

NOTE TO USERS

This reproduction is the best copy available.

UMI[®]

Commissioners, Guardians and Paupers:
Life and Death in the Limerick Poor Law Union,
1838-1850

Michael D'Arcy Ryan

A Thesis

in the

Department of History

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

April, 2005

© Michael D'Arcy Ryan, 2005



Library and
Archives Canada

Bibliothèque et
Archives Canada

Published Heritage
Branch

Direction du
Patrimoine de l'édition

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file *Votre référence*

ISBN: 0-494-04040-8

Our file *Notre référence*

ISBN: 0-494-04040-8

NOTICE:

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

AVIS:

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.


Canada

ABSTRACT

Commissioners, Guardians and Paupers: Life and Death in the Limerick Poor Law Union, 1838-1850.

Michael D'Arcy Ryan, Ph.D.
Concordia University, 2005

It is accepted by historians of Ireland that British government response to the potato famine in the middle of the nineteenth century was inadequate. This dissertation examines that response in the Limerick Poor Law Union of Munster province. It demonstrates that the ideological underpinnings that provided the motivation for government response to poverty had evolved as the result of a debate which had been protracted and misguided. The result was a poor law system which assumed culpability on the part of the poor and a belief that the corrective was coercion. By focussing on the application of the law in a specific area, the dissertation demonstrates that the local Board of Guardians was powerless to mitigate the law's negative effects despite having serious misgivings about its impact. It puts into sharp focus the almost weekly dilemma which they faced of having to follow the directives of the Poor Law Commissioners or defy them in order to respond more appropriately to local needs.

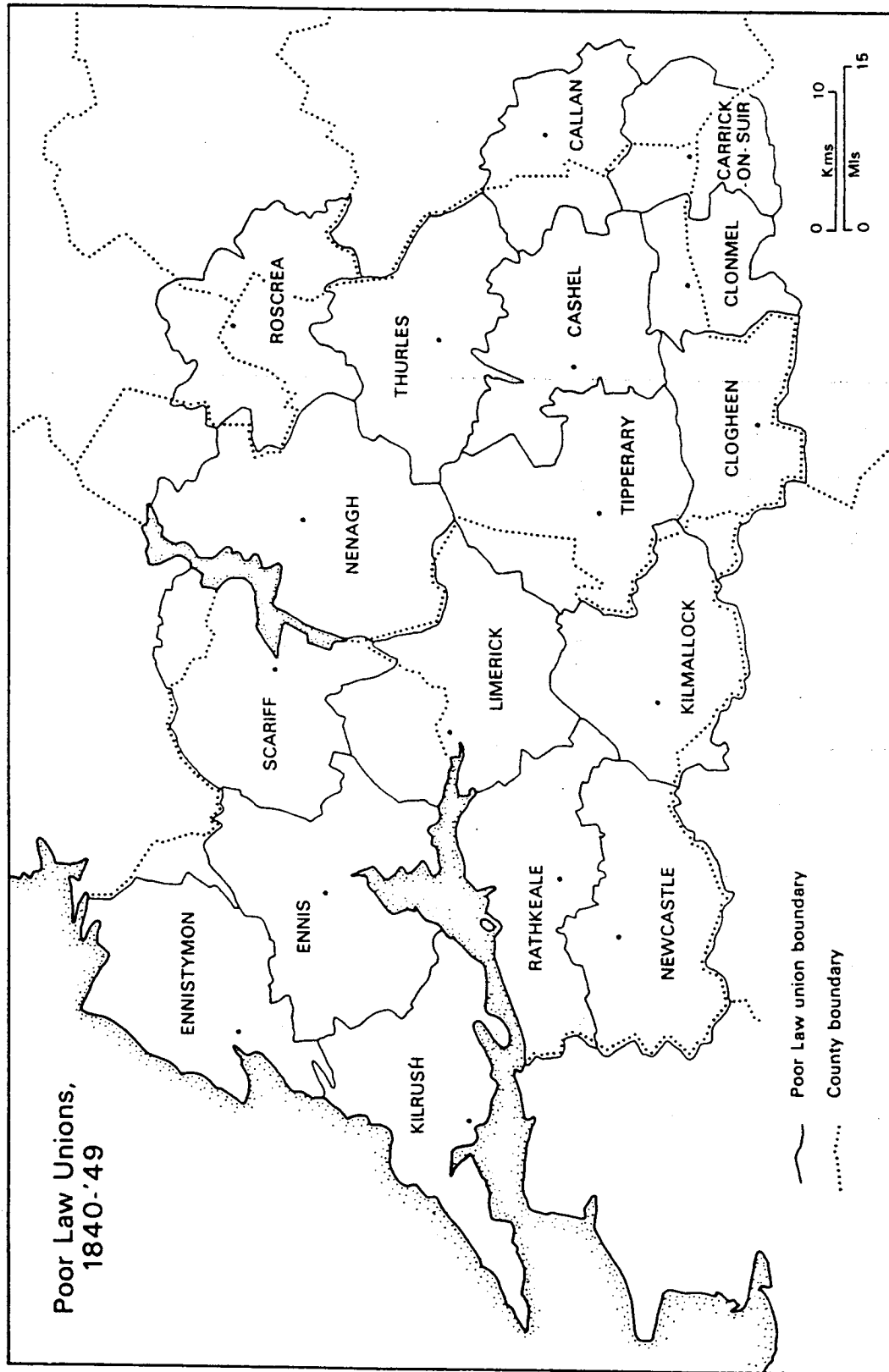
What really went on during the famine is better understood through case studies which specifically demonstrate the effects of government decision-making and the impact the resultant policy had in the daily lives of the people who received the intended services. The purpose of this case study is to amplify the findings of famine historians so that we can appreciate the human dimensions of the crisis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A student who prefers to take the road less travelled is fortunate indeed to have been encouraged along the way by a few dedicated teachers.

The late Robin Burns of Bishop's University in Lennoxville, Quebec, who knew something of my interests, invited me to join his class on the 'History of Ireland and Quebec Compared'. He really started something. Several courses later, some of which were with Professor Burns himself, and when I was ready to undertake an M.A. in Irish History, he persuaded his colleague Brian Jenkins to take me on as a post-graduate student. Professor Jenkins led me to County Galway and the famine records of the Gort Poor Law Union. My great admiration for Jenkins' scholarship and our mutual love of golf got us past our interpretive differences about the relationship between Britain and Ireland in the nineteenth century. Both Burns and Jenkins encouraged me to pursue a doctorate in Irish History and this led me (a graduate of Loyola College) back to Concordia University in Montreal.

The History Department at Concordia welcomed me, as it does all its graduate students, as a colleague and provided a stimulating environment in which to read and discuss. But the person to whom I owe the most is my advisor, Professor Ron Rudin of Concordia. He has, with amazing forbearance, let me go down some dead end roads and patiently allowed me to find my way back. He has tried my patience with consummate diplomacy. The process has made me a much better history student.



Paul Ferguson

Figure 2. Poor Law Unions in the vicinity of Limerick PLU and the Shannon estuary. Courtesy of Paul Ferguson, UCD.

CONTENTS

List of Tables	ix
General Introduction	1
Chapter 1 Revisionism and Famine Historiography	13
1.1 The Nationalist response	14
1.2 The Revisionist response	16
1.3 Post-revisionist response	20
1.4 Local famine studies	25
Chapter 2 Ideology and Irish Famine Relief	29
2.1 The debate over poor relief	32
2.2 An Irish Poor Law	46
2.3 Government response – Peel	50
2.4 Government response – Russell	54
2.5 Amending the Irish Poor Law	59
2.6 Consequences of the Whig amendments	68
Conclusion	72
Chapter 3 The Limerick Poor Law Union, 1838-45	77
3.1 The restrictive nature of the law	78
3.2 Areas of conflict	84
3.3 The first audit	90
Conclusion	100

Chapter 4 Monsell	102
4.1 Propriety, moral and fiscal	104
4.2 Management practices	109
4.3 Approaching the abyss	121
Conclusion	129
Chapter 5 Powell	131
5.1 National reform	134
5.2 Reform of women of ‘questionable character’.	141
5.3 Solvency of the Union	146
5.4 Capacity of the house	156
Conclusion	162
Chapter 6 Devitt	165
6.1 The Soup Kitchen program	168
6.2 Rampant fever	174
6.3 The Poor Law amendment acts	186
Conclusion	195
Chapter 7 Clare	199
7.1 Some positive outcomes	202
7.2 The burial crisis	204
7.3 Management by force	207
7.4 The inmates react	214
7.5 The guardians react	219
Conclusion	230
General Conclusion	234
Bibliography	243
Appendices	253

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure	Page
1. Map of Ireland	v
2. Poor Law Unions of Limerick, Clare and Tipperary	vi
3. Map of Limerick Poor Law Union	81
4. Chart of Death Rates in Limerick Workhouse	132
5. Chart of Population in Limerick Workhouse	229

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

In reading the minute books of the meetings of the Board of Guardians of the Limerick Poor Law Union during the famine years of 1845 to 1850, one cannot help but be struck by the aggressiveness of the language with which superiors communicated and the deferential tone with which underlings responded. Not only are the guardians represented in these documents, but also the Poor Law commissioners, who pass on information and orders weekly, the officers who submit reports weekly and occasionally the inmates who make requests or respond to enquiries. Suppliers and concerned rate-payers periodically make appearances as well. That society was very hierarchical and that people were very class conscious is evident throughout. The guardians were deferential to the commissioners and demanding of all who reported to them. Guardians went out of their way to use respectful language when addressing the commissioners but appeared at times to be more concerned about the impression they were projecting than the welfare of the inmates they were serving. For example, in the spring following the first potato blight a notice of motion was made to announce the guardians' intention to feed all the poor of the union:

Take notice that I will in the event of the Union Workhouse becoming full move a resolution to the following effect – That every individual in the Union requiring relief shall on proper application be supplied with food in the Workhouse, and sleeping apartments be supplied for them, so that the Guardians and the ratepayers may have the satisfaction to know that none can perish for want of food in this extensive Union. Signed - Thomas Wallnutt¹

On the surface this appears to be solicitous of the welfare of the paupers, but at best it is

¹ Limerick Poor Law Union, Minute Books, Limerick Regional Archives. Meeting of 18 March, 1846.

bravado inasmuch as the Irish Poor Law gave no one the right to relief after the workhouse was full. Furthermore the follow-up resolution never materialized. On closer examination, Wallnutt's notice of motion had more to do with assuaging the consciences of the guardians and ratepayers and conveying an impression to the commissioners. As well, there are many examples which will appear in this dissertation illustrative of the aggressive tone taken towards employees and contract workers who reported to the guardians. The language reflected an ideological framework which needs to be examined in context.

This dissertation, therefore, examines the influence of ideology on policy and particularly the impact at the implementation level where service was rendered. If the prevailing ideology and the policy derived thereof were coercive, the result at the level of implementation was invariably negative and potentially dangerous. What was intended as service was received as unwanted interference or worse aggression.

When the Poor Law was implemented in Ireland in 1838, Limerick was the first of the one hundred and thirty unions to be established and the third largest in population in the country. Its board of guardians was comprised of local landowners, professionals and prominent businessmen who were proud of their leadership roles in the community. The minute books which record their weekly deliberations reveal that they were intent on implementing the law to the letter, and were sympathetic to the needs of the paupers in their care. They were, therefore, continually faced with difficult decisions. Their role was to render an essential service yet the results when delivered were not always perceived as beneficial. Sometimes the perception of the inmates was that they were the victims of abuse rather than recipients of relief.

But why was such extensive relief necessary in the first place? Why would the failure of a single food crop, even if it did recur for several years, cause such widespread distress? To answer these questions we have to look back to some antecedent factors. The answers are to be found in the land tenure system. Beginning with the twelfth century expedition of Henry II, various British monarchs had attempted to assert their authority over Ireland. One such attempt occurred in 1541 when the Tudor king Henry VIII secured the enactment by the Irish parliament of Surrender and Regrant legislation.² This established that even the old Gaelic chieftains held their lands at the pleasure of the British monarch. Tudor successors Mary and Elizabeth went a step further in planting loyal English and Scottish subjects on Irish lands. The most successful British plantation of non-Irish settlers occurred in Ulster and, after the flight of the last of the Gaelic Lords in 1607, was completed by the early 1620s. Due to insufficient numbers of non-Irish settlers it was not possible to make these settlements viable without native Irish labourers and, therefore, tenants on lands which the native Irish had once considered their own.³ In the aftermath of the Reformation, amidst fears that a Catholic might accede to the throne in Britain, legislation forbidding the ownership of land in Ireland by Catholics (which more often than not meant native Irish) had reduced the amount of useful land owned by Catholics to 14% by the end of the 17th century, and to 5% by 1774.⁴ And yet, the planted land holders, referred to by historians as the ascendancy class, never reached twenty percent of the population. The majority of the population was, therefore, a dispossessed tenant class.

² John O'Beirne Ranelagh, *A Short History of Ireland* (Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 1999), 49.

³ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 66-71.

Certain anomalies of British feudal law put tenants at a disadvantage. The concepts of 'fixture', 'waste' and 'distress', for example, put pressure on what might have been a more agreeable relationship between landlord and tenant. 'Fixture' meant that anything added to the land such as a fence, shed or barn became fixed to the land and, therefore, the property of the landlord. 'Waste' meant that anything which was fixed to the land and altered by the tenant could constitute an act of waste and was subject to a legal claim for damages by the landlord. The concept of 'distress' meant that any claim by the landlord against a tenant could be dealt with by distraining the tenant's goods (such as cattle or tools), selling them, retaining the value of what was owed, and returning the rest to the tenant. By British law, unpaid rent did not necessarily constitute a breach of contract and, therefore, terminate the lease. It too became the subject of a legal claim by the landlord against the tenant and might take a considerable length of time and legal fees to settle. These conditions not only put a strain on the landlord-tenant relationship but also created a serious disincentive for tenants to improve their holdings for fear of forfeiting the added value to the landlord at the termination of the lease. The landlord, of course, maintained the ability of determining the amount of the rent to be paid and, with sufficient notice, could terminate the lease in favour of someone else who was willing to pay more to lease the land. Tenants who held yearly leases (which became the more common form of lease-holding) were in a very precarious position in these circumstances.⁵

Also, many of the native Irish, considered a threat to the security of the new settlers, had been banished to the rocky extremities of Ireland, south and west of the

⁵ Barbara Lewis Solow, *The Land Question and the Irish Economy 1870-1903* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 1-14.

Shannon, in order to reduce the number of dispossessed and disgruntled Irish in the midst of the newly planted and, understandably, fearful settlers. Many of these people settled in 'clachan' communities which were clusters of cottages, hastily constructed of local materials. In these communities, families shared arable land for growing gardens and pasture land for cattle. They practiced partible inheritance whereby all offspring of the family obtained a share of the land. In these circumstances there was little stopping young people from marrying and setting up homes of their own. The population grew tremendously and new settlements spread into bog areas and up the sides of mountains. One thing made this growth possible – the ubiquitous potato. It contained proteins and carbohydrates and, with a little milk to add fat, provided a balanced diet. Although they might have been rich in the oral culture which sustained them (due largely to the presence of three-generational families), materially these 'cottiers' were very poor.⁶

The concurrence of rapid population growth and a land tenure system which tended to maintain agricultural labourers in penury produced a situation, by the middle of the 19th century, in which one third of the population of over 8 million people was living in abject poverty. Under such circumstances, in the event of the failure of the potato crop in Ireland, Britain would have a major crisis on its hands.

Although there had been potato crop failures before 1845, they were usually single year episodes which caused great distress but not death from starvation. The onset of a new potato blight caused by the fungus, *phytophthora infestans*, brought an entirely new crisis in that it struck successive potato crops for a five year period, completely destroying the crops of 1846 and 1848. This brought on a catastrophe which only the

⁶ Kevin Whelan, "Pre and Post-Famine Landscape Change," in *The Great Irish Famine*, ed. Cathal Póirtéir (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1995), 19-33.

government had the resources to manage. Famine historians have examined the evidence for the country as a whole and the purpose of this dissertation is to examine the evidence for the Limerick Poor Law Union.

There is plenty of evidence that between 1845 and 1850 there was extraordinary distress in Ireland in general and in the Limerick Poor Law Union in particular. For example, those very minute books which recorded the weekly meetings of the board of guardians indicated that the Limerick union was in financial distress, that the guardians were diligently trying to conform to the Poor Law, that their relationship with the Poor Law commissioners in Dublin was sometimes strained, that they had more than their share of personnel management problems, and that the paupers in their charge were dying in shockingly high numbers. Of Ireland's distress between 1845 and 1850 historians have asked why and offered a variety of observations which are examined in chapter one, dealing with the historiography of the famine. For the most part, these observations hold true for the Limerick Poor Law union as well. It, therefore, offers a useful case study to examine the Irish Famine in microcosm. Several prominent historians of modern Ireland have referred to the necessity of completing local studies before we can have a better appreciation of what really went on during the famine.⁷

There is no doubt that the guardians of the Limerick Poor Law union had a unique situation on their hands. It was an urban union but with a relatively densely populated rural hinterland. There was a certain amount of wealth accruing from the commerce of the city which made it easier for urban property holders to meet their poor rate

⁷ Joseph Lee, "Irish Economic History Since 1500," in *Irish Historiography, 1970-79*, ed. Joseph Lee (Cork: Cork University Press, 1981), 182. Christine Kinealy, *A Death Dealing Famine: The Great Hunger in Ireland* (London: Pluto Press, 1997), 15. Cormac Ó Gráda, "Making Irish Famine History in 1995," in *History Workshop Journal* 42 (1996): 90.

obligations. The huge Russell Brothers grain mill was within one and a half miles of the workhouse, presumably reducing the cost of meal. The union had some prominent and wealthy landlords among its guardians, including members of parliament. Most, it is safe to say, were good, well-meaning individuals whose call to service was answered with the best of intentions. Their processes of decision-making were well documented. Reason appeared to prevail throughout their deliberations. Yet for the better part of five years they were unable to prevent one of the most flagrant episodes of (apparently avoidable) human suffering, brought on by (apparently slavish) adherence to ideological imperatives, in modern history.

In chapter two we will examine the evolution of the thinking which guided government response to poverty and demonstrate the consequences for Ireland as a colony. This will reveal that the prevailing ideology which determined government response to poverty was evolving rapidly in the years leading up to the mid-nineteenth century. This evolution did not necessarily favour the poor as the thinkers of the day sought to explain rationally the behaviour of the lower orders in order to force them to act cooperatively.

As to those who had set the tone for the process of ideological change which occurred in the first half of the nineteenth century United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, some names leap immediately to mind. Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus and Jeremy Bentham are prominent. Thomas Paine's was yet a voice crying in the wilderness. The prevailing wisdom espoused by these thinkers emphasized man's fallen nature and God's uncompromising retributive justice. It was an unfortunate time in history to be the colony of an upstart empire and beset by an ecological disaster. The

rhetoric tended to misguide the leaders of the people, those who could have made decisions to alleviate the distress. Instead they withheld, waffled and wrangled and not even the unprecedented numbers of deaths and dislocations of their fellow subjects enabled them to shake off the framework of thinking in which they seemed to be enthralled. It is not that alternative solutions to alleviating distress were not proposed. In fact a very successful plan was embarked upon, but only temporarily. Almost immediately, despite evidence that lives were being saved by the very successful 'Soup Kitchen' program, leaders had to retreat back to the safety of accepted basic principles, in other words, within the protective cocoon of the prevailing ideology. The value of other proposed solutions took far too long to appreciate to be of use to the starving Irish.⁸

In chapter three we will look at the history of the Limerick Poor Law Union from its inception until the first year of the potato blight. The pre-famine period of adjustment to the Poor Law Ireland Act, between 1838 and 1845, began to reveal some of the weaknesses of the Act and how the commissioners expected the guardians of the unions to exercise their authority. In fact it became quite clear that the guardians were expected to do the work of running the union while the commissioners held a firm grip on the reins of authority.

The subsequent chapters, four to seven, will examine the stewardships of the four chairmen of the Limerick Union who presided over the meetings of the board of guardians during the famine years. William Monsell, Caleb Powell and John Thomas

⁸ A case in point was the *Letter of Sir Matthew Barrington, Bart. To the Right Hon. Sir Robert Peel, Bart.*, dated 28 October 1844, in which he recommended peasant proprietorship as a solution to Ireland's constant agitation due to poverty. Barrington was a Limerick landowner and a local magistrate whose family had endowed Barrington's Hospital in the city. Inasmuch as his 32 page treatise to Peel was published in Dublin, it must have been well known to the guardians of the Limerick Poor Law Union.

Devitt each held the office for one year and John Fitzgibbon, second Earl of Clare, presided for the last two years. Their respective influences over the board of guardians differed but as the famine crisis worsened and the government in Westminster responded the way it did, there were very different, one might say, progressively worsening, issues that needed to be addressed. Monsell and Clare were liberal men but committed unionists. Powell was a strong nationalist but so preoccupied by his political career that the affairs of the union of which he was chairman got little of his attention. Devitt was a dedicated and ambitious career person whose priority was to do the bidding of his superiors to the best of his ability. One could say they acquitted themselves satisfactorily under the circumstances. Unfortunately, one would also have to admit that, as a result, the Limerick Poor Law Union suffered a similar fate to that of Ireland in general.

