon 'to lay out work for the tenants to enable them to earn the price of provision'<sup>31</sup>. But Blackwell saw a problem of timing: On 3 April he wrote to SK that 'the people could not attend the work this time of year, the Spring business [of sowing] interfering'. He therefore suggested an alternative: he recommended that SK should

send money 'to be given to such of the tenants as are in immediate want & to distribute it among them'. The view of John Stewart, who came to Clare around mid-April, was similar. On 17 April, Stewart reported to SK:

There is a few of them very badly off and I am sorry to think that a part of that few will never be better. There is 4 or 5 tenants on the Estate that are in want of immediate relief in the way of a loan as they could not attend any work that you might set on until they have their crops sown .... After they have that done they will be in want of relief in the way of work .... The best way to give relief to the few above mentioned would be to send them some money to be repaid in work when they had their tillage done .... Send the money to John Blackwell as the most of them are in Toureen and he is in the number himself, and let them join and send a horse & car to Ennis for meal and perhaps some of them might want to get some seed potatoes .... If they got meal from you they would be under the impression that they would never have to pay for it as they got it before for nothing.

Stewart went on to mention various improvements which could be commenced in May, after the tenants had completed their tillage.

SK did send some relief - £10 'to be lent & distributed among the most distressed'<sup>32</sup> - and on 26 April, Blackwell informed SK that he would 'distribute it without either favor or affection ... but as I see them in immediate want the sum you sent will go but very short'. In a letter to SK dated 1 May 1846, Blackwell listed the (seven) beneficiaries of the above-mentioned £10. They included his brother Robert and the widow of James Blackwell. However, he added that 'a few pounds more will be wanted shortly'. The same letter indicates that he had just received a further £10 from SK, for relief of himself and family.

It seems that the works of improvement on the Clare estate, laid out by John Stewart, commenced in May. On 17 July, this Stewart wrote to SK: 'I ... paid the men a fortnight wages .... The work on the Clare Estate could not be going on more regular than it is .... Toureen hill is cut down all for about £1 worth of work. The Toureen road will be graveled early next week and the [private] Carronnebohel [ie. Boghil<sup>33</sup>] road going on very well .... The Board of Works are running a new line [of road] across it which will make your road of very great use to the tenants'.

Some observations on the usefulness of these public and private works is appropriate. First, the new Board of Works road was all or part of the present road, from east to west, linking Ballygoonaun (near Kilfenora) to the road, from north to south, which intersects Crosscoraun. The Tooreen road joins the latter

road near the latter's junction with the Board's road. Between Ballygoonaun and Crosscoraun, the privately-constructed Boghil road joined the Board's road at right angles. It went from south to north into the bog of Boghil. The roadworks in Toureen, along with the Board's road, improved access eastwards for the Toureen tenants. Furthermore, taken in conjunction with the new road from south to north on Boghil, they enhanced access to the bog.

The public works in the vicinity of the Clare estate commenced in July 1846 and (probably following a temporary suspension) were extended into the Autumn and Winter. Thus, both public and private works were in progress during the Summer. The private works on the estate were financed by Stratford. However, given that it was intended that the public works would ultimately have to be financed by local property taxes, Blackwell was alarmed by their scale. On 5 August he wrote to SK:

It is ... a very grand thing to see Col Stratford's tenants employed on his own property ... [as] distinguished from hundreds of men working on the Board of Works lines .... Indeed it would surprise a person to cast an eye east & west, as long as he could see, on the numbers of men working on the new line getting across Carrownbohilly [Boghil] where we are just now at work [on the private road which joined the Board's] & there are hundreds of them working on the same line that are not in our view at all besides many other lines & sinking of hills in this part of the country, so that I am afraid that the County of Clare will not be able shortly to pay the County Charges.

The failure of the 1846 potato crop was apparent by 5 August, when Blackwell informed SK: 'There will not be a potatoe hardly alive next Christmas .... It is ... melancholy to see whole gardens of potatoes black looking that were fine looking a few days ago .... Some gardens that were green looking last Sunday were black on Monday'.