A close examination of a local poor law union such as Limerick, it is hoped, will improve our understanding of the Irish famine and lead to a better appreciation of the excellent scholarly work that has been produced about the famine in general, particularly in the last twenty years. It will also take its place among a growing number of local studies which, while they emphasize some unique feature of the community whose experience they relate, invariably demonstrate the inadequacy of government response to the tragedy.⁹ We know that the Limerick Union was not put under trusteeship, which was a fate experienced by forty-two unions, usually for insolvency but also for running

⁹ A few examples are: G. McAtasney, *Challenging an Orthodoxy: the Famine in Lurgan*, Belfast, 1996; J. Vincent, "A Political Orchestration of the Irish Famine: County Fermanagh, May 1847", in M. Silverman and P.H. Gulliver (eds.), *Approaching the Past: Historical Anthropology Through Irish Case Studies*, New York, 1992, 75-98; Michael O'Gorman, *A Pride of Paper Tigers: A History of the Great Hunger in the Scariff Workhouse Union from 1839-1853*, East Clare Heritage, 1994; Ciaran Ó Murchadha, *Sable Wings over the Land: Ennis County Clare and its Wider Community During the Great Famine*, Clasp Press, 1998; *An Gorta Mor: Famine in the Swinford Union*, Swinford Historical Society; John Fogarty, *Thurles Poor Law Union, 1847-1848* (M.A. Thesis, University College Cork, 1999); Brian MacDonald, *A Time of Desolation: Clones Poor Law Union 1845-50*, Clogher Historical Society, 2001.

afoul of Poor Law inspectors or for confronting or defying the Poor Law commissioners.¹⁰ An analysis of the specific problems encountered by the Limerick Poor Law Union during these crucial years, in the light of the prevailing ideology, will reveal that current thinking had a profound impact on the decision making of commissioners, guardians and officers of the union. Another objective is also, and perhaps most importantly, to use the source material to secure an insight into the point of view of the inmates of the workhouse as well as those who worked within it or were appointed or elected to manage it. Such perspectives, unfortunately, are often ignored.

Inmates do emerge from time to time in the minute books of the board of guardians. On 11 June 1845, for example, the clerk of the Limerick union was ordered to prosecute a boy, John Lynch, for having in his possession trousers, the property of the Union.¹¹ We know that the ragged, vermin-infested clothes of inmates were routinely ordered to be destroyed as a 'management' practice and that, therefore, the choices facing John Lynch were, probably, to abscond with the trousers or flee naked. The following week the board was obliged to pay five shillings reward for the apprehension of the husband of inmate Bridget McMahon. Apparently he had deserted her. Three weeks later it was reported that Honora Hourigan, upon leaving the workhouse after visiting her sister, who was an inmate, was discovered to be concealing four linen articles belonging to the house. The Master took her before the Magistracy and she was sentenced by the Barrister to three months imprisonment at hard labour. The inmate sister was ordered by the board of guardians to be discharged from the house for larceny.

¹⁰ Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845-52*, (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan Ltd., 1994), 211-212.

¹¹ Minutes, 11 June 1845.

These people's brush with history occurred within the space of one month at the Limerick workhouse. Over a period of years one can detect a pattern of behaviour which indicates either a pauper population under serious pressure to survive or an ill-conceived and mindlessly-implemented program of social 'welfare' legislation.

Those who were hired to work within the workhouse emerge as well. In the summer of 1845 a schoolmaster, John Ready, and schoolmistress, Jane O'Brien were hired to replace the husband and wife team of Michael and Lucy Galvin who had resigned. The Galvins had been paid £50 annually with rations and apartments. Two separate people were evidently more expensive to house so the annual salary offered to Ready was £25. and to O'Brien £15. A notice of motion to raise the salaries to those previously paid never made it to the resolution stage. O'Brien did, however, receive further compensation when, after the schools of the workhouse had been assumed under the national education program, she won a prize of £10 for excellence in teaching. Ready, on the other hand, had to be reprimanded and cautioned by the board for mistreating a student.¹² Besides teachers, the Board hired a master, matron, clerk, medical officers, nurses, chaplains, wardsmen, porter, cooks and many other employees. Not only their individual stories but the personnel practices of the board, as closely scrutinized by the commissioners, reveal much that begs analysis.

And finally, the people who were charged with the responsibility of managing the workhouse emerge as well in their roles as guardians. Two of the most diligent were John Thomas Devitt and Dr. Terence Brodie. Their regular attendance at board meetings, willingness to serve on committees and strict adherence to directives from the

¹² Minutes, 11 June 1845; 18 June 1845; 10 December 1845.

Poor Law commissioners in Dublin won them favour. They were both appointed as paid Vice-Guardians to distressed unions whose boards of guardians had been dissolved during the worst of the crisis in the late 1840s.¹³ There were also appointed to the board as ex-officio guardians several major land owners such as Monsell and Clare. Most of these men had starving tenants to deal with as well as the Poor Law to implement in the region where they had important vested interests. They were not all impervious to the suffering going on around them. Some deserve to be extricated from the negative reputation that received mythology has assigned to landlords.

Outside of the South Dublin and Cork workhouses, Limerick was the largest urban workhouse, having been built to house one thousand six hundred inmates. It was, however, situated in the worst-hit part of the country and, as one might expect, forced to deal with a much poorer clientele and proportionately greater distress. Nevertheless, the prevailing wisdom is that the Limerick Poor Law Union 'got off easy' during the famine.¹⁴ The history of what transpired within its boundaries during this period deserves to be told and will undoubtedly contribute to an overall understanding of the Irish Famine. The contribution will principally be realized by demonstrating the friction which existed between commissioners and guardians and between guardians and officers of the union. This friction was caused by the unreasonable demands put on all who were called upon to implement legislation, designed to relieve paupers, which was being used to try to address a systemic problem brought on by centuries of abuse.

¹³ Minutes, 16 February 1848.

¹⁴ Ciaran Ó Murchadha, "Limerick Union Workhouse during the Great Famine," *The Old Limerick Journal* 32 (Winter 1995): 39.

CHAPTER 1

REVISIONISM AND FAMINE HISTORIOGRAPHY

What is the popular image of historical revisionism in Ireland today? A retelling of Irish history which seeks to show that British rule of Ireland was not, as we have believed, a bad thing, but a mixture of necessity, good intentions and bungling; and that Irish resistance to it was not, as we have believed, a good thing, but a mixture of wrong-headed idealism and unnecessary, often cruel violence.¹

At the core of the revisionist view of the Famine lay three main assertions: first, that the Famine was not a watershed in modern Irish history but merely an accelerator of existing trends; second, that in view of Ireland's large population and underdeveloped agricultural sector, a subsistence crisis was inevitable; and third, that, judged by the standards of the 1840s, the British government did all that reasonably could have been expected of it.²

The historiography of the Great Irish Famine has evolved considerably in the last few decades. Just as the writing of the history of modern Ireland has gone through phases of revisionism and post-revisionism so has the writing of the history of the Great Famine of 1845-50. This chapter, in the first instance, will examine the immediate historiographical response of contemporaries to the famine, both the official response and the so-called 'nationalist' reaction to the catastrophe. It will then trace the evolution of the writing of Irish history from its introduction as an academic discipline in the 1930s. While professional Irish history writing, in the beginning stages, proceeded cautiously to address what was essentially the strained relationship between the people of Ireland and those of its dominant neighbouring island, the most troublesome issues, such as the famine, for example, tended to be played down or avoided. However, after the passage of a century had given historians a different, and hopefully, more detached perspective

¹ Desmond Fennell, "Against Revisionism," in *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism*, ed. Ciaran Brady (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1994), 184.

² Christine Kenealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine*, (London: Pluto Press, 1997), 3.

and as the centenary approached, it was inevitable that the history of the famine would have to be undertaken. This chapter will, therefore, examine the evolution of famine history writing through its revisionist and post-revisionist phases. It will then review some related literature which provides valuable famine reference material and contemporary commentary, and finally address the issue of local famine studies.

1.1 The Nationalist response

Prior to the middle of the twentieth century accounts of the famine were scarce. Contemporaries who wrote about it had quite evident 'interests' to protect. The assistant secretary to the Treasury, Charles Edward Trevelyan, declared the Famine over in 1847 at the termination of the relatively successful soup kitchen program. In "The Irish Crisis" which was published in the *Edinburgh Review* in January 1848 he extolled the unprecedented efforts of the British government in responding to the crisis. He was critical of the Irish peasants for their indolence and Irish landlords for their negligence. He saw the solution to the problem in the exposure of the Irish economy to market forces, which would result in the expulsion of the inefficient and the birth of a modern capitalist agriculture. Trevelyan, of course, had his own reputation to protect as he had largely controlled the funds made available for relief of distress and continued to do so throughout the ensuing years of potato blight and famine-induced excess mortality.

John Mitchel, convicted and transported for treason-felony in 1848, excoriated the British in *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* the first Irish edition of which was

published in 1861.³ He accused the government of allowing food to be exported from Ireland when, as he put it, the food produced by the island could have fed twice its population. He condemned Irish landlords for their profligate lifestyles, absenteeism, and for not assuming their responsibility towards their tenants. He, of course, was a well-known Young-Irelander whose hatred for everything British had been well documented in newspapers such as *The Nation* and his own *The United Irishman*.

Some time after Mitchel's famous account had been published, the first scholarly treatment of the Famine appeared. Canon John O'Rourke published *The Great Irish Famine* in 1874. He used eye-witness recollections, government documents and contemporary newspaper accounts and produced a well-researched narrative which largely adopted Mitchel's point of view. To this he added a religious dimension by accusing the British of an anti-Catholic pogrom. O'Rourke thus, "appropriated the Famine dead as Catholic martyrs, the latest victims in the long-standing struggle for faith and fatherland in Ireland."⁴ It was better received than the publisher had expected and went into a third edition. Then, for the better part of a century, while journalists, activists and politicians on both sides of the ideological divide continued to promote their preferred mythology, there was a stony silence on the subject from historians. For generations the accounts of suffering passed on must have made it next to impossible for an aspiring Irish historian to attempt a detached interpretation of the famine. There is no doubt that the subject was evocative. Perhaps it was even too embarrassing for the Irish themselves to address, due to a feeling of national shame, and the English, due to the

³ James S. Donnelly, Jr., "The Construction of the Memory of the Famine in Ireland and the Irish Diaspora, 1850-1900" in *Eire-Ireland*, (1996), 29.

⁴ Kevin Whelan, "The Revisionist Debate in Ireland," *Boundary 2* 31:1 (2004), 198.

need to assess culpability. At any rate, the Irish Famine eventually became a segment of a larger picture and had to be addressed in the context of its impact on nineteenth century Irish history.

1.2 The Revisionist response

In the meantime Irish History had come into its own as an academic discipline. The account of the pioneering efforts of Robert Dudley Edwards and Theodore William Moody to raise the level of excellence of Irish history writing has been well documented in *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism* edited by Ciaran Brady. In the introductory essay Brady describes how the collaboration of Edwards and Moody resulted in the founding of the journal *Irish Historical Studies* in 1938. They demanded of its contributors meticulous research and the dispassionate interpretation of evidence. These goals were to be achieved by focussing on new research and works in progress by scholars trained in the various university graduate schools. To further ensure their success, Edwards and Moody discouraged antiquarian studies and the rehashing of the details of famous lives or well-known events.⁵ *Irish Historical Studies* became the proving ground for what was later to be described as the 'value-free' history of Ireland. But Brady intimates that what was forged in the furnace of their ambition was a two-edged sword:

⁵ Ciaran Brady, ed., *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1994), 4.

There is a simple moral concerning the vanity of intellectual aspirations, and the nemesis they inevitably call forth, that may readily be derived from the texts collected below. It concerns a noble ambition whereby a small group of historians attempted to construct a new institutional framework which would at once radically alter the way in which historical writing was produced in Ireland and fundamentally change the way in which the Irish past and history's manner of representing it were received within contemporary Irish culture. And it concerns also a paradox whereby the grand strategies they employed to achieve their dual ends proceeded over time to subvert them.⁶

The aspiration of these two British-trained historians to revise Irish history writing was, at least in part, an attempt to rid it of its reputation of being overly nationalist in tone and whiggish in its insistence on the inevitability of independent nation status for Ireland. The process, however, produced a sanitized, pro-British bias which is perhaps best exemplified by Roy Foster's *Modern Ireland, 1600-1972*. The paradox to which Brady refers in the quote cited above is, of course, that in time this pro-British bias became obvious and a post-revisionist reaction proved to be inevitable. This reality is reflected in the texts which Brady compiled, particularly in two essays taken from the pages of *I.H.S.* The first is Steven Ellis's "Nationalist Historiography and the English and Gaelic Worlds in the Late Middle Ages"⁷ in which he argues that Irish historians have a tendency to read too much of today's political reality into the Gaelic world of the late Middle Ages, and the second, Brendan Bradshaw's "Nationalism and Historical Scholarship in Modern Ireland"⁸ which, after refuting Ellis's arguments, condemns the value-free school for refusing to deal with the tragic aspects of Irish history.

Bradshaw uses as examples major episodes in the history of modern Ireland, including the Famine to illustrate this point. Of it, he argues that because disaster forms the substance of the event and strategies such as evasion and normalization are difficult

⁶ Brady, 3.

⁷ *I.H.S.* xxv (1986-87), 1-18.

⁸ *Ibid.*, xxvi (1988-89), 329-51.

to pull off, historians of the value-free school have tended to neglect it.⁹

But to their credit, proponents of the value-free school did undertake (albeit at the instigation of the Taoiseach, Eamon de Valera, in 1943) to issue a commemorative work to mark the hundredth anniversary of the Famine. The collective volume entitled *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History* was a compilation of essays by distinguished historians on specific aspects of the Famine. Its publication, finally in 1956, was badly handled by the history establishment and ended up as an administrative history of some aspects of the Famine but far from the complete treatment de Valera had hoped for and others had a right to expect.¹⁰

The opportunity to address this glaring lacuna was seized by popular historian Cecil Woodham-Smith who published her now famous *The Great Hunger* in 1962. It chronicled the years 1845 to 49 and described the government's efforts to cope with the disaster while at the same time trying to adhere to 'laissez-faire' economic policy. She was unequivocal in blaming the government for the catastrophe. While being well-received by the public, Woodham-Smith's work was heavily criticized and even ridiculed by some historians of Ireland,¹¹ but is now acknowledged to be a significant contribution to Famine historiography. She also awakened, what the brisk sales of her book proved to be, tremendous public interest in this hitherto neglected subject.¹²

But historians of nineteenth century Ireland, mindful of the immediate reaction of

⁹ Brendan Bradshaw, "Nationalism and Historical Scholarship in Modern Ireland," in *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism*, ed. Ciaran Brady (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1994), 201.

¹⁰ Cormac Ó Gráda, "Making History in Ireland in the 1940s and 1950s: The Saga of *The Great Famine*," in *Interpreting Irish History*, ed. Ciaran Brady (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1994), 269-278.

¹¹ F.S.L. Lyons, review of Cecil Woodham Smith, *The Great Hunger* in *I.H.S.* xiv (1964-65), 76-78.

¹² Bradshaw, 204.

the history establishment to *The Great Hunger*, were still hesitant to deal with such an emotive topic and allowed their colleagues from related disciplines to take the initiative. One of the first was Joel Mokyr who attempted an econometrical analysis of the causes of the Famine. In his 1983 study, *Why Ireland Starved: A Quantitative and Analytical History of the Irish Economy, 1800-1850*, he concluded that Ireland's problems resulted not from the integration of the two economies and politics following the union, but from the fact that there was not complete integration and that England still considered Ireland an alien and even hostile country. What one might have thought would be a value-free explanation of the Famine, turned out to have a politically-charged conclusion.

Actually the value-free 'pièce-de-résistance' on the Famine was produced by Mary Daly in 1986. To further drive home his point about the reluctance of Irish historians to deal with the tragic aspects of its history, of Daly's *The Famine in Ireland*, Bradshaw wrote:

another strategy was deployed to distance the author and her readers from the stark reality. This was by assuming an austere clinical tone, as befitting academic discourse, and by resort to sociological euphemism and cliometric excursions, thus cerebralising and, thereby, desensitising the trauma.¹³

But even before Bradshaw had finally called for an end to the strange pro-British bias that the revisionist school had created, another of Daly's critics, while commending her for plugging a gaping hole in Famine historiography, decried her readiness to make excuses for a doctrinaire and heartless administration.¹⁴ But Cormac Ó Gráda, through his own research into the Irish economy in the nineteenth century, had begun to compile

¹³ Bradshaw, 204.

¹⁴ Cormac Ó Gráda, *I.H.S.*, xxv, no. 99 (1983), 333.

irrefutable evidence that the government was indeed blameworthy.

In publishing *Ireland before and after the Famine* in 1988, Ó Gráda gave close scrutiny to the Irish economy and produced some hard evidence that put the British government in a very bad light. He cautiously concluded that, along with mass poverty, an ill-timed ecological accident and an ideology ill-gearred to saving lives were to blame. But with this work, the trend toward a post-revisionist interpretation of the great Irish Famine had unmistakably begun.¹⁵

1.3 Post-revisionist response

Ó Gráda himself has contributed much to this trend with the publication of his own monograph on the famine entitled *The Great Irish Famine* in 1989, by editing a commemorative lecture series *Famine 150* which appeared in 1997, and with *Black 47* in 1999. He also published *Ireland: A New Economic History, 1780-1939* in 1994, which is a survey of the contributions which cliometrics has made to the period in the last few decades. Except for the last three chapters which deal with the economies of the two Irelands between 1921 and 1939, the book is about the famine, what led up to it and the recovery period. Ó Gráda has re-established the Famine as the focal point of nineteenth-century Irish history, revising in turn the revisionist trend which had sought to play down its importance. In *Black 47* Ó Gráda consolidated his findings on the Famine and demonstrated by comparison with other famines that the Irish case was one of the world's worst, that it had a unique, profound, and prolonged demographic effect, and that for a wealthy country, not involved in a civil war at the time, official response was

¹⁵ Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland before and after the Famine*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 122.

indeed wanting. With the use of a comparative methodology, he highlights the Irish famine's significance in the world history of famines.¹⁶

But in the ten years it took Ó Gráda to come around to this stronger position, other, notably non-Irish born, historians had contributed to the post-revisionist literature. Among these is James S. Donnelly Jr., an American historian of the Famine in Ireland who has spent his whole career teaching in the United States and researching nineteenth-century Ireland. He has specialized in agriculture, agrarian unrest, rural life, landlord-tenant relations and British rule in Ireland. In the much-acclaimed fifth volume of *A New History of Ireland*, edited by W.E. Vaughan, Donnelly has contributed eight chapters, all dealing with the Famine. The fact that a non-Irish historian was offered the opportunity to do the Famine chapters in this volume indicates how sensitive Irish historians were to the possibility of being accused of nationalist leanings when dealing with this emotive subject.

Donnelly used traditional literary sources such as British government documents, contemporary newspapers, estate records, ministerial correspondence, and the work of other historians. He did not shy away from drawing the logical conclusions to which a reasoned judgement led him. If the eight-hundred-plus page volume received rave reviews, Donnelly was singled out as one of the principal reasons for its success. He tackled government malfeasance head on and reported clear evidence of an official mistrust, bordering on racism, of the Irish poor.¹⁷ He was even able to address the

¹⁶ Cormac Ó Gráda, *Black 47*, 232.

¹⁷ Kevin O'Neill, review of *A New History of Ireland, V: Ireland Under the Union, I: 1801-1870*, by W.E. Vaughan, ed. In *Irish Literary Supplement* 10, 2 (Fall 1991): 9-10.

subject of Mitchel's accusation of genocide without losing his balanced touch or appearing to be judgmental. In Donnelly's own, now oft-quoted, words:

If the charge of genocide could be sustained simply by showing that blind adherence to the doctrines of laissez-faire led to countless thousands of deaths (though certainly not two million) in Ireland during the late 1840s, then it may be taken as proved. But if, as most scholars would hold, there must also be a demonstration that British statesmen and their agents in Ireland were knowing collaborators in a deliberate campaign of extermination, then the allegation of genocide is not only unproven but not even worth making.¹⁸

In 2001 Donnelly published his own single volume work entitled *The Great Irish Potato Famine* which is a compilation of the chapters from *A New History of Ireland*, some of which have been updated, with an introduction and a concluding section on the construction of memory. It is the definitive post-revisionist text on the subject.

Christine Kinealy, herself not Irish-born, has also approached the famine from traditional literary sources. She has done extensive research into the minute books of the Irish Poor Law Unions as well as into British government documentation such as Royal Commission Reports, Poor Law Commissioners' Reports, Parliamentary Committee Reports and correspondence. In 1994 she published *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845-52*. Without exaggeration she could be referred to as the current leading administrative historian of the famine. *This Great Calamity* benefits from Kinealy's Ph.D. research into the Irish Poor Law. Its principal contribution is that it provides a more detailed background to the narrative so emotively expressed by Woodham-Smith and demonstrates the length of the crisis by showing the lingering effects of the potato blight right up until 1852. She followed up with *A Death-Dealing Famine* in 1997, which does an excellent job of summarizing the historiographical debate herein described

¹⁸ James S. Donnelly, Jr., "The Administration of Relief, 1847-51", in *A New History of Ireland, V: Ireland Under the Union, 1801-1870*, ed. W.E. Vaughan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 330.

and elaborates on the inadequacy of government response. In 2002 Kinealy published *The Great Irish Famine: Impact, Ideology and Rebellion*, a contribution to the 'British History in Perspective' series edited by Jeremy Black. It reflects her maturing scholarship and provides a thorough treatment of the Famine by addressing themes such as memory, philanthropy, the food supply controversy, criminal agitation and the response of both the churches and government. It rivals Donnelly's more chronological approach as the most appropriate text for teaching the famine to undergraduates.

Another recent contribution to the historiography has been made by Peter Gray. His *Famine, Land and Politics: British Government and Irish Society 1843-50*, published in 1999, meticulously examines the political ideology of the principle players in the conception, implementation and administration of Irish policy during the famine period. He describes the hope for justice for Ireland engendered by the Foxite-liberal views of Lord John Russell and a few of his more radical associates, and how the moralist (or at best moderate) views of the majority of his cabinet served to stifle reform. He allows that the moralists were prepared to play a deadly game of brinkmanship in their campaign to impose a capitalist cultural revolution on the Irish.¹⁹ But, for Gray, what Russell really succumbed to was "an attitude of mind that suffused the British political public, and set the parameters of state activity."²⁰ Gray's contribution is invaluable because of its exposure of the ideological complexities which confronted those who were in a position to deliver relief to the Irish. He has addressed the issue of motivation, the stumbling block which, long ago, James Donnelly identified as the reason

¹⁹ Peter Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics: British Government and Irish Society, 1843-50* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999), 331.

²⁰ Gray, 337.

that Mitchel's genocide charge could not be sustained. Perhaps inadvertently, perhaps intentionally, Gray has shown that the motivation to drastically reduce the Irish population was not only present but also quite clearly and emphatically articulated by some British politicians and administrators. In so doing he has helped to eliminate the stumbling block. While he almost elicits sympathy for Russell (if not for Wood and Trevelyan) Gray does not shy away from identifying the Prime Minister's political and personal limitations. He also demonstrates the growing influence on the cabinet of middle-class public opinion.

Along with this growing body of post-revisionist literature, more specialized studies have emerged on related topics such as the Catholic Church and the Famine ('*A Nation of Beggars*'? *Priests People and Politics in Famine Ireland, 1846-52* by Donal Kerr, 1994), the long term cultural impact of the Famine ("Pre and Post-Famine Landscape Change", by Kevin Whelan, in *The Great Irish Famine* edited by Cathal Póirtéir, 1995), and the construction of the memory of the Famine.²¹ These studies have gone a long way toward clearing up some misconceptions that had underpinned the nationalist mythology as well as the revisionist tendency to underplay the catastrophe.

There have also been compilations published recently which are not only useful in themselves to give the reader a sense of contemporary dialogue during the famine, but also as aids to students and researchers. By their very nature they provide evidence to post-revisionists. Some examples are: *The Irish Famine: A Documentary History*, edited by Noel Kissane and published in 1995; *Famine Diary* by Brendan Ó Cathaoir,

²¹ See "Making Irish Famine History in 1995" by Cormac Ó Gráda, *History Workshop Journal*, 43 (1996), "The Construction of the Memory of the Famine in Ireland and the Irish Diaspora, 1850-1900" by James S. Donnelly, Jr., *Eire-Ireland*, (1996), and *Famine Echoes*, edited by Cathal Póirtéir, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1995).

published in 1999, and, in 2001, *The Irish Famine, a documentary*, by Colm Tóibín and Diarmaid Ferriter. Each is unique in its choice of source documents and all have helpful explanatory sections to provide the reader with a comprehensive picture of the event.

1.4 Local famine studies

But as Professor Joseph Lee put it so eloquently, more than twenty years ago:

When the economic history of the Famine finally comes to be written, it will certainly draw...on (among other things)...some parish histories, whose value tends to be neglected, and on a few special studies, including accounts of workhouses during the Famine, even if these tend to concentrate more on the social than on the economic consequences. Discussion about whether the Famine constituted a watershed often seems to take for granted that we know what happened during the Famine. We don't.²²

The few local famine studies that have been done to date seem to confirm the pathos described by travellers and government officials in Ireland at the time, who did their best to alert cabinet officials but were unable to penetrate the ideological barrier that had so completely sealed them off from reality. These local histories invariably fall into the post-revisionist category, although the passage of time has also made it easier for authors to address the tragic aspects of the famine with candour.

One of the first was *A People Starved: Life and Death in West Clare, 1845-51* by Ignatius Murphy. Father Murphy's history was centered on the parish of Kilfearagh, in the Kilrush Poor Law Union. Although published posthumously in 1999, it was written in the 1960s for a degree at Maynooth College. Along with a companion volume, *Before Famine Struck: Life in West Clare, 1834-1845*, it described the relatively happy although poverty-stricken lives of a community which was totally destroyed by the famine. Even the minor tourist activity experienced before the famine in the small resort

²² Joseph Lee. "Irish Economic History Since 1500," in *Irish Historiography, 1970-79*, ed. Joseph Lee (Cork: Cork University Press, 1981), 182.

town of Kilkee was terminated by the devastation. Murphy showed that by 1851 the parish had lost 25% of its population and by 1861, 33%. He emphasized, however, that the devastation was more than likely greater than the official figures would indicate because the population in 1845 was probably much higher than the 1841 census figures.²³ This account is very anecdotal and full of interesting local characters. Murphy made it quite clear that the Poor Law, as amended by the Whigs, was inadequate and inappropriate to deal with the worsening crisis and that the resources of the community, even if the local landlords had been conscientious or generous, were incapable of supporting the poor. Yet, in the spirit of the times in the history profession in Ireland, he avoided actually addressing the subject of responsibility on the part of government or local officials.

By contrast, a more recent local history of the famine has been written by Ciarán Ó Murchadha in *Sable Wings over the Land: Ennis County Clare and its wider community during the Great Famine*, published in 1998. He used traditional literary sources and, in particular, local newspapers. He has written with unabashed indignation of horribly misguided government policy and the implementation of it by commissioners, guardians and lesser functionaries who cared little for the murderous consequences of their actions. Not only is the tone of his work undeniably post-revisionist but it is also graced by a foreword written by a prominent post-revisionist, James Donnelly, who heartily endorses it declaring, "Official negligence, indifference, and corruption, along with selfish class interest and shameless profiteering, are unsparingly exposed, and

²³ Ignatius Murphy, *A People Starved: Life and Death in West Clare, 1845-1851* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999), 89-90.

unattractive human faces are put on many repulsive instances of oppression.”²⁴ This work situates the reader in Ennis and the surrounding community during those fateful days and, in the process of providing a microcosmic glimpse of the Irish famine, does not hesitate to declare misconduct and identify the responsible party wherever it is uncovered.

The contrast between these two examples brings into sharp focus the evolution in the approximately three decades which separate their authorship. Although Ignatius Murphy, were he alive today, would probably not identify himself as a revisionist, the influence of the history profession, in its revisionist heyday, is clearly recognizable by the omissions in his work. Neither Murphy nor others who have undertaken local famine studies²⁵ fall into the category of revisionist identified so emotively by Tim Pat Coogan (interviewed by Brendan Bradshaw) in a recent issue of *History Ireland*. Coogan described Irish professional historians of his generation in a very disparaging light.

the Famine was portrayed as the nineteenth-century version of the Scarsdale diet, something that Trevelyan and company always regretted; they never intended this to happen, etc. They regarded Irish nationalism as an atavistic pursuit of bloody bog men, responsible for today's bombs, as if it had nothing to do with the apartheid state which the unionists and the British set up and maintained.²⁶

Ignatius Murphy's undertaking was exceptional for its time and, had he not become the distinguished historian of the three volume history of the Diocese of Killaloe, might never have seen the light of day. Had he not died in 1993, just prior to the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Famine, his estate might never have sought to unearth his work from the archives of Maynooth College.

²⁴ James S. Donnelly, foreword to *Sable Wings over the Land*, by Ciarán Ó Murchadha (Ennis: Clasp Press, 1998), ii.

²⁵ See footnote 9 on page 9.

²⁶ Tim Pat Coogan, "Living and Writing the Twentieth Century," as interviewed by Brendan Bradshaw in *History Ireland* Volume 12 Number 2 (Summer 2004), 42.

Most other local famine studies are much more recent and have benefited from post-revisionist scholarship. Having been released from the constraints imposed by the revisionist movement and the concomitant paralysis in the history profession, we are now free to address the tragic aspects of the famine without fear of ridicule for being too passionate about our subject. The history of the Limerick Poor Law Union during the famine is unique in its characters and incidents. Inasmuch as Limerick was a large urban union in the most devastated part of Ireland during the Famine and the model which the Poor Law Commissioners would have liked other unions to emulate, it is a special case. The diligent struggle of the board of guardians to implement the provisions of the Poor Law, especially after it was amended in 1847, is a poignant reminder that the 'rule of law' serves a people best when the laws upon which it is based are sound at the outset.

CHAPTER 2

IDEOLOGY AND IRISH FAMINE RELIEF

The first country to industrialize was the first to have to address the problems of poverty on a large scale. Never, before industrialization, had the poor been in such an unsafe position. Before the revolutions in agriculture and industry, the lower orders had had a paternalistic structure to protect them.¹ Their attachment to the soil put subsistence, at least, within reach. Once the enclosure movement cut off their access to common pasture land and waste land for fuel and game² and improvements in production methods reduced the need for manpower, they became more vulnerable. Then when industrialization drew them to the cities they were absolutely dependent upon wages to survive. Any interruption in employment due to a downturn in the economy or to illness or infirmity threw them into a desperate situation.

The first small steps toward what would be referred to in the twentieth century as the 'welfare state' were taken in the form of government responses to poverty. There is an ongoing argument today among sociologists, political scientists and historians about the viability of the welfare state. Put far too simply, on the one hand there are those who believe that full 'citizenship' in a modern democracy demands that fundamental rights, such as educational opportunities, health care, employment assurance, affordable housing, etc., be delivered to all as a requirement of social justice. Furthermore, this is

¹ Peter Mandler, *Aristocratic Government in the Age of Reform*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 131.

² Raymond G. Cowherd, *Political Economists and the English Poor Laws*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1977), xi.

necessary in a society which wishes to retain the practical benefits of a market economy. On the other hand there are those who believe that a liberal market and the sovereignty of political democracy cannot continue to co-exist in a modern capitalist economy. This sounds very much like the Marxist prediction of the inevitable collapse of capitalism. Social welfare programs, for them, have just put off the day of reckoning. Along with this go accusations that the welfare state is coercive and systematically undermines the initiative and self-reliance of its citizens.³ However timely it might be, this debate is not new. It was raging at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries and it had a profound impact on government policy in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

This chapter will examine the evolution of the thinking which influenced government decision-making in respect to its poorer citizens. It will concentrate on the British government's response to poverty, particularly in the early nineteenth century when policy was being developed in response to growing concern and pressure for the state to assume responsibility for pauperization caused by a rapidly changing economic situation. It will describe the debate, discuss the introduction of a poor law into Ireland and examine the responses of the Tories and the Whigs to the famine crisis. It will conclude with a discussion of the Whig amendments to the Irish Poor Law during the famine and their consequent impact on the country.

It is important to define terms before examining the schools of thought which broached the question of the state's responsibility to its poor, in particular to its paupers.

³ See Michael Hill, *The Welfare State in Britain: A Political History since 1945* (Hants, England: Edward Elgar, 1993) 3-10; David Harris, *Justifying State Welfare: The New Right versus The Old Left* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987) passim.

The 'poor' are defined as those lacking material possessions; existing without the luxuries and often the necessities of life; having little money. The distinction between luxuries and necessities is an important one. The industrial revolution caused consumer goods to be put on the market which were unheard of before. At the beginning they might have been considered luxuries. In time some of them came to be considered necessities of life. This is, of course, relatively speaking. One is considered poor, by this definition, in relation to others. If there is no comparison, there is no poverty. In her seminal study, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age*, Gertrude Himmelfarb makes this point at length. She claims that the progress of civilization brought with it not only an expansion of needs and therefore an enlargement of the definition of poverty, but also a determination to alleviate poverty as it had come to be understood.⁴

But before we deal with that second notion of the "determination to alleviate poverty" it is important to define pauper. A pauper is a person destitute of means except such as are derived from charity; one who receives aid from public poor funds. This adds a dimension which is not included in the commonly accepted definition of 'poor'. Therefore, in the debate over alleviating poverty (or the state's responsibility for the welfare of its citizens), it is important to know if one is advocating the redistribution of wealth from richer to poorer citizens or the providing of sustenance to paupers to keep them from starving or turning to crime.

It will be useful to agree from the outset that the poor are those who lack luxuries

⁴ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age*, (New York: Random House, 1985), 148.

and paupers are those who need help to survive. The distinction between 'poor' and 'pauper' is essential to understanding the ideologies which spurred the debate which resulted in government response. This distinction we will maintain throughout in order to focus on the 'determination to alleviate poverty'. We will have to agree, therefore, that 'Poor Law' is an inadequate (not to say poor) way to describe legislation intended to alleviate the suffering of paupers.

It will become evident that those who took a hard line in the debates were advocating not so much against helping paupers as they were against the pauperization of the poor. This in turn points up the opposing philosophies regarding aid to paupers. Some believed it was an essential, 'humanitarian', almost obligatory response to the suffering of their fellow citizens. Others believed that men, being basically lazy and shiftless, would not work unless they were compelled by the threat of starvation. Consequently, giving aid for them (i.e., those who believed that irrefutable 'laws of nature' governed the behaviour of men individually and in their commercial and economic relationships) was bound to result in eliminating the threat of starvation and, therefore, the incentive to work. Furthermore, such help would create more paupers from among the poor who would quickly realize that it was easier to get relief than to work. This is basically how the debate broke down. We will see how these opposing factions spawned a third, 'radical' response to the question which prevailed in the establishment in England of a 'New Poor Law' in 1834.

2.1 The debate over poor relief

Prior to the industrial revolution, in a mercantilist economy, nations saw workers

as a source of wealth or a resource for exploitation. Keeping wages down was a way of remaining competitive with other nations. Furthermore there seemed to be a strong prejudice against the good will or self-motivation of workers. Gaston Rimlinger, in his study entitled *Welfare Policy and Industrialization in Europe, America and Russia*, describes the problem as follows:

the workers were thought to have a backwards sloping individual supply curve of labor, which meant that increases in remuneration would result in decreases of the willingness to work. It was a doctrine that made improvement of the workers' lot self-defeating and that justified harsh measures against the poor. To what extent the doctrine was based on fact or simply reflected a bias in the attitude of the upper classes toward the common man remains unknown, but the doctrine itself had many adherents in both England and in France.⁵

We will see this attitude reflected strongly in the debate on whether the original Poor Law should be amended or repealed altogether.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there was also a profound questioning throughout Europe of the structure of society. Ideas of individual liberty and the rights of man were emerging to challenge the establishment. As the industrial revolution got underway and the impact of the large scale production of goods on the wealth of individual capitalists and the nation as a whole began to be observed, it was inevitable that someone would attempt to analyze and explain this, essentially capitalist, phenomenon. The workers were, of course, a key component in its success. The attempt to define the process became known as the discipline called political economy. It emerged from what might be described as moral philosophy, the body of knowledge which describes the relationships between men and nations as they reflect a certain ethical standard. The problem became to remove this essentially commercial phenomenon from the domain of moral philosophy, to de-moralize it and subject it to a

⁵ Gaston V. Rimlinger, *Welfare Policy and Industrialization in Europe, America and Russia* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1971), 16.

strictly rational interpretation and the scientific method. Yet it was hard to ignore the fact that the largest segment of society, the poor, were not only implicated but had to be committed to the success of commercial capitalism. They should therefore, some thought, benefit from the process.

In 1776 Adam Smith published *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* which heralded the beginning of ‘political economy’ as that term was generally understood at the time – ‘classical economics,’ as a later generation was to know it.⁶ Smith was a moral philosopher by profession and although Himmelfarb credits him with being the first political economist she insists that he was not responsible for demoralizing the discipline. Smith’s attitude to labour was somewhat magnanimous.

Servants, labourers and workmen of different kinds, make up the far greater part of every great political society. But what improves the circumstances of the greater part can never be regarded as an inconvenience to the whole. No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable. It is but equity, besides, that they who feed, clothe and lodge the whole body of the people, should have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably well fed, clothed and lodged.⁷

Smith was, as Himmelfarb points out, in favour of high wages and not so “laissez-faire” as he is criticized for being. He believed in a ‘progressive’ economy and was thus an optimist regarding the economic progress of the nation and in this Himmelfarb sees his chief claim to originality.⁸ It was for Thomas Robert Malthus to introduce the note of pessimism and finally to de-moralize (i.e., remove from the realm of ethical consideration) political economy.

Malthus published his *Essay on the Principle of Population* in 1798. It was

⁶ Himmelfarb, 51.

⁷ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (New York: The Modern Library, 1937), 78-79.

⁸ Himmelfarb, 53.

antithetical to Smith's optimistic view of industrial productivity, high wages and ultimate social and economic progress. The 'principle of population' based on natural laws, the immutable, physical, biological facts of nature, dictated that population could not grow beyond the level of the means of subsistence. When the crisis point was reached and population outgrew the food supply, there were means by which nature corrected the imbalance. This came as a revelation to contemporaries of Malthus at the beginning of the nineteenth century and undermined belief in the possibility not only of a 'very great' improvement of society but of any significant degree of improvement, which denied, indeed, the basic assumption of modern enlightened thought – the idea of progress.⁹ In this context the poor are in for the worst fate that might befall mankind whether it be from famine, pestilence or war. This was a pessimistic view indeed and one which Malthus admitted to and apologized for.¹⁰ But in subjecting not only the fate of the poor but ultimately the progress of the nation to the irrefutable laws of nature, Malthus succeeded in de-moralizing political economy. He caused a great deal of controversy but he did not turn the leading thinkers of the early nineteenth century in Britain into pessimists.

It is not too much to say that England in the first half of the nineteenth century was in a state of moral and intellectual turmoil, as some people tried to assimilate the message of Malthusianism, others frantically resisted it, and still others found themselves caught up in a mode of thought and feeling that seemed to be intellectually irresistible and morally repulsive.¹¹

It is in this context that the 'determination to alleviate poverty' was so heatedly debated by Humanitarian, Natural Law and Radical reformers in the years leading up to the passage of the 'New Poor Law' in Britain in 1834.

⁹ Himmelfarb, 102.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 133.

In England there had been a Poor Law since the original '43 Elizabeth' had been passed in 1601. It had been conceived in the paternalistic spirit of the times. It gave to the parishes of the established church the responsibility to look after their own poor. The vestry and the local magistrates were charged with the implementation of the law. Accompanying it was an act of settlement and removal which enabled parishes to remove paupers who did not belong to them by virtue of long standing residence or birth in that parish. The Poor Law provided work for the unemployed, education for the children, relief for those unable to work and punishment for those unwilling to work.¹² This law was modified over time. Parishes eventually began to build workhouses to accommodate paupers and deny relief to those who did not wish to enter the workhouse. Outdoor relief was provided by some parishes and eventually a system of augmenting a labourer's wages to raise them to an acceptable subsistence level came into widespread use.

The wars with France at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries put a tremendous strain on the economy. The fear was that the nation could not afford to support indigence. There was mounting pressure on the government of William Pitt from both sides of the debate but particularly from those who wanted the old Poor Law repealed and the accompanying expense eliminated.

The original poor law had served its purpose for almost two centuries and, as with much legislation, was in the process of being updated and adapted. The rapidly changing economic conditions and the consequent demographic shift called for open-minded analysis and clear-headed reaction. There were those who made it their preoccupation to take note of the needs of the less fortunate in society and try to have government respond

¹² Cowherd, 1.

by modifying legislation to meet changing conditions. Generally speaking, their attention was focussed on suffering and how to provide relief. Raymond Cowherd, among others, has chronicled their efforts.¹³

Cowherd credits Jonas Hanway, for having begun the humanitarian reform of the Poor Law in England. Hanway began his public life in 1750 when an inheritance and his own accumulated wealth enabled him to devote the rest of his life to the most neglected and wretched of London's poorer classes.¹⁴ His work was mostly in behalf of infants, whose death-rate in workhouses was exceptionally high, and apprentices who were often treated little better than slaves. His legacy, however, was in the number of other like-minded reformers he inspired to carry on his work. A contemporary of Hanway was long-time parliamentarian Thomas Gilbert. Through the assiduous collection of statistical data to back up his arguments for reform, he was able, in a limited way, to have legislation passed modifying the existing Poor Law. He got the government to at least consider the negative effects of the settlement laws which prevented the movement of workers from rural parishes to industrial towns.¹⁵ He demonstrated that it was more efficient in some communities to combine parishes together into larger poor law "unions" and administer the workhouse with paid personnel. He was instrumental in keeping the able-bodied poor out of the workhouse and he encouraged outdoor relief to all types of needy people. Gilbert's influence was enhanced by the support and admiration he enjoyed from William Pitt, the younger, who became Prime Minister in 1784 and

¹³ See also Raymond Cowherd, *The Politics of English Dissent: the religious aspects of liberal and humanitarian reform movements from 1815-1848*. New York: New York University Press, 1956.