Private works on the Clare estate ended in September. Some of Stratford's tenants therefore sought employment on public works. On 1 October 1846 John Blackwell's brother Robert, who had been a steward on private works during the Summer, wrote to SK requesting use of influence to obtain employment for him on public works. On 2 October, John Blackwell wrote to SK: 'Most of the tenants are in great distress just now. [More] than they were last July as being earning then & not earning any now. There are lots of respectable people runing about here ... to get situations under the Board of Works & I was informed yesterday that it was the Head Engineer that could do it .... So [I] trust your Honrs. will have the kindness of speaking to him for me ... so that I will get some Employment'. SK responded by providing the Blackwells with letters of recommendation. However, John's

application to the head engineer at Ennis was not successful<sup>34</sup>.

Early in October 1846 the tenants petitioned SK to send them meal<sup>35</sup>, for which they were expected to pay. Blackwell went around the estate asking them how much they wanted, and on 11 October he wrote to SK requesting that three tons of meal be sent to Clarecastle. He added: 'The times are very disturbed .... There was a horse belonging to a man from this Parish shot near Ennis yesterday .... There is a man ... from Ennis selling ... meal & flour in Ennistymon & always when a cargo is coming to Ennistymon it is escorted by some of the policemen. Do you think would it be expensive for you to order a few of them up with the carmen as far as Ennistymon'.

On 25 October 1846 Blackwell sent SK half-notes for £35-10, this sum being most of the cost (£42, excluding cost of delivery from Clarecastle to Ennistimon) of the three tons of meal sent by SK. In the enclosed letter he stated:

Its a loss that we had not more of it. It is now 2s/2d @ stone in Ennistymon. Did you Sirs buy any more than the 3 tons you have sent. The 3 tons did not go far on the tenants .... A good many of them were between two minds when you mentioned £14 a ton, for it was selling at the time for 1s/10d @ stone in Ennistymon .... I would much want 3 tons more .... If some [more] relief does not come half the people will starve ... as the public work is not getting on in this Parish .... I am much surprised that men of property & learning did not put a stop to the opening of unnecessary lines of roads, & [instead] fence, drain & subsoil the land which would be of use to both landlord & tenant, as all these unnecessary lines are nothing but snares & instruments to destroy both landlord & tenant [through taxation].

This letter reveals that the savings due to bulk purchase and bulk delivery of meal by SK were smaller than might have been expected. The cost per ton on arrival at Ennistimon was £14 plus the cost of carriage from Clarecastle. By way of contrast, the price of meal in Ennistimon at the beginning of October -- 1s/10d per stone -- was (on a pro rata basis) equivalent to £14-13-4 per ton. On the other hand, the Ennistimon price of 2s/2d per stone at the end of October was the equivalent of £17-6-8 per ton; hence bulk purchase by SK at £14 per ton to Clarecastle would then certainly have been worthwhile. Given the destitution of the tenantry, every penny mattered.

Blackwell's letter of 25 October closed with a listing of the amounts of the meal bought, at original cost price to Clarecastle, by each of thirty one named tenants.



Presumably with a view to spurring SK to re-commence private works, Blackwell again referred to injurious effects of large-scale public works in his letter to SK dated 29 October 1846. In this he wrote:

There are already too much public works laid out in this Barony. As much ... as will be injurious yet to both landlord & tenant. Taxes will I fear amt. so high as that it will be next to impossibility to get over them. It is very extraordinary that there is no public works going on yet in this Parish [of Kilshanny] & men at work in the surrounding Parishes. The most of the inhabitants of this Parish marched to Ennistymon last monday to the resident Engineer to know the reason they were kept back & the chief part of them in a State of Starvation .... In the next Parish to this the line leading thro' Ballyguila ... is ... through Augustine Kerins best part ... & also through Michl. Considines. They will be greatly injured by it .... There were plenty of roads already. Lay out the money in draining & subsoiling.

Although we can be sure that arrears of rent accumulated, it seems the few (if any) of the tenants who farmed on Stratford's Clare estate were removed from the land in 1846. Those whose possession was terminated seem to have been middlemen. Thus, on 14 March, Blackwell wrote to SK: "I received the parcel of Ejectments ... You are quite right to think that I will get no opposition, for the tenants would be very glad to get under the head landlord".

In 1846 SK's agents seem to have been fully aware that many of the tenants could not pay. Maxwell came to collect rents in June. Some days before his arrival, Blackwell wrote to him, at Shanagolden in Limerick, informing: 'I could not see the [Boghil] tenants at [Kilshanny] chapel as the Carrownbohilly [Boghil] tenants goes to mass at Kilfenora, but I sent for them last Monday morning & told them you would take so small a sum from the whole of them as £20. They all spoke one man after another to say that unless they could borrow it they could not pay'.

The SK correspondence on the Clare estate contains only a single letter written in 1847. But the information which it contains is important: it indicates that a programme of assisted emigration from the estate was implemented in the Spring of that year. Thus, on 5 May 1847, J. R. Stewart wrote to Kincaid: 'You see by the Enclosed ... the numbers sent from Col Stratford's Clare Estate. Vincent gives a pitious account of their wretched appearance & want of clothing. I only wonder. He did not venture on two or three pounds to get them some, but he dont venture far without orders'. One wonders whether these emigrants included Denis Spellissy, who appears to have been a son of the

Stratford tenant James Spellissy, and who was an attorney in Manhattan in the 1880s<sup>36</sup>.

The SK correspondence pertaining to the Clare estate in 1848 is sparse. The letters reveal, following some depopulation, that Stratford obtained a Government loan in order to finance drainage works on the estate<sup>37</sup>. The SK correspondence on Clare contains no letters dated 1849 or subsequently.

### **Concluding Observations**

It can be concluded from the foregoing that on Stratford's behalf, SK's response to distress on the Clare estate in the 1840s was humane. Although many notices to quit were served, the correspondence provides no evidence that any tenant who farmed on the estate was ejected in the 1840s. It seems that works of improvement, involving hire of labour, were first implemented on the estate (in 1842) in response to destitution. Following instructions from the SK agriculturalist John Stewart, the practice of husbandry greatly improved in 1843-5. In the Spring of 1846, SK sent small sums of money for relief of the most distressed tenants, and again implemented works of improvement during the Summer. Failure of the potato crop in the Autumn of 1846, combined with termination of private works in September, accentuated distress. However, SK responded by arranging a shipment to the estate of three tons of meal, for which the tenants were expected to pay. It seems that by early 1847 SK had come to the conclusion that the existing population on the estate could no longer be maintained. The firm therefore arranged a programme of assisted emigration from the estate, which was supervised by Arthur Vincent. It must, however, be recognised that those who then emigrated were wretched in appearance, and in want of clothing.

Especially during 1847-8, that huge numbers of tenants were dispossessed in the Poor Law Union of Kilrush - in the southwest of Clare - has been well documented<sup>38</sup>. A small number of them did manage to get to America. However, in the Kilrush district, landlord assistance to enable them to emigrate seems to have been rare or nonexistent. As already indicated, the SK correspondence on Stratford's Clare in the same period is very thin. But it can reasonably be inferred that Stratford's treatment of tenants was more humane than in the case of the thousands of destitute and dying in the Kilrush district. Thus, on Stratford's behalf, SK did organise a programme of assisted emigration from Clare in 1847, though the number involved - probably small - is unknown. Note also that descendants of many of those on Stratford's Clare estate before 1847 were still there several decades later.