¹⁴ Cowherd, *Political Economists*, 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

appointed him chairman of the Ways and Means Committee.¹⁶

Gilbert's efforts met with a great deal of resistance from natural law reformers but some of the seeds which he had sown were brought to fruition by Sir George Rose, another of Pitt's protégés. Rose's first measure was designed to protect Friendly Societies. These benefit clubs provided workers with fellowship and financial assistance in times of crisis. His bill provided legal protection for the Societies so they could do their work. He and Pitt also achieved modifications to the Laws of Settlement and Removal which increased the migration of labour to places of employment and prevented the removal of sick persons and pregnant women.¹⁷ He was instrumental in increasing outdoor relief to the extent that the Poor Law Returns of 1803 revealed that:

the total number of people in England and Wales receiving assistance in that year was 1,233,768; and of this total, 956,248 persons received outdoor relief, while only 83,468 were relieved in workhouses. Of the number receiving outdoor relief in 1803, 194,052 persons did not belong to the parishes which helped them.¹⁸

These figures reflect the extent of the contribution of Rose and Pitt to humanitarian reform. The P.M. remained in office, and to a certain extent allowed himself to be influenced by humanitarian reformers, from 1784 till his death in 1806, except for a three year period beginning in 1801, when he was forced to resign by the refusal of King George III to honour Pitt's promise to the Irish for the loss of their parliament in the union with Britain in 1801 - the admission of Catholics to high office and to parliament.¹⁹

Additional humanitarian support came from the Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor, organized by William Wilberforce and Thomas Bernard, leaders

¹⁶ Cowherd, *Political Economists*, 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁹ John A Garry and Peter Gay, eds., *The Columbia History of the World*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 785.

of the Clapham Evangelicals. Its purpose was to remove the difficulties connected with parochial relief, to correct abuses of workhouses and to assist the poor in placing out their children in the world.²⁰ This organization continued, even after Pitt's death, to try to have some of his reforms implemented. Cowherd sums up their contribution:

It was fortunate for the English working classes that the Evangelical reformers advocated their welfare and ameliorated some of the harsh conditions of the Poor Laws. At a time of rapid industrialization, the humanitarian reforms made it easier for the workers to move to places of employment and to be more secure in their residence. The granting of outdoor relief to the sick and to large families lessened somewhat the harsh conditions during the years of wartime inflation. Although the benevolent reforms mitigated conditions somewhat, they also served to emphasize the enormous amount of misery which the working people endured during the period of the French Wars.²¹

Humanitarian reformers were focussed on the needs of the poor and concerned with the delivery of relief where and when it was needed. They were not so much concerned with the fallen nature of mankind and how to improve the behaviour of the paupers in order to change them into contributing members of society. The adaptation of the existing Poor Law to make it more effective in providing relief, was their primary concern. In this they were somewhat successful and the needy were well served by their efforts.

The antithesis to humanitarian reform was the reaction of the so-called 'Natural Law' reformers. They believed in a set of principles based on what were assumed to be the permanent characteristics of human nature. For them these principles were fundamentally unchanging and universally applicable. This movement seemed to grow even in the ranks of the Evangelicals. Boyd Hilton in *The Age of Atonement: the Influence of Evangelism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865*, postulates that

²⁰ Cowherd, 14-15.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

evangelicals had even more influence than economists in gaining acceptance for a natural law, i.e., free trade, laissez-faire, theory. The catalyst for this reaction was the *Essay on the Principle of Population* by Thomas Malthus. Its influence grew as the financial pressure of the war effort, a few poor harvests and Napoleon's blockade of the Continent threatened the English population with widespread famine. The census of 1811 revealed a growing population and Malthus's conclusion, that the Poor Laws made even worse the conditions that they were supposed to improve, seemed borne out by the evidence at hand.

But probably the two most salient reasons for the increasing popularity of natural law arguments for dealing with poverty are that they were based on seemingly scientific reasoning as opposed to sentiment and that they gained the approbation of leading churchmen. Natural law reformers criticized humanitarians as "soft-headed men of good intentions."²² Malthus himself insisted that the laws of nature were the laws of God and in time many Evangelicals were persuaded to accept his principle of population as Providential discipline for the working classes.²³

Two of the more prominent clergymen to adopt the Malthusian philosophy and apply it to their writings were John Bird Sumner and Thomas Chalmers. Sumner's *Treatise on the Records of Creation and the Moral Attributes of the Creator* invoked the principle of population in attempting to prove that revealed religion had the confirmation of the latest scientific knowledge.²⁴ Overpopulation for him was the incentive to work or, in other words, men are forced by want to labour, and then to exchange with others

²² Cowherd, 29.

²³ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

the fruits of their labour, so that universal welfare is the consequence.²⁵ But he also endorsed the preventive check (famine, war) which was the means by which nature restored the balance between population and food supply.

According to Sumner, Malthus had gone far toward explaining the existence of evil in the world, since he had “clearly proved that the greater part of these evils are the necessary consequence of a cause universally operating, viz., the natural tendency of mankind to increase in a quicker ratio than their substance.”²⁶

Chalmers, according to Hilton, erected the preventive check into a system of moral theology in which prudence and chastity were not merely rational responses to crisis but spiritual imperatives in their own right.²⁷ In addition to several works on political economy, Chalmers wrote two lengthy articles in the *Edinburgh Review* on “The Causes and Cure of Pauperism.” He was convinced that relief caused the poor to become paupers and that the Poor Laws “ought to be entirely abolished.”²⁸

In the economic depression which followed the Napoleonic Wars a sort of panic set in about the growing costs of relief and the House of Commons appointed a committee to inquire into the Poor Laws. Under the chairmanship of William Sturges Bourne, it started its investigation in February, 1817, and worked for four months. The committee collected an important amount of social information but its report reflected current natural law thinking rather than the evidence it had compiled.²⁹ It recommended that the workhouse be reinstated as the only source of relief. The allowance system to augment labourers’ wages was out. Its most unbelievable recommendation was that redundant children, i.e., those that a labourer’s wages could not support, between the

²⁵ Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: the Influence of Evangelism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 77.

²⁶ Cowherd, 39.

²⁷ Hilton, 79.

²⁸ Cowherd, 66.

²⁹ Mandler, 134; Cowherd, 56-57.

ages of three and fourteen be taken from their families and set to work in schools of industry where they would be taught not only a trade but also morals and religion.³⁰

In the House of Commons Report the natural law reformers wove economics, morals and theology into one fabric. These theorists had such confidence in their self-evident propositions that they either discounted or misused the testimony of experience. They selected from their own testimony those cases which illustrated the doctrines deduced from self-evident propositions. Moreover, they did not think it necessary to wait for the great mass of statistical evidence made available by the Poor Law Returns for the years 1813 to 1815.³¹

These returns were not available until 1818 and, similar to the statistics compiled in 1803, they showed that during the prosperous but inflationary years of the war the cost of maintaining the poor had actually dropped. Nevertheless, by 1819, in a series of bills piloted through parliament by Sturges Bourne, the natural law philosophy of the early nineteenth century was implemented. The new legislation treated paupers like mindless creatures who had to be taught to be industrious or they had to be eliminated before they bankrupted the nation. It is interesting to note that, in this new legislation, the laws of settlement were tightened up in order to remove to the port nearest their home parish Irish and Scots paupers who had moved into centers of industry seeking work.

Had they taken the time to study the compilation of statistics that they themselves had commissioned, they might have made more relevant and helpful recommendations to alleviate pauperism. Instead they reacted to their fears of the consequences of pauperism on the economy of the nation. They were convinced that they had the solution to the problem in their advocacy of the abolition of the Poor Law. Had it not been for others of a more radical persuasion, the existing poor laws might very well have been abolished.

The radical movement in the nineteenth century took 'natural law' reform ideas one step further. Its foremost proponent was Jeremy Bentham. By the time the 'New

³⁰ Cowherd, 59.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

Poor Law' of 1834 was passed in parliament his influence was unmistakable.

the Poor Law Amendment Act was no partial measure, no mere bit of tinkering with the system; it was, despite its title, not an amendment act at all, but what it was popularly called, a New Poor Law, and for that we may well hold the Benthamites responsible.³²

Bentham was a lawyer who pursued a career as a reformer. He was the founder of the school of moral philosophy called 'utilitarianism' based on his principle of utility which he defined as "that property of any object whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good or happiness, or to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered."³³ His attitude was democratic for his time and he was an economic liberal. In the depression years following the wars, with mounting pressure on the government to cut spending he turned his attention to parliamentary reform. One aspect of his philosophy was that the role of governing was to produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number. He could not see this happening with the largest segment of society disenfranchised and control in the hands of a few who were, as were all humans, motivated by gain and pleasure. He recommended: 1) the exclusion of placemen from the House of Commons, 2) annual elections, 3) uniform electoral districts, 4) suffrage to all who paid a certain amount of taxes and 5) secret voting.³⁴ Radicalism was born and it was primarily characterized by an attitude of hostility toward aristocratic institutions.³⁵

Bentham attracted two important disciples, James Mill and David Ricardo, who made his work more comprehensible to the world at large. Mill was, for a time, his secretary and editorial assistant and reduced Bentham's prolific prose into simple and

³² Edsall, 2.

³³ Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee, eds., *Dictionary of National Biography*, (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1908), Vol. II, 271.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 275.

³⁵ Cowherd, 98.

direct articles which could be published. Ricardo, on the other hand, helped Bentham propose practical solutions based on sound economic theory. By developing his theory of rent, Ricardo demonstrated that the passing of the Corn Law in 1815 restricting the importation of grain and driving up the value of rent benefited only the landlords. This was, therefore, a manipulation by the aristocracy for its own gain and seemed to confirm the utilitarian doctrine that corruption was inherent in an aristocratic form of government.³⁶ Ricardo also believed that the price of labour should be determined by the market and that the Poor Laws, by supplementing the wages of labourers, unnaturally increased their numbers. These laws therefore exacerbated the problem by creating paupers which the market could not support. Taxes, however, which came from profits, had to be reduced in order for capital to accumulate thereby stimulating social progress. The Poor Laws created the opposite effect because the poor rates directly reduced profits.

Ricardo went beyond Malthus and predicted diminishing returns to capital in proportion to the increase of population. In the light of his doctrine, he could take no other position than that of ultimately abolishing the Poor Law. Until the time was more opportune for abolishing the Poor Law, Ricardo contended for the steady reduction of all types of taxation, including the poor rate.³⁷

In addressing the reform of the Poor Laws Bentham's purpose was to diminish the effect of pauperism on the economy and, if possible, to decrease the extent of pauperism itself.³⁸ He advocated no relief outside of the workhouse, that inmates work out their own expense and that maintenance inside the workhouse be less desirable than self-maintenance (i.e., the principle of 'less eligibility'). He also saw the whole plan being administered by an Indigence Relief Minister of cabinet rank.

In an atmosphere of growing acceptance of Radical thought and agitation for

³⁶ Cowherd, 110.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

³⁸ Edsall, 6.

parliamentary reform, and after rioting had broken out in the southern counties the government, in March of 1832, appointed a Royal Commission on the Poor Laws.³⁹ The Commission, whose report virtually became the New Poor Law, was chaired by Nassau Senior, a political economist of radical persuasion, and had as an assistant (later member) Edwin Chadwick who had been Bentham's secretary for many years. These two are credited with having written the report. It recommended: 1) fewer units of poor law administration by grouping parishes together in Poor Law Unions, 2) a Board of Guardians in each of these Unions, elected by the ratepayers, with the mandate to hire full-time officers, and 3) a Poor Law Commission to oversee the whole administrative structure and provide efficiency and uniformity.⁴⁰ The Poor Law Amendment Bill of 1834 passed both houses with remarkable ease. It represented the triumph of ideology over good sense and the evidence at hand. And it demonstrated the tremendous impact of current thinking on decision-making in government. Although it spawned an anti-poor law movement that forced some easing of restrictions, it really began an era of social 'natural selection' and ultra laissez-faire economic policy which was to set back the evolution of the welfare state and have particularly drastic results in Ireland.

the New Poor Law was clearly seen as a tool of improvement. But improvement was to be achieved not by granting but by withdrawing rights, by throwing labourers on their own resources. For this reason, most of the Royal Commissioners opposed extending the New Poor Law to Ireland, hitherto without any Poor Laws at all.⁴¹

But Ireland had a vast number of poor peasants and, having addressed the problem of poverty in one part of the United Kingdom, the government could hardly ignore it in the poorest part.

³⁹ Mandler, 135-136; Himmelfarb, 153.

⁴⁰ Edsall, 8; Mandler, 135.

⁴¹ Mandler, 136-137.

2.2 An Irish Poor Law

In vain it was pointed out that the problems of poverty in England and Ireland were totally different, that the immense amount of destitution in Ireland would entail a gigantic expenditure if a poor law was to be effective. Workhouses for hundreds of thousands would have to be erected, and the annual cost would be at least five million pounds a year: there was no possibility of raising such a sum in Ireland...The British Government's mind was made up. The property of Ireland must support the poverty of Ireland, and a menace to England be removed.⁴²

The New Poor Law of 1834 did not apply to Ireland. Analysis of the situation in Ireland -- and it had been studied at length by British governments since the Union of 1801 -- was that it was so unique, and that poverty was so extensive that the law would not serve the population there. An analysis of British government policy toward Ireland in the early nineteenth century is readily available in *Era of Emancipation: British Government of Ireland, 1812-1830* by Brian Jenkins. In it he makes the case that the Union never functioned properly because of the "policy of Irish exceptionalism."⁴³ In the matter of poverty Ireland was exceptional. It was not industrialized, the population had grown enormously, most labour was agricultural and labourers lived on tiny plots of land which provided subsistence for their families if they were able to harvest the potatoes which were the staple of their diet. In the climate of fiscal anxiety and economic 'laissez-faire' liberalism which prevailed as the mid-century approached, this was an unsafe position for the Irish poor to be in. It would have taken an exceptionally humanitarian government to respond adequately to a crisis in this situation. As we have seen, the era of humanitarian response to poverty had passed. Jenkins demonstrates that the British government never did govern Ireland the way it did England but, despite this, it proved to be extremely doctrinaire when it came to balancing the budget. When the

⁴² Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, (New York: E.P. Hutton, 1980), 37.

⁴³ Brian Jenkins, *Era of Emancipation: British Government of Ireland, 1812-1830*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988), 80.

time came to really treat Ireland exceptionally, as in legislation to relieve pauperism, the British government made an exception and chose conformity.

Famine had periodically threatened the Irish population during the first part of the nineteenth century and a poor law for Ireland had been much studied and discussed. The government had appointed Select Committees in 1819, 1823 and 1829 to examine precisely how poverty should be relieved in Ireland.⁴⁴ In actual fact there had been, between 1825 and 1837, several unsuccessful attempts by private members to introduce poor law legislation for Ireland into the House of Commons.⁴⁵ Even though there was consensus among political economists and parliamentarians that a poor law was needed for Ireland, it was primarily based on their belief that Irish landlords had failed in their duty to support the Irish poor. But what form such state intervention should take was still in dispute. And so, in 1833 a Royal Commission, under the chairmanship of Archbishop Whatley of Dublin, was appointed to enquire into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland. Whatley's commission carried out an extensive enquiry which lasted three years and interviewed 1590 persons.⁴⁶ It found that poverty was too widespread to be adequately dealt with by a workhouse system. Instead it recommended government intervention to stimulate employment through land reclamation and the development of fisheries. It also recommended government assisted emigration to reduce the population. The likelihood that such recommendations would be accepted by a government which had just introduced a workhouse system in England was slim indeed. However, one recommendation did meet with the approval of leading political economists and the

⁴⁴ Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, 18.

⁴⁵ Black, R.D.C., *Economic Thought and the Irish Question 1817-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 91-104.

⁴⁶ Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, 18.

government. The commissioners asserted that under no circumstances should the government grant a 'right' to relief to the Irish poor such as existed in the English Poor Law.⁴⁷ This was no doubt based on their understanding of the extent of poverty in Ireland and their acceptance that the state could never support the whole of the poor. Thus the need for investment in infrastructure to provide employment. The government, of course, saw such investment as simply allowing landlords to continue to shirk their responsibility. The Whately Commission's report was not acceptable.

Just what the government was prepared to accept was revealed a couple of months after it had received the mostly negative fallout from the Whately Commission's report. One of the English Poor Law commissioners, George Nicholls, was instructed to go to Ireland and enquire into the question of poor relief.⁴⁸ He made a hasty nine-week tour of the country beginning in August 1836, and concluded that a deterrent workhouse system was essential "as a first step toward effecting an improvement in the character, habits and social conditions of the people."⁴⁹ This focus on the character of the people revealed a personal prejudice of Nicholls which, it turned out, was commonly held by British decision-makers. This 'character of the Irish people' issue became a significant aspect of their thinking when, in 1847, the Irish Poor Law was amended.

Essentially, Nicholls' mission was to propose to the government a system of poor relief which would restore order to Ireland and encourage that influx of capital which she so badly needed to provide employment for her population.⁵⁰ It had to be a system

⁴⁷ Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, 18-19.

⁴⁸ MacDowell, R.B., "Ireland on the Eve of the Famine" in *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1956), 46.

⁴⁹ D. George Boyce, *Nineteenth Century Ireland: The Search for Stability*, (Savage, Maryland: Barnes & Noble, 1991), 71

⁵⁰ Sir George Nicholls, *A History of the Irish Poor Law*, (New York: Augustus M. Kelly, 1967), 221.

similar to that of England and thus be one in which Ireland would pay for her own poverty and convert her own paupers into productive labourers. Nicholls gave the British government what it found acceptable and, on 31 July 1838, the Irish Poor Law was given royal assent.⁵¹

The country was divided into one hundred and thirty unions each with Poor Law Guardians reporting to a central Poor Law Commission. Nicholls himself, along with four assistant commissioners, was sent to Dublin to oversee its administration.⁵² Yet even he warned the government that, in the event of famine in Ireland, no poor law could prove adequate.⁵³

The subject of what motivated the government's stubborn pursuit of such a course despite so much unequivocal advice to the contrary is a challenge to the historian. The Whigs had developed and implemented a strategy for providing relief to the poor in England which they had been convinced, by moderates and moralists in their midst, would begin to eliminate pauperism, if not poverty. The workhouse test of 'less eligibility' was the key. Paupers would, as human nature dictated, prefer to work for a living than be relieved in an atmosphere of discomfort, humiliation, coercion and near starvation. The experience of the workhouse, therefore, would bring them to their senses and propel them to a life of gainful employment. So when it came to Ireland, where indolence and improvident behaviour was rampant, in their view, these same thinkers and policy makers, would inevitably conclude that such potent measures would be even more salutary. To complicate the Irish situation further, Irish landlords were considered by the

⁵¹ Nicholls, 221.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 234.

⁵³ D. George Boyce, *Nineteenth Century Ireland*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990), 71.

British to have done a poor job of assuming the responsibility of their privileged positions. Landlords needed, therefore, to be forced, if necessary, to put back into Ireland some of the vast amount of value which they were extracting in rent. This, the government thought, would be well begun by employing their poor tenants. The combination of these two factors, animus towards both the Irish poor and Irish landlords, would have devastating consequences when the time came to dealing with the failures of the Poor Law which had finally been adopted for Ireland.

2.3 Government response - Peel

Alive to the system's deficiencies, Robert Peel's Tory government was able to implement measures in 1845-46 that simply ignored the Poor Law. Or put another way, distress was relieved, at least in the beginning of the crisis, by means other than the Poor Law. The first partial failure of the potato crop due to *phytophthora infestans* occurred in the summer of 1845. When the late crop was harvested in October of that year, it became evident that the devastation was serious and extensive. "What was so discouraging, and what lent credibility to even the most despondent reports, was that potatoes that appeared sound and free of disease when dug became blighted soon after they had been pitted or housed."⁵⁴ The potato was the staple of the Irish diet for the majority of the peasant population. Regardless of the fact that it was an agrarian society and other forms of food were produced in abundance, the destruction of the potato meant certain starvation for hundreds of thousands of people unless something exceptional was done. Government response was the key factor. Would it be adequate? How would an

⁵⁴ James S. Donnelly, Jr., *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2001), 44.

adequate response be implemented?

As 1845 neared an end Peel's government was being advised to do something about the rising cost of food in Ireland. It was urged, in effect, to suspend the Corn Laws by allowing the duty-free importation of grain from foreign sources, to forbid the export of oats, to provide a loan of £1 million for the relief of distress, to establish public granaries and to put the destitute to work on public works projects.⁵⁵ One of Peel's earliest responses was to purchase £100,000 worth of Indian corn in the United States. This was to be stored in Ireland and released onto the market at cost in order to keep the price of food down. There were also £46,000 worth of Indian corn and oatmeal purchased in Britain and shipped to Ireland.⁵⁶ These quantities of food were milled and stored in depots throughout the country run by the commissariat branch of the army and the coast guard. Distribution was controlled by the central relief commission set up by Peel's government in late 1845, and by local relief committees, which, by the spring and summer of 1846, had been established throughout the country. The intention was to release quantities as the need arose during that time of the year (May to August) between planting of the new crop and normal harvesting of the early potatoes.⁵⁷ The demand, however, forced some depots to open as early as March and by the end of June government supplies were all but exhausted.⁵⁸ Due to the blight, of course, seed potatoes were in short supply in the spring of 1846 and so the amount of acreage planted was reduced in comparison with 1845. Furthermore, the destruction of the crop in 1846 was not partial, as it had been in 1845, but complete.

⁵⁵ Donnelly, *Potato Famine*, 48.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁵⁸ Woodham-Smith, 85.

One of the complicating factors for the Irish poor was that they were not used to a monetized economy. Their labour secured for them access to a plot of land and they subsisted on the potatoes which they grew for themselves. Peel's public works projects were intended to put into their hands the pittance they would require to purchase food.⁵⁹ But the projects were fraught with difficulties from the beginning. Eventually there were two kinds of public works, those approved by grand juries which were funded entirely by loans and those approved by the Board of Works which were half-grant projects. It quickly became obvious to the Treasury Board that landlords were applying to the Board of Works for projects in order to have the benefit of government investment in their estates. The immediate reaction of the Secretary of the Treasury, Charles Edward Trevelyan, was to demand proof of distress and require contributions from proprietors, but these requirements caused delays which put the government in the position of refusing to implement its own policy and withholding relief which it had agreed to offer.⁶⁰ Also it was alleged that the wages paid on public works projects were drawing labourers away from farmers and threatening Ireland's badly needed agricultural output.

Quite apart from the criticism the public works were receiving, the employment statistics began to worry the Treasury, if not the government itself. In the month of June 1846, 21,000 was the average daily number employed on public works projects. By mid-July the number had soared to 71,000 and in the first week of August it had peaked at 98,000.⁶¹ The new Whig government's estimate was that with these and other projects, considering the dependents of these labourers, it was supporting approximately seven

⁵⁹ Donnelly, *Potato Famine*, 53-54.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

hundred thousand people in Ireland. Furthermore, the landlords, whose responsibility it was to provide for the poor on their estates, were still managing to transfer some of their costs to the public purse. Unfortunately, the crisis corresponded to the beginning of a downturn in the economy in Britain which led to a more cautious approach to spending at the Treasury and a tendency to focus on England's woes rather than those of Ireland.

The 'railway mania' which began in 1845 had run its course, and bad harvests in both Ireland and Britain in 1846 led to a huge trade deficit and consequent drain of bullion on the Bank of England. The financial crisis...was exacerbated (so most economists argue) by the restrictiveness of the Bank Act of 1844. The crisis was relatively short lived, but it was one of the nineteenth century's worst, and from Ireland's point of view the timing was inauspicious. With the plight of the Bank of England to worry them, it is easier to see how Ireland's problems took a back seat in the minds of Russell and Wood.⁶²

Consequently, the Treasury's determination to put an end to the public works fiasco, and the financial peril in which, in its perception, it placed the British people, was strengthened. One begins to see the basis for the motivation of Russell's government to address the situation as soon as possible.

Peel's policies, which the Whigs inherited, were apparently appreciated not only by the officials who were charged with implementing them, but also by the Irish peasantry. Relief officials were enthused about their food distribution program and expressed this to Trevelyan at the Treasury.⁶³ They were mindful, of course, of what an unmitigated disaster it would have been if they had not been in a position to fulfill the immediate need for food to stave off starvation. The labourers themselves were full of praise for the government work schemes.

⁶² Cormac Ó Gráda, *The Great Irish Famine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 39.

⁶³ Donnelly, *Potato Famine*, 56.

Commissariat officers took delight in quoting the effusive comments of the poor in reference to relief measures. Said one labourer: 'This is the sort of repeal for Ireland, and may the Almighty bless our queen'. Another remarked: 'After all, Peel is a true man to old Ireland, and the right sort.' The country people, observed Assistant Commissary-general Edward Pine Coffin, readily declared that they had 'been rescued from a state of frightful misery...'⁶⁴

But what Peel's policies perhaps created in the minds of the people was a sort of expectation as to how the government would react in the event of a crisis at any time.

Peel's government, as it turned out, was not to last the summer. Although he managed to put the repeal of the Corn Laws through both houses, it was at the cost of hopelessly dividing his party and antagonizing half of his own supporters. His resignation was announced on 29 June 1846.⁶⁵ Lord John Russell's Whig government soon proved to be less sympathetic to the fate of the Irish people.

2.4 Government response – Russell

By contrast, the Whig government of Lord John Russell, which succeeded the Tories in 1846, started out being interventionist and then, in the face of mounting pressure, abandoned this policy, made a complete turnaround and retreated in the face of substantial opposition. It failed, therefore, to respond adequately to the increasing gravity of the situation in Ireland. Russell's government abandoned the Irish people to the woefully inadequate mechanisms of the Irish Poor Law. It is not surprising, therefore, that some historians have imputed much more sinister motives to the Whigs than mere neglect or blind adherence to ideology.

No one knew at the outset, of course, that it would take another four years for the potato crisis to subside and that the Poor Law would be used, as the situation worsened,

⁶⁴ Donnelly, *Potato Famine*, 56.

⁶⁵ Woodham-Smith, 86.

to deal with a catastrophe for which it was not designed. The more the government insisted on using the Poor Law to deal with starvation, the more its instruments broke down under the strain. Public works projects with emaciated labourers to provide the manpower, overcrowded workhouses doubling as fever hospitals, and temporary solutions abandoned on principle, lead one to conclude that there was a fundamental lack of understanding of the seriousness of the problem. Was this caused by slavish adherence to economic ideology or were there other motives at play which affected the Whig response? One needs to examine this complex issue first and then look at the consequences.

Lord John Russell considered himself the champion of justice for Ireland⁶⁶ and came into office with a long-range program for transforming the country into a peaceable kingdom. His plan included turning small farmers into wage labourers, encouraging an emergent middle class of shopkeepers and merchants to supply them, forcing insolvent landlords to sell to the new breed of merchants who would be anxious to invest in land, a land tax to support the Catholic clergy, and security for tenants which would improve forever their relationships with landlords.⁶⁷ It seemed well thought out and comprehensive, but the focal point of what ailed Ireland, for Russell, was the landlords.

He expressed his attitude toward them openly:

the Landlords of Ireland have exercised the rights of property, squeezing by means of agents, police and military the utmost rents out of their tenants, and performing none of the duties of property. If a farmhouse was wanted they did not build it; if gates were broken down they did not put up new ones; if the labourers were reduced to beggary they did not feed them; if the people had no place of public worship for their own creed they did not contribute to erect one. In receiving rent, and in collecting rent, began continued and ended their part as proprietors.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ John Prest, *Lord John Russell* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1972), 235.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 236.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 236-237.

Russell came with a plan, but the plan itself, because of his “animus towards the landlords” caused him, from time to time, to lose sight of the poor needing relief.⁶⁹

Russell’s announced intention when he took over the reins of government was not to interfere with the grain trade.⁷⁰ The public works projects which were currently in progress were scheduled to end at the time of the early harvest and although they were considered by the Treasury to be an unmitigated disaster they were allowed to continue until approximately 15 August. It was his government’s intention to reorganize public works and make the system more efficient.

Trevelyan had outlined a revised strategy which Russell brought before the House of Commons on 17 August.⁷¹ It was already evident by then that the failure of the potato crop of 1846 would be extensive, if not total. He suggested that food supply be left in the hands of private merchants except in the extreme west where there was less commercial activity. Here government supplies could be stored in the event of shortages. But a horrible fiasco ensued involving delayed authorization to purchase grain, too little Indian corn in Britain and on the continent, export of local grain and rising food costs. There was an even greater urgency of tone in the reports Trevelyan received from officials in Ireland, but he refused to interfere directly in the market. The price of Indian meal in Cork, for example, rose from £11 a ton at the beginning of September to £18 by the end of October.⁷² This influenced the price at government depots so as not to undercut the market price. It seemed obvious to the casual observer that such a policy

⁶⁹ Prest, 237.

⁷⁰ Donnelly, *Potato Famine*, 65.

⁷¹ Prest, 238.

⁷² Donnelly, *Potato Famine*, 69.

would put the only food available beyond the reach of those who needed it to survive.

To solve this problem Trevelyan's reorganized public works program was implemented. In the new scheme of things all projects were to be approved and supervised by the Board of Works. Although government loans were to be made available to initiate projects, ninety percent of the cost would have to be repaid through local taxation. Projects involving permanent improvements to private estates were to be discouraged so that, as much as possible, landlords would not benefit directly. In other words, the building and repair of roads and bridges were the easiest projects for which to win approval. The bureaucracy required to approve and inspect projects swelled. Inevitably delays ensued. The demand for work exploded as the people sought desperately the means to feed themselves and their families. In order to avoid the perceived problem of labourers not putting in an honest day's work, a program of task labour was introduced, whereby a worker would be paid for what he accomplished rather than how many hour he had worked. Workers who refused to participate in task labour had their daily wages reduced.⁷³ Task work, however, required greater supervision to inspect and measure and caused delays in the payment of wages. The effort that went into trying to avoid inefficiency and waste, not to mention fraud, was not in itself cost effective.

The sheer numbers threatened to overwhelm the government. The average daily number of workers on public works projects grew from 26,000 at the beginning of October 1846, to 114,000 by the end of the month. By the end of November it had reached 286,000. The number of persons employed daily by the end of the year was

⁷³ Donnelly, *Potato Famine*, 74.

441,000.⁷⁴ To Treasury officials, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer Charles Wood, it was clear that the cost of such an effort was eventually going to bankrupt either the landlords or the government and maybe both.

The peak was reached in March 1847, when during one week as many as 714,390 persons were employed daily. Naturally the expenditure was great. By the time that the system of public works was terminated in the spring of 1847 and replaced by the distribution of free food (in a terribly belated confession of failure), the cumulated cost of these relief schemes amounted to the staggering sum of almost £4,850,000. It could now be said that Irish property was paying, or rather was beginning to pay, for Irish poverty.⁷⁵

During the period of time covered by these reorganized public works there were reports of people showing up for work in an emaciated state, much too weak to work for want of food. There were even reports of men dying on the job. As their productivity and consequently wages declined, they were no longer able to afford to feed themselves and their families. Thankfully, there were charitable organizations operating in Ireland that had had some success operating soup kitchens at very little cost. In its desperation the government decided to adopt a similar plan.

The legislation to put into place the distribution of free food, to address, once and for all, the problem of starvation which the public works program had never succeeded in doing, was commonly called the Soup Kitchen Act.⁷⁶ It was passed in February 1847. The financing of the scheme was done through the one hundred and thirty poor law unions then in existence but the distribution, for access purposes, was based on electoral districts of which there were slightly more than two thousand. In a remarkable feat of organization by the relief commission set up expressly for this project, some districts were ready to operate by 15 March. By 15 May, there were 1,250 up and running and by the first week in June, the maximum of 1,989 districts had soup kitchens feeding

⁷⁴ Donnelly, *Potato Famine*, 72.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

approximately three million people.⁷⁷ The program was intended to be temporary, lasting until the harvest of 1847. By then the government hoped to have in place its revisions to the poor law system which would deal with the problem of poverty in Ireland once and for all. By all standards the soup kitchen program was a real success and, had it not been for its severe time limitation, could be considered a humanitarian gesture on the part of Russell's government. It fed more people more cheaply than anything else that had been tried. It was, however, a direct intervention in the economy and risked creating a dependency on relief from which, it was feared, the Irish people would never recover.

As Donnelly observes:

The relief commissioners understandably took pride in having accomplished so much under the soup kitchen act, but with an ineradicable dogmatism they insisted that because of 'its many dangers and evils', the measure 'could only be justified by such an extreme occasion, including a combination of circumstances that can hardly be expected to occur again'. Yet history did repeat itself, and more than once, and now the official responses to extreme occasions were murderous in their consequences, though not in their intentions.⁷⁸

2.5 Amending the Irish Poor Law

At this point the government decided to transfer administration of poor relief to the aegis of the Irish Poor Law. In so doing, it pretended to itself that the crisis was over. It had been made clear to all concerned, even by George Nicholls who drafted the original Irish Poor Law in 1838, that it was intended to force the elimination of pauperism, not to deal with famine. Nevertheless, the Whig government went ahead with its plan. From now on all relief would be paid for by the rates and would be given through the workhouse in each Poor Law Union on the approval of the board of guardians. In order to prepare for the shift, three pieces of legislation were put through

⁷⁷ Donnelly, *Potato Famine*, 82-85.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

both houses in June and July 1847. The first, commonly referred to as the Poor Law Extension Act, altered the structure of the Irish Poor Law Commission by splitting it off from the authority of the Poor Law Board in England.⁷⁹ The act also strengthened the Commission's ties with the Treasury and in effect gave Trevelyan a more prominent role in the provision of relief. Local boards of guardians which failed to execute their mandates could be dismissed and replaced by paid vice-guardians. The number of poor law unions was increased from 130 to 163, by subdividing some of the larger unions in the west and erecting new workhouses.⁸⁰

The second piece of legislation was an act to punish vagrants but in particular those who had abandoned their families to the mercies of the poor law. It was intended to curtail demand for relief, by threatening those who would not declare themselves destitute, yet clandestinely sought to have their families relieved. It apparently had not occurred to the framers of this law that a man, rather than watch his family starve, might seek to have them relieved in the workhouse and continue to try to find work in order to bring them home when he was better able to support them.

The third and most important bill was the Poor Law Amendment Act. It had four main provisions: 1) the destitute who were not able-bodied, such as the infirm, the sick, orphans and widows with two or more dependent children, were to be relieved either in or out of the workhouse with the choice left up to the local board of guardians; 2) the able-bodied who were unemployed and destitute were entitled to relief but in the workhouse only - unless there was no room or the presence of infectious disease made the workhouse unfit for habitation; 3) the workhouse being full or unfit, the guardians

⁷⁹ Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, 181.

⁸⁰ Mary Daly, *The Famine in Ireland* (Dublin: Dublin Historical Association, 1986), 93.

could authorize outdoor relief to the able-bodied for a maximum of two months in exchange for labour (usually breaking stones); 4) anyone occupying more than a quarter of an acre of land could not be deemed destitute and was, therefore, ineligible to receive relief paid for by the poor rates.⁸¹

This last provision had been submitted as an amendment by William H. Gregory of Coole who, at the time, represented Dublin in the House of Commons. It became known as the 'Gregory clause' and his name became synonymous with landlords' efforts to clear their estates of redundant population. It forced any tenant with more than a quarter of an acre to give up his holding to the landlord before he could get relief for himself and his family. This was a harsh measure to the Irish peasant to whom the holding of a piece of land was a matter of life and death. But for the landlord it meant a more rapid consolidation of his estate.

Landlords may very well have been inclined to take advantage of the 'Gregory Clause', for in the week ending 4 July 1847, of the 681,794 persons relieved, no fewer than 335,535 possessed more than a quarter of an acre of land.⁸² Ironically, as a landlord, Gregory scrupulously avoided evicting tenants even at considerable cost to himself. There is speculation that the bill would never have passed through the House of Lords without the quarter-acre clause and that Gregory had merely suggested the addition to break the impasse. His compassion towards his own tenants notwithstanding, the effects of his amendment were soon to be seen throughout the countryside and adversely affected his reputation.

⁸¹ Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, 181.

⁸² Brian Jenkins, *Sir William Gregory of Coole: The Biography of an Anglo-Irishman* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe), 95.

The ravages of the Gregory clause could be seen by any traveller. 'The startling evidence of the reality will meet his eye, everywhere in the shape of the roofless cottages, and the blackened walls, and the desolate hearths which were once the humble and happy homes of a peaceful and contented peasantry.' If such comments tended to romanticize living conditions which had always been squalid, there was no escaping the desolation justly attributed to a measure to which Gregory had given his name.⁸³

The reports which continued to flow in to the Commission from the local unions painted a picture of a system which was totally overwhelmed by the magnitude of its mandate.

In January of 1848, Trevelyan published in the *Edinburgh Review* his apologia for the conduct of the government during the crisis. He referred to the famine in his title as *The Irish Crisis*. He began and ended the text with references to Divine Providence as if to wash from the hands of the government and his department responsibility for the tragic affair. He praised the administration of "the Soup Kitchen Act that by July 1847 was feeding 3,020,712 persons."⁸⁴ He gave the impression that the crisis had ended on this note of triumph. Inasmuch as it was published in January of 1848, his account gave only a fraction of the total picture. The partial failures of the potato crop which recurred in 1847 and 1849 and the complete failure of 1848 told an altogether different story. But throughout these three additional years of crisis the government held fast to its program. Trevelyan based his explanation for the modifications to the Poor Law on the three things which had become evident during the crisis:

⁸³ Jenkins, *Sir William Gregory of Coole*, 95.

⁸⁴ Joseph M. Hemon Jr., "A Victorian Cromwell: Sir Charles Trevelyan, the Famine and the Age of Improvement," *Eire-Ireland* 23:3 (Fall 1987): 23.

the first was, that if these gigantic efforts were much longer continued, they must exhaust and disorganize society throughout the United Kingdom, and reduce all classes of people in Ireland to a state of helpless dependence; the second was, that provision ought to be made for the relief of extreme destitution in some less objectionable mode than that which had been adopted for want of a better, under the pressure of an alarming emergency; and the third was, that great efforts and great sacrifices were required to provide another and a better subsistence for the large population which had hitherto depended on the potato. Upon these principles the plan of the Government for the season of 1847-8, and for all after time, was based.⁸⁵

Trevelyan's treatise not only revealed the government's motivation in reforming the Poor Law but introduced the themes that became the accepted English liberal mythology for the famine in Ireland: "non-intervention was the correct policy; attempts at intervention by the government only made matters worse; and the Irish people in particular had to be taught the salutary lesson."⁸⁶ George Bernstein, in an ironic twist, refers to this English liberal mythology of the famine in contrast to what many writers have referred to as the mythology of nationalist Irish famine history. If *laissez-faire* economic policy was a motive for amending the poor law, Bernstein suggests that at the start of Russell's mandate, his government was more open-minded.

when the Whigs returned to power in the summer of 1846, they were predisposed to two policies: first, no interference with the market; and second, public works as a means of providing famine relief...The first was a *laissez-faire* policy; the second was interventionist.⁸⁷

He goes on to explain that many liberals quickly became disillusioned with interventionist policies in Ireland. And at the roots of their disillusionment was "the suspicion and even contempt that many liberals felt towards the Irish."⁸⁸ The rhetoric of political economy indicated that the provision of so-called social services encouraged more and more dependency and it was the conviction of many liberals that the Irish were

⁸⁵ Trevelyan, 297-299.

⁸⁶ George L. Bernstein, "Liberals, the Irish Famine and the Role of the State," *Irish Historical Studies* xxix no. 116 (November 1995): 533.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 534.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 534.

becoming more and more dependent. Consequently, when abuses came to light in the public works program, they seemed to confirm both English stereotypes of the Irish and the laws of political economy.⁸⁹

Increasingly famine policy was driven by the perception that there was little constructive that the government could do to help improve conditions in Ireland; and anything it attempted was likely to be abused by the Irish and so to go wrong...British liberalism needed a Famine mythology rooted in non-interventionism. As the human cost of the Famine became evident, the British needed the reassurance that there was nothing they could have done to prevent the tragedy. The laws of political economy provided just such reassurance.⁹⁰

Bernstein has, in effect, identified the point at which Whig ideology overwhelmed Russell's government and derailed his program for turning Ireland into a peaceable kingdom. Instead, it made it possible for him to attack the principal protagonists, the landlords, by burdening them with crushing poor rates. Furthermore, as their exasperation grew by the summer of 1847, he, his cabinet colleagues and government administrators might very well have welcomed the opportunity to carry out a social experiment in classical *laissez-faire* economic policy with a population with whom they were willing to take a risk. This latter point will be dealt with shortly.

There can be no doubt that the primary preoccupation of the Whig government was to avoid having the crisis bankrupt the Treasury. Trevelyan refers to this on many occasions:

The state of the finances of some of the unions was a source of deep anxiety through the winter and spring of 1846-7. Rates were not collected sufficient to defray the current expenses of the workhouses of these unions, and the guardians threatened to turn the inmates into the street, if assistance were not given from the public purse.⁹¹

He goes on to explain that guardians who would carry out such a threat were trying to turn what was a local responsibility into a national concern. This leads to the

⁸⁹ Bernstein, 535.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 536.

⁹¹ Trevelyan, 270.

Whig's second major motive or preoccupation which was finally to force Irish landlords to assume responsibility for their poor tenants.

[The] apophthegm, that 'property has its duties as well as its rights,' having now received the sanction of law, it can never hereafter be a matter of indifference to a landed proprietor, what the condition of the people on his estate is. The day has gone by for letting things take their course, and landlords and farmers have the plain alternative placed before them of supporting the people in idleness or in profitable labour.⁹²

In other words, landlords must either properly support the tenants on their estates or pay for their upkeep in the workhouse through the rates. Hand in hand with these two main preoccupations there ran another theme throughout liberal discourse about the Irish, that they were troublesome, profligate and ungrateful and needed to act more like the English. The stereotypical *Punch* caricature of the Irish as being almost less than human, which began to appear in late 1847,⁹³ seemed to reflect the thinking of many British officials and politicians. It crops up far too often in their speeches and correspondence to be ignored. The prevailing wisdom seemed to have become: they are incorrigible, therefore, they deserve whatever befalls them. Trevelyan is far too diplomatic to reveal openly his prejudice so he tars the Irish peasantry with a portion of the same brush he uses on the landlords. He congratulates himself and the government by declaring that "the Irish have been disabused of one of the strangest delusions which ever paralyzed the energies of a naturally intelligent and energetic people."⁹⁴ He is referring to the penchant of the Irish upper classes to be forever seeking the financial help of the government.

⁹² Trevelyan, 301.

⁹³ Peter Gray, "Punch and the Great Famine," *History Ireland* Vol. 1 No. 2 (Summer 1993): 28.

⁹⁴ Trevelyan, 314

it was reserved for that potent solvent, the Famine, to discover to the full extent, this element of the national character. To pass with safety through this crisis, required that every man, from the highest nobleman to the meanest peasant, should exert himself to the utmost of his means and ability; instead of which, the ...example of the gentry was followed with customary exaggeration by the lower orders, and throughout extensive districts the cultivation of the land was suspended in the spring of 1847 until it should be seen what 'encouragement' the Government would give, or, as it was sometimes ingenuously expressed, 'We expect the Government will till the ground.'⁹⁵

The image of a whole nation of people starving itself, lemming-like, in order to force the hand of the government to provide relief does not sit well. The Irish had already been through two failed harvests. Hundreds of thousands had already died or emigrated. The 1846 failure of the potato crop had been complete and therefore produced no seed potatoes. Much of the labouring population was debilitated, if not by malnutrition then by disease. For them stubbornly to refuse to till the land at this point in the vain hope that the government would feed them was a farfetched notion. One might give such an 'intelligent and energetic' people credit for having some instinct for self-preservation.