## Notes and References

1. I thank members of the North Clare Historical Society who in November 1999 at Kilshanny made helpful comments in response to my lecture there on Stratford's Clare estate. I am also grateful to The Business Research Programme, Michael Smurfit Graduate School of Business at University College Dublin, for financial assistance in the larger project from which the present article is drawn. Unless otherwise indicated, each of the unpublished documents to which I refer is currently in my possession, and may be consulted by researchers.
2. Bernard Burke, *Peerage and Baronetage of the British Empire* (London, 1864), p. 904.
3. *Union of Ennistimon, Valuation* (Dublin, 1855).
4. Details of Stratford's Limerick estate will be found in my chapter 'Stratford's Robertstown Estate in the 1840s' in a forthcoming book, by Thomas Culhane, on the history of that district.
5. A letter to SK from Perse Stamer, 19 December 1843, claimed that the Stamers had been tenants to Stratford 'and his family for more than two hundred years'. The name Stamer appears on a document of 1746 referring to the Powerscourt estate in Clare. See 'Ld. Powerscourt rents Acct. Stated for 2 ys. Rent Ending 1 May 1746'.
6. George Green, 'Account stated for May Rents 1751 of Robertstown', 24 February 1752; 'George Evans's Account ... for the Gale due out of Lord Powerscourts Estate in the County of Clare the 1st day of May 1761, and the same title, 'the first day of November 1761'.
7. The tenants are listed in the references cited in note 6.
8. On 28 February 1841, John Blackwell wrote to SK: 'I did not acquaint the tenants as yet that you accepted the agency of Col Stratford's Clare property'. Circa 1790 Henry Stewart, who was father of J. R. Stewart, had some role in collection/forwarding of rents from the Clare estate.
9. Francis Fitzgerald to SK in April of 1842, 1843 and 1845.
10. Arthur Vincent to SK, 20 January 1842. *The Tithe Applotment Book, Parish of Kilshanny*, lists James Considine on 110 acres in Smithstown circa 1830. I thank Mary Ronan of Lisdoonvarna for sending me a copy of her notes from this document.
11. Hugh Weir, *Historical Genealogical Architectural notes on some Houses of Clare* (Whitegate, Clare, 1986), p. 280. This

'Wingfield' seems to have been in decay in the early nineteenth century. Although Leet lists three residences named 'Wingfield', he does not indicate any of that name in Clare. See Ambrose Leet, *Directory to the ... Noted Places in Ireland*, second edition, (Dublin, 1814), p. 390.

12. This person, whose tombstone can be seen in Kilshanny graveyard, died in 1879 aged 72.

13. Addendum to 'Rental of Lord Powerscourts Estate in the County of Clare ... Ending the first of Novr. 1787'; John Blackwell to Stratford, 15 January 1841, and to SK, 28 October 1845.

14. See Sheet 8 of the 1842 Ordnance Survey map of Co Clare.

15. R. Purcell to SK, 20 March 1843; M. Kelly to SK, 13 June 1843.

16. John Blackwell to SK, 23 August 1846.

17. John Blackwell to SK, 7 April 1845, 25 July 1845 and 26 April 1846. It also seems that SK assisted the son of one of the tenants on Stratford's Limerick estate to attend an agricultural college in the mid-1840s. See note 4.

18. James Spellissy usually wrote from Kilfenora. On 10 January 1846 he asked SK to 'get' a place at Templemoyle for his 'little boy' of 17, who would have been aged about 53 in 1882. In 1999 I found two letters among the stock of a New York stamp dealer. They had been sent from Clare to Denis Spellissy, an attorney at 170 Broadway. Written by Belinda McNamara of 'Corrofin' and dated 1882, the first asked 'the favour of assisting ... sons of Mr. James Thynes of Toureen [Tooreen] ... to secure an independent position in New York'. The same letter added: 'I need not remind you of the horrible cruel innocent death of their beloved young brother Francy .... I dare say it would be as pieces if treason to get them printed here just now. It is a pity not to publish them in the American papers'. Dated 1883, the second letter sought a loan from Spellissy to pay the sender's passage to America.