Trevelyan revealed much more about the government's motivation in amending the poor law. He listed as a reason the desire to create a "comprehensive Poor Law,"⁹⁶ by which he meant the closing of loopholes, the provision of outdoor relief to the infirm, and the dispatch of the able-bodied to the workhouse where they could be disciplined into becoming productive citizens. Comprehensive also meant that the new law would make it clear that the cost of relief must be paid for by the local rates. Another condition was the abolition of mendicancy, and beyond this lay the intent to rid Ireland of cottiers and conacre tenants whose tiny plots of land could never be tenable for "agriculture

⁹⁵ Trevelyan, 315.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 299.

conducted according to new and very improved conditions.”⁹⁷ A related motive had to do with weaning the Irish off the potato as a staple food because of its unreliability and converting them to a grain diet. Trevelyan also expressed the government’s intention to convert Irish agriculture to beef, sheep and grain production in order to supply the export market which, in turn, would “provide the fund out of which the community will be maintained under the several heads of wages, profits and rents.”⁹⁸ But what Trevelyan omitted to reveal, Peter Gray has teased out in his meticulous examination of government motivation. Gray argues convincingly that the Whigs in government (particularly the moralists, among whom were Wood and Trevelyan) became obsessed by their perception of the moral inferiority of the Irish.

For moralist administrators and opinion formers, however, identifying and eradicating ‘abuse’ acquired a higher priority than saving lives. Their fetishization of the idea directly reflected their behaviouralist construction of the underlying ‘Irish problem’. Dealing with what was ultimately a marginal problem was elevated to the organizing principle of state policy.⁹⁹

In other words they were motivated by a certain negative ideological construct, or prejudice, towards the Irish.

Some of those who were less delicate in their choice of words to describe the phenomenon were the Young Irelanders. Notable among them was John Mitchel whose oft-repeated accusation of genocide committed by British ministers and officials against the Irish is an example. As has been mentioned, James Donnelly, makes reference to Mitchel’s claim. Donnelly refers as well to the respected British historian A. J. P. Taylor who, he says, characterizes the policies of British ministers and officials as genocidal without attributing malevolent intentions to them. One is constrained to wonder, “Can

⁹⁷ Trevelyan, 303-304.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 304.

⁹⁹ Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, 332.

there be such a thing as benign genocide?" Donnelly argues that the allegation of genocide is not proven. However, two things are worth mentioning in this regard. First and foremost, Whig politicians and government officials knew about the mortality rates in Ireland and had time to react to this information. Secondly, they had the experience of the success of the Soup Kitchens program. They knew, in other words, how relatively easily and inexpensively the Irish people could be kept from dying of starvation and disease. It is, therefore, not surprising that the issue of genocide keeps coming up in debate about British government motivation during the famine in Ireland.

2.6 Consequences of the Whig amendments

The consequences of the Whig amendments to the Irish poor law were both immediate and far-reaching. The first and most obvious and immediate consequence was death. Historians refer to it as excess mortality, and exhaustive studies have put the range between 860,000 and 1,082,000. Some interesting aspects of the excess death rates are that they were higher in areas where the per capita income was lowest and the illiteracy rate was highest, and also they were higher in counties where the proportion of farms under twenty acres was highest.¹⁰⁰ This would clearly indicate that there were mitigating factors in Ireland that affected excess death rates. In the poorest areas the rapid population growth had resulted in continual subdivision of farms into smaller and smaller plots and pushed the poorest cottiers into the least fertile areas of the country.¹⁰¹ This made them exceedingly vulnerable to potato blight. On the other hand, in the large

¹⁰⁰ James S. Donnelly Jr., "Excess Mortality and Emigration," in *A New History of Ireland*, Vol. V, *Ireland Under the Union, 1801-70*, ed. W.E. Vaughan (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 352.

¹⁰¹ Kevin Whelan, "Pre and Post Famine Landscape Change", 23-24.

farm areas where indiscriminate subdivision was not allowed, excess mortality also occurred. Mary Daly, the famine historian who most typifies the revisionist interpretation, points to the work of economic historian Joel Mokyr who “tends to attribute the high death rate of the western areas to the breakdown of the poor law system and its inability to cope with the crisis.”¹⁰² It would seem that historians have concluded that excess mortality would have been diminished or eliminated had the political will been present.

Emigration was a second immediate and obvious consequence. In particular the Gregory clause seemed designed precisely to drive people off the land. One of the few alternatives of the dispossessed was to flee the country. Emigration, however, had been a pattern before the famine. But the difference between what might have been expected and actual emigration figures is significant. Had the existing trend persisted 437,500 persons would have left Ireland between 1845 and 1851.¹⁰³ The actual emigration figure for these years was 1.2 million. Excess emigration can therefore be calculated at 762,500. But in the immediate aftermath of the famine another 900,000 people left Ireland.¹⁰⁴ It seems safe to assume that this additional exodus was in some way related to British government famine relief policy. Facing the possibility of a dismal future of more of the same or the chance at a new life, anyone who had the opportunity to leave would have been compelled to do so. As well, although it was the hope of government to see the population of Ireland reduced in order to increase the value of labour, it did not need to invest in emigration as it was happening voluntarily. Although in the early

¹⁰² Daly, *The Famine in Ireland*, 100.

¹⁰³ Donnelly, *Potato Famine*, 178.

¹⁰⁴ Donnelly, “Excess Mortality and Emigration”, 353.

stages of the crisis emigration might have been considered an acceptable alternative, as the numbers increased it became a matter of controversy. Donnelly comments on this.

by late 1847 and early 1848 the whole tone of public discussion on the subject had changed drastically. Priests, editors of popular newspapers, and nationalist politicians of all factions were joining in a loud chorus of denunciation, stigmatizing emigration as forced exile. This radical shift in opinion coincided with, and was largely prompted by, the bitter realization that the British government had laid aside any conception of the famine as an imperial responsibility and had terminated all major schemes of direct relief funded by the treasury.¹⁰⁵

One might conclude, therefore, that forced exile was also considered by some to be a consequence of the Whig amendments to the Irish poor law. The perception of emigration as forced exile was also carried abroad with those who left and fostered a memory of race hatred against the English in Britain, North America and as far away as Australia. This grew into a powerful nationalist myth which, although articulated best by the fiery members of the Young Ireland movement, was shared by many Irish people of all classes at home and abroad.

The combination of excess deaths and elevated emigration numbers caused a tremendous demographic shift in the country. The cottiers, the poorest people in the remotest, yet most densely populated, reaches of the west and south were virtually eliminated as a class. The following table, referring to classes of dwellings, indicates the extent of the impact in the County of Limerick alone.

¹⁰⁵ Donnelly, "Excess Mortality and Emigration", 356.

Pre-Famine and Post-Famine Housing Class change in Co. Limerick				
	Class I (Gentlemen's Residences)	Class II (Big Farmhouses)	Class III (Small Farmhouses)	Class IV (Labourers' & Cottiers' Houses)
1841	567	5,237	15,575	21,493
1851	722	6,204	16,459	7,460¹⁰⁶

While all other classes of houses increased in numbers, labourers' and cottiers' houses were reduced by two thirds. Cottiers were no longer the predominant demographic group after the famine as small farmers took over as the most numerous class. It appeared as though the Whigs had achieved their goal of changing the face of Irish society to prepare it to be more economically viable.

A less immediate but nevertheless important consequence of the Whig amendments to the Irish poor law was the impetus given to the nationalist movement. There had long been a movement for the repeal of the Union led by Daniel O'Connell. His well-known aversion to violence in achieving his political goals had understandably caused a split among some younger members of his association. The Young Irelanders finally broke with O'Connell when it became evident that the Whigs were not going to give much in the way of concessions to Ireland, let alone repeal of the Union. Through their newspaper, *Nation*, they preached a much more aggressive approach to solving Ireland's problems. By the time the Whig amendments to the Irish poor law were passed, O'Connell had died and the nationalist movement was in some disarray but the land question and tenants' rights focused the attention of nationalist writers, politicians

¹⁰⁶ Census of Ireland for the years 1841 and 1851.

and agitators. As the famine ravaged the population and the Gregory clause took its toll, some Young Irelanders began to advocate revolution. John Mitchel was one of these. He founded his own newspaper the *United Irishman* in February 1848.¹⁰⁷ His rhetoric was strident and in time the British government felt it had no option but to prosecute. The Treason Felony Act¹⁰⁸ was pushed through Parliament and several 'revolutionaries' were tried under it.¹⁰⁹ Mitchel himself was transported and his writings, including his *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*, became classics of nationalist literature.

The relationship between Irish landlords and their tenants was also changed significantly as a result of the Whig amendments. Many landlords simply could no longer afford to maintain their estates. In 1849 the government passed an Encumbered Estates Act to enable landlords to get out from under the burden of their holdings. Its intention was that the land be passed into the hands of those who could afford to invest in it. There were many sales but not a significant change in ownership. Most purchasers were not the hoped-for English entrepreneurs but members of the emerging Irish middle class of merchants and professionals. Many landlords used the act to sell off portions of their estates to discharge their debts.

Conclusion

Before examining the experiences of the people of the Limerick Poor Law Union during the Famine, we should, in summary, draw some conclusions about the efforts of both Peel and Russell to deal with the crisis. It must be said that Russell's government

¹⁰⁷ Woodham-Smith, 334.

¹⁰⁸ The Treason Felony Act enabled the government to avoid trying them for treason, a capital offense.

¹⁰⁹ Woodham-Smith, 340-345.

was heading into a situation never before experienced in Ireland. Peel's government comes off better by comparison because it had only a partial failure of the potato crop to deal with, and time to stock up grain supplies to meet the need. It is also the case that Peel had experience of Ireland as he had been Chief Secretary from 1812 to 1818 and in particular he had experience of providing poor relief to distressed parts of the island as the latter part of his mandate corresponded with the downturn in the economy following the Napoleonic wars.¹¹⁰ His reaction in 1845-46 was predictable as well as fortuitous. To give him credit, there is much evidence that he was motivated by a genuine concern for the poor and a conviction that the state had some responsibility to relieve their distress. But of the three ways in which he attempted to address the emergency, namely, agreeing to pay half the cost of works projects, encouraging landlords to initiate projects, and supplying corn to keep the price of food from rising beyond the reach of the poor, only the third was successful. But these policies looked good on paper¹¹¹ and seemed generous by comparison with what was to come.

Russell and Wood assumed responsibility for the crisis at the worst possible time.

When the Whigs took over, the whole scheme [of Peel's government] was about to expire, and by that time the economy was over-heated by the railway boom, the British public had built up a year's immunity to Irish suffering, and the officials of the treasury had experience of the waste and fraud inseparable from public works.¹¹²

Whatever economies they attempted were bound to look mean-spirited by comparison.

Nor was the Chief Secretary for Ireland, Henry Labouchere, a member of Russell's

Cabinet, loath to remind the Prime Minister of the fact.

¹¹⁰ Jenkins, *Era of Emancipation*, 127-132.

¹¹¹ Prest, 238.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 238.

[Labouchere] went on, in a way that Lord John cannot have liked, in two instances to compare what was being done by Lord John's government with what had been done by Peel's. Under the new ten shilling in the pound system the government had contributed to the relief committees less than one-sixth what had been contributed the year before; and the depots in the South and West which contained 8000 tons of food in the winter of 1845-6, now held only 4500.¹¹³

The two major interventions of Russell's government to relieve distress in the early part of its mandate, the public works schemes of 1846 and the soup kitchens program which terminated in September 1847, put the lie to the accusation that the Whigs were slavishly committed to not intervening in the economy. But when push came to shove in Cabinet, Russell sided with Wood, not Labouchere. And in the last analysis, his government's abdication of responsibility for policy to the doctrinaire Trevelyan, its absolute refusal to intervene further despite alarming reports of suffering and death, its fear that public opinion in Britain would not sustain a more humanitarian approach to poor relief in Ireland, its conviction that Irish landlords were uniformly bilking the system and its transference of this negative attitude to the entire poor population of Ireland, reveal a temerity for which Russell must bear responsibility.¹¹⁴

Unfortunately for him, the famine occurred just as the upsurge in the popularity of the traditional Whig aristocracy was reaching its apogee. Peter Mandler argues that this temporary reversal in the gradual transition toward a more liberal political ideology resulted in the accession to power of Whig governments heavily stacked with moderates. Radicals (including Russell), although present and active in the governments of Grey and Melbourne between 1830 and 1841, and in Russell's own government during the crucial famine years, did not have enough influence to accelerate the pace of reform. Russell's Irish policy, based on his fond hope of turning Ireland into a peaceable kingdom, was

¹¹³ Prest, 241.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 301.

impossible to sell to his cabinet colleagues.

Peter Gray takes Mandler's taxonomy of radical and moderate Whigs one step further in distinguishing the 'moralists' from among moderate Whigs who, when the pressure was heaviest to provide relief to the starving Irish, were able to complacently attribute the disaster to the dispensation of an all-wise providence.¹¹⁵ Relief, therefore, could be interpreted as interference with, if not the will of God, then the natural order of things. The belief that the famine was an act of Providence required to teach the improvident Irish a lesson, and that for the Irish economy to survive Ireland had to be purged of its excess population, formed a part of a 'myth' needed to salve the collective conscience of the British. This enabled the British establishment to convince itself that it could not have done anything to avert the disaster. It was the will of God and could not be denied or interfered with.

Factors other than the ideological predisposition of cabinet members and influential civil servants included the unprecedented scale of the ecological disaster, the European harvest failure of 1846, and the London financial crisis of 1847. But such physical obstacles could have been overcome if the political will to address them had been present. When searching for the reasons why, ideology inevitably comes to the fore.

Yet despite these obstacles the inescapable conclusion remains that the state failed to make use of its resources to contain the number of deaths... This policy failure was due in large measure to the success of the dominant faction in the government in prioritizing another, ideologically-driven, agenda – that of grasping the heaven-sent 'opportunity' of famine to deconstruct Irish society and rebuild it anew.¹¹⁶

Ireland seems to be a particularly blatant example of ideology getting in the way

¹¹⁵ Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, 24-26.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 331.

of appropriate state intervention in aid of the poor. In most nation states where ties of language, religion, custom and blood exist, one might expect concern, solicitousness and compassion to prevail over ideology in times of crisis. And, indeed, Robert Peel in 1845-46 did show a measure of concern for the plight of the Irish. Lord John Russell, however, abandoned hope in the face of moderate and moralist opposition (bolstered by hostile English public opinion) and seemed content to let policy making slip into the hands of non-elected, hard-line ideologues. This, coupled with an absence of ties of language, religion, custom and blood, resulted in death and emigration on a large scale and an enormous expatriate Irish population, primarily in England and North America, prepared to contribute to the continuing struggle to achieve 'justice for Ireland'.

How this played itself out in the Limerick Poor Law Union and in particular what transpired in the Limerick workhouse in the years leading up to the first appearance of potato blight and then during the famine years, affords us an opportunity to see the consequences of government policy in a very particular case. The Poor Law Commissioner and Assistant Commissioners, working out of Dublin, were the government's principal agents in Ireland charged with the implementation of this policy. Their attitude towards, and the way in which they interacted with, the Limerick Board of Guardians, the officers of the Union, and the paupers whom they were appointed to serve determined, to a great extent, the success or failure of the government's response.

CHAPTER 3

THE LIMERICK POOR LAW UNION, 1838-45

The practical application of the Irish Poor Law was carried out in the management of the Poor Law Unions and in particular in the day to day running of the union workhouses. The people on whose shoulders the responsibility for decision making lay were the Guardians who, first off, had the unenviable task of determining what rate to levy to see the union through the subsequent fiscal period in solvency. Then they had to remain vigilant that their decisions, which almost always had financial consequences, did not result in overspending. Furthermore this process was carried out in an atmosphere of constant and overbearing supervision by the commissioners to whom the law gave ultimate authority in matters of any import whatsoever. This chapter will examine the process experienced by the Limerick Poor Law Union in its inaugural, pre-famine, stages, including its first audit. Attention will be paid to the constant emphasis put upon financial management, diligent supervision and wary observation for potential fraud which preoccupied government agents in the implementation of the Irish Poor Law. It will describe the provisions of the law which defined the roles of commissioners and guardians, indicate some areas where conflict developed between the two groups and deal at length with the first audit of the Limerick Union. Inasmuch as the Commissioners saw fit to include the Limerick audit verbatim, as an appendix to its *Eighth Annual Report*, it must have been intended as a model for other unions to emulate.

Although poverty in Ireland had been studied at length and creative and ambitious recommendations had been made to alleviate it, the magnitude of the problem

served more to cause governments to delay decision-making rather than inspire the commitment necessary to properly address the issue. As a consequence the 'Act for the more effectual Relief of the Poor in Ireland' which became law on 31 July 1838 proved to be a stop-gap measure. Its provisions appeared ambitious enough in themselves as they laid down the particulars necessary for the accommodation of the destitute poor. But in the details of the law one can detect the underlying fear that Ireland's poor were a tricky and duplicitous lot that needed watching lest they fleece the Treasury. In the case of the Limerick Union this fear was imbued in the guardians to the extent that their decisions seemed often to be a reflection of their suspicion that the destitute poor were uniformly malevolent and that their own (the guardians') interests needed to be protected against this constant menace. One must be, of course, conscious of the fact that the guardians represented (and in many cases were themselves) the landlords whose taxes were going to have to support an uncommonly large pauper population.

3.1 The restrictive nature of the law

The law provided that the electoral divisions within a union be represented by, if not the landed gentry, at least substantial enough landlords who would be in a position to safeguard their own interests. The principal framer of the law, George Nicholls, in his own history of how the measure came to be, expressed his own misgivings about it.

The details of the law referred to here are few but reveal much about its flawed nature. Whenever a union is declared, a board of guardians is to be elected, for which purpose the commissioners may divide the union into electoral divisions, and from time to time alter the same... The commissioners are to determine the number of guardians, having regard to the circumstances of each electoral division; and also the qualification, which in no case is to exceed a rating of £30 net annual value—"provided always that no person being in holy orders, or being a regular minister of any religious denomination, shall be eligible as a guardian."¹

The interests of the landlord were protected by the exclusion of the clergy and by the £30 qualification for eligibility. The annual election on the 25th of March of each year ensured that a property owner who felt his interests were not being looked after would not have long to wait to improve his representation. But to be absolutely certain that the state's interests were protected, one quarter of the board of guardians was made up of ex-officio members.

Every justice of peace not being a stipendiary magistrate or assistant-barrister or minister of any religious denomination, is an ex-officio guardian of the poor of the union in which he resides...when the justices duly qualified and residing in the union exceed one-third the number of elected guardians, they are at a meeting specially assembled for the purpose, to appoint from among themselves a number nearest but not exceeding one third of the elected guardians, to act as ex-officio guardians from the time of such appointment, until the 29th of September following...²

This representative body, however, was by no means autonomous. The commissioners had, by the provisions of the law, a great deal of discretion and the Limerick guardians seemed more than willing to comply with it.

The commissioners may direct the appointment of such paid officers, with such qualifications, as they think necessary in every union, and may define their duties and determine their continuance in office or dismissal, and regulate their salaries. The commissioners are further empowered, with or without the concurrence of guardians, to remove any paid officer whom they deem unfit or incompetent, and to require the appointment of a fit and competent person in his room, failing in which the commissioners may themselves make the appointment.³

¹ Sir George Nicholls, *A History of the Irish Poor Law* (New York: Augustus M. Kelly, 1967), 223.

² *Ibid.*, 223-224.

³ *Ibid.*, 224-225.

But if they were under the close scrutiny of authority, they certainly had an onerous responsibility which presumed that they were sensitive to the demands as well as the privileges of property.

The commissioners may from time to time as they see fit, build or cause to be built a workhouse or workhouses for any union, or may hire any building or buildings to be used as a workhouse, and may enlarge and alter the same, in such manner as they deem most proper for carrying the provisions of the Act into execution, and may purchase or hire any land not exceeding twelve acres to be occupied with such workhouse, and may order the guardians to uphold and maintain, and to furnish and fit up the same, and provide means for setting the poor to work therein – for all which purposes the guardians are required to raise and levy the necessary sums as a poor rate...⁴

The Limerick guardians undertook this responsibility, as did the guardians in other unions, in a spirit of public service but mindful of the obvious fact that if they did not, someone else, who might not be as sensitive to their own best interests, would surely do so.

It is truly remarkable how quickly and efficiently Commissioner George Nicholls and the Assistant Commissioners whom he engaged set about implementing the law. Immediately following their arrival in Dublin in September 1838, the four English and four Irish Assistant Commissioners spread out across the country to survey and enquire and propose the territorial entities which were to become Poor Law Unions.⁵ The first to be established was the Limerick Union, declared on December 20, 1838. It had been formed by Messers Hawley and Hancock, comprised 126,307 statute acres and according to the 1831 census had a population of about 140,000 people.⁶

They divided it into seventeen electoral districts, Limerick City being the largest of these, containing about forty-eight percent of the total population. Of the rest,

⁴ Nicholls, 225.

⁵ Christine Kinealy, *The Irish Poor Law, 1838-62* (Ph.D. thesis, Trinity College, Dublin, 1984), 13.

⁶ John George Shaw Lefevre, George Nicholls, George Cornwall Lewis. *The Act for the More Effectual Relief of the Destitute Poor in Ireland: Fifth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners with appendices (So far as the same relate to the administration of the Irish Poor Relief Act – 1 & 2 Vict, cap 56)*. London: W. Clowes and sons, 1839, 93.

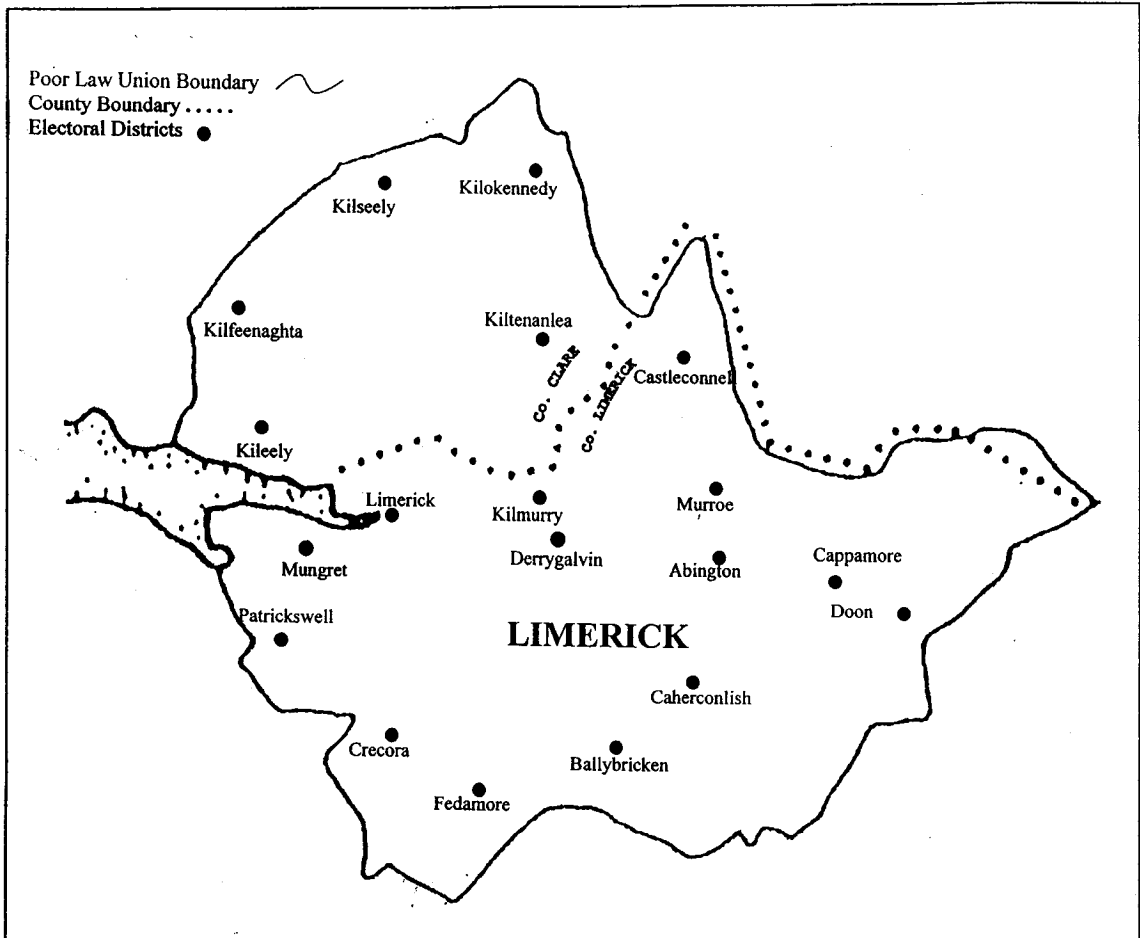


Figure 3. Limerick Poor Law Union with locations of the centers of electoral districts.

representing the rural districts surrounding the city, eleven were in the County of Limerick and five in County Clare. The electoral districts were to be represented on the Board of Guardians by forty elected members. Twenty of these were designated for the City of Limerick while each rural division had one or two elected guardians depending on population. As well, there were to be thirteen ex-officio guardians, all of whom, as per the law, were magistrates and, therefore, quite likely to be residents of the urban district.⁷ It was not long before this skewed representation of the Board manifested itself

⁷ There were, in fact, six of the thirteen resident within the electoral district of Limerick in October 1841, according to the *Eighth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners*, 72.

in what was perceived by the rural guardians to be a serious injustice.⁸

The most pressing issue immediately facing boards of guardians was financing the capital costs and operations of their unions which included the cost of the original building, the upkeep of the physical facilities and the inventory as well as the care, feeding and supervision of paupers. This was to be done by levying a rate in the pound on the annual rental value of property in the union. The accuracy and uniformity of valuation, therefore, became a crucial issue. In their first annual Irish report the commissioners included several memoranda on valuation and rating.⁹ Therein the commissioners emphasized:

The Act declares that it must be a poundage rate, or a rate at a certain sum in the pound, on an estimate of the net annual value of the property; and it defines the meaning of "annual value" to be the rent at which such property, one year with another, in its actual state, might be reasonably expected to let from year to year, on the supposition that the annual average cost of the repairs, insurance, and other expenses necessary to maintain the property in its actual state, and all rates, taxes, and public charges (except tithes), are to be paid by the tenant.¹⁰

And they stressed to the guardians, the only safe criterion for valuers was to ask themselves, as the Act prescribed, "What is the property reasonably worth to let from year to year, to a tenant who undertakes to pay all public taxes and charges, including such as are necessary to maintain it in its present condition?"¹¹ The commissioners were conscious of the importance of the role of the valuator to the smooth operation of the Poor Law in general and that the guardians would be the first to complain or be complained to if there was even the perception of inaccuracy or unfairness. It was essential, therefore, that only highly qualified, sensible and sensitive people be hired to

⁸ See page 84 below.

⁹ Inasmuch as the English Poor Law was passed in 1834, the first annual Irish report, in 1839, was in fact *The Fifth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners, with appendices*.

¹⁰ *Fifth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners*, 70.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

do this work and that the underlying principle of their function and responsibility be understood by all.

It was determined that, in the case of a union as large and diverse as the Limerick Union, a full time valuator would have to be employed to make the initial assessments, do periodic revisions, advise the rate collectors and whatever other related tasks the guardians might require. The only strongly expressed exigency the commissioners insisted upon, besides competency, was that the candidate not have been notoriously committed to the views or actively engaged in the proceedings of any particular party.¹² So sensitive was this role to be that the commissioners wanted to be absolutely certain that all rate payers have confidence in the character of the individual.

The operation of the workhouse, then, was to be financed by a rate charged in the pound on the rental value of property in the union. Also, the poor rate had to be assessed on each electoral division separately, depending on the number of paupers given admission to the house from the division. The framers of the law had intended that each electoral district would be responsible for supporting the paupers who had been resident therein before seeking admission to the workhouse. Their intention was that by charging each electoral division with the upkeep of its own paupers, the landlords within the district would be disposed to improving the condition of the poor for whom they were responsible, presumably by employing them on their estates or by initiating improvement projects which would require waged labourers. The more the poor were able to work, the fewer would be the applications for relief in the workhouse. And consequently, the less

¹² *Eighth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners, with Appendices: So far as the same relate to the administration of the Irish Poor Relief Act (1&2Vict, cap 56)*. London: W. Cowes and Sons, 1842, 66.

rate the property holders in a given district would have to pay. Viewed in the light of utilitarian political philosophy, it was a perfect solution. The objective of the law was to produce the most favourable outcome for the largest number of people. But the desired outcome depended on the largest landowners, the ones with the capital (from rents) to invest in hiring agricultural labourers or initiating improvement projects. That many were unable or unwilling to do so in relatively normal times, casts doubt on the soundness of the underlying thinking or the practicability, which is to say utility, of the land tenure system itself. Bentham, of course, was hostile to the aristocracy because he thought it unlikely that they would make decisions which were in the best interests of the majority. Far from acting in the interests of the majority, the landed gentry, in this case represented by the Limerick guardians, attempted to manipulate the law in its own favour.

3.2 Areas of conflict

The Limerick Union Workhouse received its first inmates on 19 May 1841, and the first problem surfaced as early as October 1841 in a memorial from certain rural guardians of the Limerick Union concerning the chargeability of paupers to particular electoral divisions. In it they expressed concern about the large number of paupers in the house who had been charged to the union at large rather than to a particular electoral division. This spread the cost of the maintenance of these paupers among all electoral divisions. The petitioners alleged in their memorial to the commissioners that the city guardians, who had by their superior numbers control over decision making, were misinterpreting a section of the law in order to evade their financial responsibility and

cause unwarranted expense to the rural districts. The case of the memorialists centered around the interpretation of the term 'resident'. They averred that the city guardians were disqualifying paupers as residents of the electoral district of Limerick on grounds of mendicancy if they had so much as begged for food or stayed for free in the home of a relative or friend. They supplied the following table to illustrate the extent of the problem:

Number of paupers chargeable to the several divisions of the Limerick Union, to 1 st September, 1841.	
Union at large.....	448
Limerick, eastern division.....	509
Patrickswell.....	11
Crecora.....	16
Fedamore.....	.8
Ballybricken.....	3
Cahirconlish.....	14
Kilmurry.....	.1
Murroe.....	.0
Abington.....	.1
Cappamore.....	.5
Doon.....	0
Castleconnel.....	7
Killokennedy.....	13
Kiltannonlea.....	28
Kilseely.....	9
Kilfenaghta.....	4
Kileely.....	.23
TOTAL.....	1100 ¹³

The commissioners' response favoured the rural guardians in the sense that they also gave a broad interpretation to the term 'resident'. They failed, however, to insist that the wrong be righted and appeared to prefer that the guardians of the Limerick Union work out the problem among themselves. This caused the memorialists to send off a stronger demand to the commissioners. In it they stated their dissatisfaction with the commissioners' reply and spelled out the reason for their inability

¹³ *Eighth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners, 73.*

to obtain a just solution.

Each of the electoral divisions of the Union may be said to have a separate interest; and it, therefore, seems necessary to provide that no one division shall be so powerful as to be able to consult its particular advantage to the prejudice of all the rest. It was a hazardous experiment in a Union consisting of 17 electoral divisions, and returning in all 40 representative Guardians, to allot 20 of those Guardians to one electoral division; nor was the constitution of the Board improved by the addition of 13 ex-officio members, since many of these, as has been shown by our memorial, are taken from the electoral division of Limerick. The result has been that the 16 weak divisions are taxed at the mercy of the seventeenth.¹⁴

Along with their memorial they included copies of resolutions demanding a change in representation or, failing that, an appeal to parliament. The commissioners, in the person of Mr. Hawley, asked the board of guardians for an opportunity to examine the cases of certain paupers charged to the union at large in the presence of the members of the board. The board's response was surprisingly defensive. It informed the commissioners that they had no business interfering with decisions of the board taken after due deliberation. Nevertheless, Mr Hawley went ahead with his investigation and the evidence revealed that, among a sample of ten paupers randomly chosen and examined under oath, eight were wrongly charged to the union at large. An example of the type of deposition made is listed below.¹⁵

Evidence taken in an inquiry into the circumstances of certain paupers in the Limerick workhouse, charged to the Union at large, by order of the Poor Law Commissioners, before me, W. H. T. Hawley, Esq., Assistant Poor Law Commissioner, this 27th day of January, 1842.

CATHERINE FITZPATRICK. I am a single woman, and was admitted into the workhouse on the 12th of January instant. I have a father alive, who lives in Mary-street, Limerick. He has lived there upwards of 20 years. I have lived there with him ever since I was born, up to the time when I was admitted into the workhouse. I was formerly an inmate of the mendicity institution. The way in which I have supported myself lately is by knitting socks and selling them, but I could not make enough by that employment to support myself, and I have been obliged to pawn my clothes and subsist by begging. I used to beg in the country round Limerick, but always returned into Limerick to sleep. The neighbours always gave me a bed, and I never on any occasion slept out of Limerick.

Sworn before me,
W.H.T. HAWLEY.

The mark of
X
CATHERINE FITZPATRICK.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Eighth Annual Report*, 76.

¹⁵ See Appendix I for all ten depositions. Such testimony gives us a rare glimpse into the conditions of the poor at the time.

¹⁶ *Eighth Annual Report*, 82-86.

If eighty percent of the paupers questioned, in this small sample by Hawley, were clearly people who had been living in the Limerick electoral district, then their upkeep should have been charged to Limerick City. Had he questioned all 448 paupers who were, at the time, being charged to the union at large, it might have resulted in a considerable lessening of costs to the rural electoral districts. The commissioners, however, refrained from dictating to the board any necessity to change previous decisions. They merely expressed the hope that, having pointed out to the board the error into which it had inadvertently fallen, that future decisions would better reflect the intention of the law in regard to the residency of paupers. The board instructed the clerk to forward the following resolution to the commissioners:

Resolved, That this Board are perfectly convinced (notwithstanding the opinion of the commissioners to the contrary) that they have, in the allocation of paupers, strictly confined themselves to the spirit of the Poor Law Act, and that the word *residence* has been on all occasions interpreted agreeably to its usual acceptation by the majority of this Board.¹⁷

This incident was a part of the process of commissioners and guardians feeling each other out at the beginning of the implementation of the Irish Poor Law. With the demands put upon them by the Poor Law, guardians were naturally resentful of interference by the commissioners. They felt that, considering that most of the authority was clearly vested in the commissioners, where the law gave them leave to act, they should be able to do so untrammelled. But aside from a couple of other incidents of a relatively minor nature, the Limerick guardians maintained a remarkable deference toward the commissioners.

One other area in which they clashed was over the suspension of John Ryan, the

¹⁷ *Eighth Annual Report*, 87.

clerk of the union. The incident is referred to in the eleventh annual report in 1845 in which the commissioners advert to a request by the Limerick guardians to alter the 41st article of the regulations in order to vest in themselves (rather than in the commissioners) the power of suspending the clerk of the union from the performance of his duties. The intention of the law was to keep the clerk of the union at arms length from the guardians because his counter-signature was required to perfect a legal record of the proceedings of the guardians. His counter-signature was also necessary for the registration of paupers, a process by which their chargeability to particular electoral divisions was determined. And finally he was required to certify, before it was signed by the guardians, that the rate for each electoral division was made in conformity with the valuation then in force.¹⁸ The potential for conflict with all or a segment of the guardians was, therefore, ever present.

The guardians were adamant that article 41 be altered and so the commissioners sought legal advice. They received conflicting responses, the Solicitor-General for Ireland being of the opinion that there was nothing in the law which prevented the commissioners from imparting to the guardians the power of suspending the clerk of the union from the exercise of his duties as clerk. However, the opinion which they preferred, which had been received from two English sources, was that they could not legally impart to the guardians the function which they claimed to exercise, i.e., that of suspending the clerk.¹⁹ This the commissioners communicated to the guardians.

Coincidentally, the commissioners sought advice as to how to proceed against the Limerick guardians who had not only threatened to abandon their responsibilities as

¹⁸ *Eleventh Annual Report*, 36-37.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

guardians but had also ceased to meet on a weekly basis as the law required. On the advice of counsel, the commissioners had applied to the Court of Queen's Bench for a writ of mandamus against the Limerick guardians to compel them to resume meeting and proceed with the execution of their duties.²⁰ They had been successful in obtaining a conditional order but the guardians, in turn, proceeded against the order and showed cause which resulted in the Court then refusing to issue the writ on the grounds that the Act afforded the commissioners another remedy, that of dissolving the board of guardians and calling for a new election. The judges, however, in rendering their decision voiced their strong disapproval of the course which the guardians had taken of abandoning their duties. They also expressed the opinion that the guardians could not resign their offices without the consent of the Poor Law Commissioners nor cease to discharge their responsibilities without exposing themselves to indictment for breach of the law.²¹ Upon weighing the observations of the Court, the guardians resumed meeting and discharging their duties.

Regarding the 41st article of the regulations, however, the Limerick guardians chose to test the opinion of a wider audience and wrote to the boards of guardians of the other unions in Ireland to see if their views were shared by many or most of the other boards. The commissioners found that a large majority favoured the opinion of the Limerick board. The only concession, however, that the commissioners were prepared to allow was an assurance "of their readiness to enquire into any complaint against the conduct of their officers, and to afford immediate assistance and redress on every

²⁰ This happened in other unions as well such as, Athlone, Ballina, Carrick-on-Shannon, Kanturk, Newcastle, Rathkeale and Skibbereen. See Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, 211.

²¹ *Eleventh Annual Report*, 37-38.

occasion of such complaint being shown to be well founded.”²² The commissioners were more familiar with situations in which they wanted to remove an officer of a union on the grounds of his unfitness for the office and were at odds with the guardians who wanted to retain his services. In the case of John Ryan, the problem for the Limerick guardians was that there was no practical grievance against their clerk which they could substantiate. They must, therefore, have come to some accommodation with him because before the year was out Ryan had been replaced by Dennis O’Connor who remained clerk of the Limerick Union throughout the famine.

3.3 The first audit

The first audit of the accounts of the Limerick Union, with John Ryan as clerk, was favourable. It is contained as an appendix in the *Eighth Annual Report* of the commissioners and encompasses the period from the opening of the workhouse to paupers on 19 May, 1841 until Michaelmas, 29 September, 1841. It was carried out by the same W. H. T. Hawley, Assistant Commissioner and Auditor, and is undoubtedly contained in the annual report to serve as a model and a guide to all Poor Law guardians and officers of unions.

It immediately addressed the function of parish wardens, the unpaid eyes and ears of the Poor Law in the respective communities. The wardens were charged with the responsibility of being aware of who was destitute in their parishes and, therefore, who was eligible for admission to the workhouse. It was an odious, thankless and unremunerated task but designed to make it easy for the guardians to know whom to

²² *Eleventh Annual Report*, 38.

approve for admission at their weekly meetings. It appears that several of the Limerick Union's parish wardens had not received their 'Application and Report Books'. Mr Hawley's concern was that, in the absence of the guardian for a specific electoral division, the only evidence the guardians had to make an informed decision as to the admissibility of a pauper applicant was the warden's recommendation, contained in his Application and Report Book. As he expressed it, "...if this evidence of the circumstances of the paupers is wanting, many may be permitted to enter the house who actually possess no admissible claim to relief, by which a serious injury will be inflicted on the rate-payers."²³

With this kind of official concern being expressed it was hard for guardians, even if they were mindful of the poverty around them, not to share the suspicion that the poor would try to take advantage of rate payers. Mr. Hawley's recommendation was that all the wardens fill in their reports each week and that they be passed on to the elected guardian for their electoral division for use at the 'admission of paupers' section of the weekly meeting. If this was not possible, guardians were reminded that they had the power to compel wardens, if it were deemed necessary, to attend the weekly meetings. Coercion, it would appear, was the favoured back-up position. It was, perhaps, even more ominous to be a warden during the famine with the potential for contagious disease being ever-present. A resolution of the board of guardians in April of 1846 seemed to indicate that some potential wardens were balking at the prospect:

²³ *Eighth Annual Report*, 155.

Ordered that Robert Gabbett M.D. be not required to act as Warden (he being a professional man) and with reference to the Clerk's report it was ordered that he write to Mr. Scanlan and Mr. Burke to say they must act as Wardens – and that the Clerk be directed to point out to them the penalties in the Act of Parliament should they still refuse to act.²⁴

In his audit, Mr. Hawley congratulated the 'visiting committee'²⁵ for their regular attendance and attention to the condition and wants of the paupers but warned the guardians that unless they continued to supervise the workhouse, its offices and inmates, discipline would be relaxed and abuses would creep in which would be difficult to eradicate. However (congratulations not being the primary purpose of an audit), he reminded the clerk that the Master's Account Books had to be authenticated prior to each weekly meeting so that the guardians could compare the details of the Master's accounts with the minute books as to the number of paupers admitted, their dates of admission and their consumption of provisions. He also reminded the board (that is to say, the clerk) that entries in the Inventory Book had to be brought up to date. Having pointed out these exceptions, he allowed that, for the most part, the clerk's and master's books appeared to be correctly kept.²⁶

Mr. Hawley then addressed the fundamental issue of workhouse financing, the work of the rate collectors, who were required by order of the commissioners to pay over to the treasurer all rates collected on a weekly basis, or immediately, if the sum in their possession exceeded £50. He deplored the lax attitude of all the collectors (with the exception of one Mr. Hackett) and intimated that rate-payers would have promptly and willingly paid their rates had a due degree of firmness and activity been exhibited by

²⁴ Minutes, 22 April 1846.

²⁵ The 'visiting committee' was a committee of the guardians charged with patrolling the house at regular interval to ascertain whether or not the inmates were being well attended to by the officers of the Union.

²⁶ *Eighth Annual Report*, 156.

the collectors. For Mr. Hawley, evidence of their neglect was the large amount of rate left uncollected at the end of the half year. He insisted to the guardians that:

...to ensure regularity in their payments to the treasurer, they should be compelled to attend the Board regularly every week with their account books, and receive the instructions of the Board of Guardians as to proceedings against defaulters, and other matters connected with the discharge of their duties.²⁷

This matter shows, once again, the tension which characterized the relationship between commissioners and guardians in the implementation of the Irish Poor Law. The commissioners, on the one hand, appeared to be of the opinion that the financing of the workhouse was a simple matter of the collectors doing their work conscientiously under the supervision of the guardians. The government had been warned by commissions of enquiry into poverty in Ireland that the problem was too extensive to be remedied by a mere model of the English Poor Law. So if, in 1841, in the first audit of the first declared Irish Poor Law Union, a large amount of rate remained uncollected, one might think that the Irish Poor Law Commissioners would be prepared to look farther afield for solutions. But their constant theme was: force rate-collectors to perform their duties more diligently, distrain property for payment where possible, and prosecute defaulters. When the crisis of the famine hit and workhouse expenses exploded beyond predicted levels, the commissioners added 'strike a new rate' to their admonitions to the guardians. The guardians, on the other hand, being themselves rate-payers and being, in most cases, more familiar with the extent of poverty on their estates, were in the position of having to implement the law and at the same time inform the commissioners of its inadequacy. Subsequent chapters will reveal, at least in the case of the Limerick Union, how the guardians attempted to cope with a seemingly impossible situation.