19. Oral communication by Michael Fitzgerald of Smithstown.

20. This second former Blackwell house is the dwelling of Robert Crosbie and his wife Suzanne Linnane. I thank them for providing me with some of the information in the present paragraph. In the same context I thank Jack Flanagan of Dough, Lahinch, and Jimmy Leahy of Ballyalla.

21. John Blackwell to SK, 22 January 1842.

22. John Blackwell to Kincaid, 26 August 1842.

23. Michael Molony to Kincaid, 30 January 1843; John Blackwell to SK, 27 November 1843; James Spellissy to SK, 16 September 1844.

24. James Spellissy to SK, 3 May 1842; Memorandum signed by James Spellissy, 21 June 1843. See, however, Spellissy to SK, 26 September 1848, in which he wrote: 'I hope you will make me some allowance for the very expensive house that I built, tho not built according to your plan'.

25. John Blackwell to Arthur Vincent, 10 September 1841.

26. The last person named Reidy on Tooreen (Patrick Reidy) died in 1924, aged 79. Aged 88 in 1999, Mary Ronan of Lisdoonvarna is a great-grand-daughter of Darby Reidy mentioned in the text. Darby Reidy was the father of the aforementioned Patrick. Patrick had no son but he had a daughter named Mary. Mary Reidy married Michael Nestor of Carrowkeel, beside Tooreen. Their daughter Mary married Michael Ronan of Carrowkeel who died in 1980. Thus, the lineage is: Darby Reidy, Patrick Reidy, Mary Nestor, Mary Ronan. I thank Mary Ronan for these details.

27. Details here are drawn from John Blackwell to SK, 26 February, 16 March, 21 March and 3 April, 1846.

28. Griffith's *Union of Ennistimon, Valuation*, p. 122, lists Michael Considine as tenant on 78 acres in Gortnaboul in 1855.

29. For most useful and more general discussions, which complement that here, see Ciaran O Murchadha, 'The Onset of Famine: County Clare, 1845-1846', *The Other Clare*, vol 19 (1995), pp. 46-52, and the same author's "'Sable Wings Over the Land": County Clare, 1846-1847', *The Other Clare*, vol 20 (1996), pp. 25-32.

30. *The Tithe Applotment Book, Parish of Kilshanny*, circa 1830, indicates that a person named John Blackwell held the following: about 4 acres of first quality land in Smithstown and, in Tooreen, 13 acres of second class land, 11 acres of third class land, 8 acres which was fourth class, and 12 acres of fifth class land. Thus, most of his land was relatively poor in quality. He was probably the same person as the John Blackwell who became SK's agent in the 1840s.

31. John Blackwell to SK, 3 April 1846.

32. John Blackwell to SK, 26 April 1846.

33. Until I spoke to Michael Slattery of Ballygoonaun, I was unable to determine the whereabouts of the place described in the SK correspondence as "Carronnebohel" or "Carrownbohilly". As Mr Slattery indicated to me, the *Tithe Applotment Book, Parish of*

*Kilfenora*, 1827, pp. 41-42, refers to the townland of Boghil as "Carhoonabaghilla" ("Carronnebohel" in SK correspondence). I thank him for showing me the course of Stratford's Boghil road, for supplying me with copies of maps and for information on the Board's road crossing Boghil.

34. John Blackwell to SK, 26 December 1846.

35. John Blackwell to SK, 6 and 12 October 1846.

36. See note 18 above. On 26 September 1848 James Spellissy wrote from Kilfenora to SK indicating his intention to dispose of his interest in his farm.

37. Office of Public Works to Stratford, 29 June 1848.

38. *Reports and Returns Relating to Evictions in the Kilrush Union*, (London, 1849). For a modern survey, see Ignatius Murphy, *A People Starved: Life and Death in West Clare, 1845-1851*, (Blackrock, Dublin, 1996).