²⁷ *Eighth Annual Report*, 157.

In concluding the matter of financing, the auditor admonished the Finance Committee whose meetings, he regretted to observe, were very irregular. He let it be known that, had they been diligently fulfilling their mandate, the financial position of the union would be more favourable.

Mr. Hawley next addressed the makeup of the inmate body of the workhouse. In the first four months of its existence, the Limerick Union had relieved 1692 persons, of whom 549 had been discharged, 34 had died and 1109 were remaining at the time of the audit. The auditor drew the attention of the board to areas in which he felt the law was being circumvented. There were, for example, 639 able adults of both sexes (among whom he included widows and mothers of abandoned and illegitimate children) whom he described as capable of obtaining a livelihood by their own industry. There were also 219 orphans and destitute children whose number “is so great as to lead to the belief that others have been palmed upon the board as orphans whose parents are still actually in existence.”²⁸ This issue and that of ‘women whose husbands are alleged to have deserted them’ became a constant theme in the management of the house and the board put a lot of energy into the legal pursuit of delinquent husbands and fathers. This was no doubt a consequence of the vehemence with which the auditor described his position on the matter:

In the Limerick workhouse, I doubt not that there are at the present time able-bodied women with families, whose husbands are known to be living in the neighbourhood; and though the evil is now in a great measure checked by the vigilance of your Board, still it appears but justice to the rate-payers, and a vindication of the law, that a remedy should be applied retrospectively, and that wherever a case of this nature can be clearly established, the parties should be discharged from the workhouse.²⁹

As for the number of mothers with illegitimate children, there were only 5 of

²⁸ *Eighth Annual Report*, 159.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 159.

them with 8 children. Inasmuch as this constituted an insignificant proportion of the population of the house, it occasioned the following comment from Mr. Hawley: "I have derived much satisfaction from observing that your Board have in all cases discouraged this species of immorality by refusing relief, where practicable, to the claimant under such circumstances."³⁰ Under the head of 'destitute from other causes' the auditor took note of the disparity between men and women. There were 234 men and 321 women. He expressed the opinion that the large number of women was due to insufficient hard work and a more liberal diet and greater general comforts than they could expect in their own homes. He suggested that they be set to breaking stones.

Mr. Hawley made reference to the problem of the great number of paupers charged to the union at large, but decided to refrain from elaborating due to the discussions underway between the commissioners and the board. However, he could not resist the opportunity to comment on mendicancy which provides us with both an insight into the nature of poverty in Ireland in the middle of the nineteenth century and his view of one of the areas in which the poor law proved inadequate. His plea to the commissioners, to whom the audit was addressed, appeared impassioned:

The streets are still infested by a throng of professed beggars; the implements of whose trade often are assumed disease, untiring importunity, imposture, and abuse; and the roads display the usual number of vagrants returning daily with the spoils obtained from the labours of the industrious farmer. Were a fair computation made of the amount of the exactions levied by this traffic on the feelings and the credulity of the humane, it would be found to exceed that of the poor rate; and when once a legal provision for the support of the destitute has been supplied by means of a compulsory contribution, the public have a right to be protected from the consequences of an evil, which by imposing a double tax upon the public, will render the Poor Law a burthen rather than a blessing to the community.³¹

He was in fact suggesting that if the law were not amended to outlaw mendicancy, the

³⁰ *Eighth Annual Report*, 160.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 164.

whole relief system was in jeopardy. The impression he divulged by use of expressions such as 'throng of beggars' and 'spoils obtained from' was that beggary was a profession practiced by many who now had to be taught that relief was at hand in the workhouse. And he made it clear that he believed mendicancy to be a serious evil that needed to be addressed by strong measures. At the same time, the board had to be vigilant against providing relief to those without a legitimate claim. It seems evident to the reader that, even as early as 1841, the Irish Poor Law was expected to regulate a much bigger problem than it was designed to accommodate. If the Irish were indeed used to dealing with poverty by welcoming and sharing provisions with poor mendicants, why was this not acceptable as complementary to a Poor Law that looked to be too rich for the wealth of the nation to bear? This dilemma was to play itself out in amendments to the Poor Law which continually forced Irish property to pay for Irish poverty by placing more and more of the burden on landlords while, at the same time, removing the government from direct intervention in relief measures.

In his audit Mr. Hawley made passing reference to the personnel engaged by the commissioners to manage the union workhouse. Their names, offices and annual salaries formed a part of his report. At this stage in the union's history they were few in number and the list does not include the evaluator, Piers Creaghe, who would become the highest paid officer of the Limerick Union. The salary of the Roman Catholic chaplain is also not included inasmuch as his hiring had not yet been confirmed by the commissioners. At the end of September, 1841, the paid personnel included the following:

Name	Office	Salary		
		£	s.	d.
John Ryan	Clerk	60	0	0
John Scott	Master	60	0	0
Mary Scott	Matron	30	0	0
Daniel Griffin	Physician	40	0	0
Michael Brodie	Physician	40	0	0
Rev. J. Elmes	P. Chaplain	25	0	0
Rev. R. Walsh	R.C. Chaplain			
Dennis O'Connor	Assistant Master	30	0	0
John Galvin	Schoolmaster	30	0	0
Lucy Galvin	Schoolmistress	20	0	0
John Simpson	Male Lunatic Keeper	30	0	0
Naomi Simpson	Female Lunatic Keeper	20	0	0
Timothy O'Kelly	Apothecary	30	0	0
Thomas McNamara	Wardsman	10	8	0
Patrick Malone	Wardsman	10	8	0
Eliza Riedy	Cook	3	0	0
Alicia O'Neill	Cook	3	0	0
	Total	441	16	0 ³²

He made two observations regarding the chaplains. The first was that the Protestant chaplain had been paid £10 for the last quarter in anticipation of a raise in annual salary (approved by the board) to £40. The auditor noted that there were only 34 Protestant paupers in the workhouse and that the Rev. Elmes's duties were not so onerous as to warrant an increase in salary. He also reminded the guardians that the engagement of personnel and regulation of their salaries were the exclusive prerogative of the commissioners. His second observation was that the Roman Catholic chaplain, Father Walsh, according to the ledger, had been allotted £18 15s. for the quarter even though he had not yet been officially engaged by the commissioners. He allowed the payment to stand inasmuch as the Reverend Walsh was likely to be appointed, subject to the deduction of any surplus beyond the salary to be approved by the commissioners. Once approved, his salary was added to the total of £441 16s. and, as in most

³² *Eighth Annual Report*, 162.

organizations, personnel costs became a significant part of the union's annual budget. It should also be noted that the rate collectors were paid, annually 3% of their intake, in the process reducing the revenue of the union.

The cost of maintaining the paupers was a matter of concern to the auditor. Extensive tables were used to break down the cost to feed each category of inmate, by the meal, per week. The average weekly cost to feed a healthy pauper was 1s. 7d. which was higher, Hawley reported, than any other union in the district. The diet of oatmeal, potatoes and milk exceeded by one ounce of oatmeal and one-half pound of potatoes the daily quantity sanctioned for each individual by the commissioners. This together with the substitution of new milk for sour milk at dinner had, he averred, a doubly injurious effect in that it seriously increased the expense and placed paupers in a better position than the independent poor, supporting themselves by their own industry.³³ He also made reference to a practice in the Tipperary Union of substituting skimmed milk for new which allowed an annual saving of nearly £500. The hospital dietary averaged a little more than 3d. per week over that of the healthy inmates but, by the law, was subject to the discretion of the medical officers. Mr. Hawley assured the guardians that, to date, the discretionary power of the medical officers of the Limerick union had been exercised with such judgement and moderation as to require no interference on the part of the board. In effect, by the time that country-wide statistics were available, the average cost to support a pauper in the Limerick union was always a little high but never the highest and invariably within pennies of the weekly average for the country.³⁴

³³ *Eighth Annual Report*, 166.

³⁴ *British Parliamentary Papers: Famine (Ireland)*, Volume 1 (Shannon, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1968), 66-78.

In his audit Mr. Hawley finally addressed the issue of the rate levied. For the first rate, by virtue of their lack of experience, and in consideration of the rate-payers, the guardians had settled on a uniform rate of 5d. in the pound over the whole union. Hawley provided tables to show the breakdown of expenses per electoral division. By this he was able to demonstrate that at the end of the fiscal period some electoral divisions were left with a surplus in the treasury while the more pauperized divisions were in a deficit position. He insisted, therefore, that in future an appropriate rate be determined for each electoral division. Furthermore, the union as a whole was in debt to the treasury because approximately 25% of the rate had not been collected. Had the whole amount been collected, the union would have had a surplus of almost £1000. This, of course, would have provided the union with the liquidity necessary to carry on its daily operations. Instead, it was constantly incurring interest charges to pay for the treasury deficit. Mr. Hawley's comments ignored the fact that, had the full rate been collected, the union would have been solvent. Instead he chose to speculate that the rate itself was inadequate.

in making the second rate, due regard must be had to the amount which shall have been ascertained to be chargeable upon each electoral division in respect of its proportion of the expenses incurred in the relief of persons within the workhouse during the period to which the last account of such expenses extended...It is much to be regretted that the first uniform rate had not been struck on a higher poundage which was required by the greater outlay incurred during the first half year for clothing, furniture, &c. The convenience of the rate-payers was kept in view by levying a small rate, but its insufficiency has involved your Board in pecuniary difficulties which have considerably embarrassed your proceedings, and, in the end...the rate-payers will incur an additional burden rather than reap a benefit from your well-intended forbearance.³⁵

Nevertheless, he did not neglect the opportunity to remind the board of "the remiss manner in which the collectors have performed their duty." Of the total amount of rate levied, i.e., £5041 12s. 11d., there remained £1316 19s. 5d. uncollected. The

³⁵ *Eighth Annual Report*, 170.

actual deficit in the treasury at the close of the audit period was only £335 4s. 11d.³⁶

Conclusion

The early eighteen forties can hardly be referred to as a time of relative prosperity. Prosperity in Ireland was enjoyed by less than one third of the population, the land owners and the professional and merchant classes. Everyone else survived. The population figure of over 8 million people in the census of 1841, the largest in the country's history, might lead one to believe that they were surviving well. However, there were signs of trouble which some economic historians have identified: the negligent management style of most landlords which allowed subdivision and its concomitant population growth to go unchecked; the financial difficulties of many estates as revealed in the data produced by Court of Chancery records; and landlord absenteeism, especially in remote, poorly served areas, should have provided evidence of a potential impending crisis.³⁷ The early stages of the implementation of the Irish Poor Law clearly indicated that Irish property might have some difficulty supporting Irish poverty.

Certainly in the Limerick Poor Law Union there were signs that there would not be a smooth transition to state managed poor relief. Nevertheless, the prevailing ideological position which gave expression to providentialist moral theology, 'laissez-faire' economic theory and utilitarian political philosophy led Poor Law commissioners and boards of guardians to an aggressive implementation policy which flew in the face

³⁶ *Eighth Annual Report*, 170.

³⁷ Cormac Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine in history, economy and memory*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 26-27.

of the reality confronting them. It remains to be seen just how dominant and dominating this ideology would be in determining policy and influencing decision makers in a period of unprecedented calamity. The famine years in the Limerick Poor Law Union clearly indicate that ideology, not the plight of workhouse inmates, was foremost in the minds of most politicians and government officials.

CHAPTER 4

MONSELL

In 1845, the year in which the potato blight (*phytophthora infestans*) first struck, the Limerick Poor Law Union workhouse was routinely providing relief for approximately twelve hundred paupers. Under the chairmanship of William Monsell of Tervoe (1812-1894), the board of guardians seemed particularly concerned with implementing the 1838 Poor Law, especially its financial aspects, and with ensuring that the inmates of the house conformed to the provisions of the law in its most detailed regulations. Whether this reflected Monsell's leadership or was the consensus is difficult to determine. It certainly reflected the tenor of the times and, therefore, seems harsh by today's standards.

This chapter will examine the period of Monsell's chairmanship from the summer in which the potato blight struck until 29 March 1846, when he was replaced as chairman by the sitting member of parliament for Limerick City, Caleb Powell. It was a period during which the guardians attempted to establish a high level of propriety, the potential insolvency of the union became evident, there was a crisis among the rate collectors and the assistant master resigned. It was also a time of increasing ill-health among inmates as they sought admission in desperation and fear of starvation, already debilitated from want of proper nourishment. And finally the guardians began to concern themselves with the possibility of a workhouse filled to capacity, mindful of the fact that the Irish Poor Law did not provide for relief outside. At the end of March 1846 there was a concerted and orchestrated effort to replace Monsell as chairman. This may have been

accomplished with little resistance from himself as his second attempt to be elected to parliament must have been in the planning stages. The decision-making process of the guardians closely reflected the requirements of the law and although there were occasional expressions of sympathy for the paupers, the realities of life in the Limerick Poor Law Union workhouse were grim indeed.

Monsell was not an average member of the landed gentry. Unlike most of his colleagues on the board, he had been educated in England at Winchester public school and Oriel College, Oxford. A thoroughly serious student and “hard reading man”¹, this made of him an English gentleman and life-long unionist. Paradoxically his exposure to the Tractarian movement at Oriel challenged his devotion to the state religion.² By 1850 he had converted to Catholicism.

By all accounts he was a fair landlord who never evicted a tenant from his estates but he was an ambitious young man at this time with an eye on a political career.³ Although he was moved by the suffering of the poor, even to tears on at least one occasion during the famine,⁴ his social conscience did not preclude his pursuit of political office. Perhaps, because of it, he set his sights on a political career to try to effect some changes which would be of benefit to the poor. He was a devoted public servant and took his chairmanship of the Limerick Poor Law Union seriously. During this one year term of office, his attendance at meetings was uninterrupted until the untimely death of his four year old son and sole heir, on 12 July 1845, forced him to take

¹ *Munster News and Clare Advocate*, Obituary of Lord Emly, 21 April 1894.

² Matthew Potter, *A Catholic Unionist: The Life and Times of William Monsell, First Baron Emly of Tervoe*, (Limerick: The Treaty Press, 1995), 12.

³ Monsell's second attempt to be elected to parliament was successful in August 1847. He stood as a Liberal for one of the two seats in Limerick county and topped the poll with 588 votes over William Smith O'Brien who took the second seat with 482 votes. Potter, 30-31.

⁴ Potter, 28.

his distraught wife to the Continent for an extended stay.⁵ He did not return until the middle of October by which time it had become evident that the failure of the potato crop was extensive.

4.1 Propriety, moral and fiscal

Propriety was a preoccupation which was befitting Victorian middle and upper-class gentlemen of the time. The board, therefore, paid a great deal of attention to the behaviour of the inmates. This manifested itself in the aggressive pursuit, through the court system, of delinquent husbands under suspicion of having abandoned their families; the expulsion from the house of families whose ostensible bread-winners were found to be surviving in the community, and the close scrutiny of the punishment book at the end of each meeting where it was sometimes judged necessary by the guardians to expel the offending pauper from the house. The unfortunate inmate sister of the thief, Honora Hourigan, was thus discharged in the summer of 1845.⁶

Another example of the guardians' concern for propriety could be seen in their attempt to rearrange the house to separate women of bad character (or who were mothers of 'bastard' children) from the other inmates. This group alone seemed particularly offensive to Monsell and the other guardians. No other category of inmate was singled out for this kind of scrutiny. On 25 June 1845, for example, they passed the following motion.

⁵ Monsell's wife never recovered from this tragedy and died in 1855 at the age of 41. His eventual heir was born to his second wife.

⁶ See page 10 above and Minutes, 2 July 1845.

Resolved that we deem the separation of women of bad character from the other Paupers of the establishment to be essential to the good government of this house, that in order to carry out this principle a special committee be appointed to devise the best mode of securing so desirable an object and report accordingly. Resolved that Mr. Honan, Mr. O'Gorman and Mr. Clampett be appointed as a special committee for the purpose of the foregoing resolution to meet on next Friday at 12 o'clock and that the RC Chaplain and Medical Officers be requested to attend the committee.⁷

Although the committee duly tabled its report which was unanimously adopted by the board, the solution to the problem had to be put off because there were no quarters at the time which could be appropriated for the purpose. However, there were facilities for a fever hospital under construction within the workhouse grounds and the committee anticipated being able to find adequate space upon their completion by the contractor. To ensure that the commissioners were aware of its strong stance against this perceived evil, the board ordered the clerk to forward a copy of the resolution to them.

In the interest of conforming to the letter of the Poor Law, the union's solvency was, of course, the board's main concern. They took very seriously their responsibility to provide relief while, at the same time, respecting the best interests of the rate payers. On 2 July 1845 the board gave its final approval for the union's budget for the financial year beginning 25 March 1845, taking due notice of the arrears in rates for the previous year. The board resolved to have its solicitor, Mr Murphy, proceed against two of the rate collectors, Messrs. McNamara and Bently, and their sureties⁸ for defaulting and to charge their respective districts with the costs.⁹ Other rate collectors who were remiss were duly chastised or threatened with termination. Unrecoverable rates were identified

⁷ Minutes, 25 June 1845.

⁸ Each rate collector had to be backed by two solvent supporters who agreed to be liable for the amount of the bond sworn out for him.

⁹ Minutes, 18 June 1845.

and written off and unpaid rates which they deemed recoverable were carried over as arrears into the new fiscal year. Rate collectors were given up-dated rate books and their bonds and sureties were renewed.

The intention of the law was that the newly elected board examine the financial situation of the Union, strike an appropriate rate for each electoral district and send out its full force of rate collectors early in its mandate. The fact that this board's budget for 25 March 1845 to 25 March 1846 was only approved on 2 July 1845 indicated a slightly slow start. Collectors were also expected to complete their collections, to the extent possible, within the first few months of the financial year. This would enable them to concentrate on pursuing the hard cases, including police and/or military-assisted distraint and, if necessary, legal proceedings, in the subsequent months.

The following table indicates the undertaking for the year of Monsell's mandate, by electoral division. The City of Limerick, which contained 33% of the valuation of the Union, is further subdivided into its constituent parts. The important columns are 'Amt. of Rate', which is the valuation multiplied by the rate, and 'Total' which is the sum of the 'Amt. of Rate' and 'Amt. of Arrears'. The former is the new amount which the property of the Union was required to pay to support the poor and the latter is the total when previously uncollected amounts are added to it.

Although the law prescribed an administrative year from 25 March of one year to 25 March of the next, and no doubt, in the best of all possible worlds, it would have coincided with the fiscal year, the striking of a new rate could happen any time. We will see this occur as the crisis deepens.

Limerick Poor Law Union
Rate Books
25 March 1845 - 25 March 1846
(Approved 2 July 1845)¹⁰

Electoral Division	Net Annual Value			Rate	Amt. of Rate			Amt. of Arrears			Total		
	£	s.	d.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.
Limerick E.D.													
Thomond Bridge	9,174	0	0	20	764	10	0	2	8	10	766	18	10
John St.	7,377	10	0	20	614	15	10	7	4	5	622	0	3
Patrick St.	8,196	0	0	20	683	0	0	0	12	1	683	12	1
William St.	13,008	10	0	20	1,084	0	10	12	17	0	1,096	17	10
Richmond Pl.	20,908	10	0	20	1,742	7	6	18	15	5¼	1,761	2	11¼
South Liberties	5,748	10	0	20	479	0	10	46	15	3¾	525	16	1¾
North Liberties	4,838	12	0	20	403	4	4	14	8	11¾	417	13	3¾
Total - Limerick	69,251	12	0	20	5,770	19	4	103	2	¾	5,874	1	4¼
Derrygalvin	14,064	10	0	11	644	11	6½	42	1	5	686	12	11½
Mungret	11,030	10	0	11	505	11	3½	59	11	¾	565	2	4¼
Patrickswell	14,885	8	0	12	744	5	3	1	10	10½	745	16	1½
Creora	9,300	0	0	13	503	15	0	9	15	10½	513	10	10½
Fedamore	8,930	10	0	12	446	10	6	7	15	2½	454	5	8½
Ballybricken	11,657	10	0	12	582	17	6	7	8	6½	590	6	½
Kilmurry	7,661	0	0	12	383	1	0	19	0	9¼	402	1	9¼
Caherconlish	8,612	10	0	13	466	10	2½	15	8	2	481	18	4½
Cappamore	4,365	0	0	12	218	5	0	8	15	7½	227	0	7½
Doon	920	0	0	11	42	3	4	2	13	11½	44	17	3½
Abington	8,101	4	0	11	317	6	1½	24	0	8	395	6	9½
Murroe	4,165	0	0	13	225	12	7½	3	3	2½	228	15	10
Castleconnell	4,244	0	0	24	424	8	0	149	10	6	573	18	6
Kiltenanlea	9,679	0	0	18	725	18	6	78	16	5	804	14	11
Kilokennedy	5,596	6	0	15	349	15	6	64	17	0	414	12	6
Kilsceely	3,694	0	0	15	230	17	6	96	11	8	327	9	2
Kilfeenaghta	2,652	0	0	14	154	14	0	35	5	10	189	19	10
Kileely	8,052	0	0	14	469	14	0	63	4	9¼	532	18	9¼
TOTALS	206,861	10	0		13,260	16	2½	792	13	7½	14,053	9	10

One can ascertain from this data that certain electoral districts were already showing signs of difficulty or reluctance to assume responsibility for the poor in their neighbourhood. Castleconnell, a wealthy suburb of Limerick containing, among others,

¹⁰ Minutes, 2 July 1845.

Mount Shannon, residence of the Earl of Clare and one of the finest mansions in the South of Ireland,¹¹ was strapped with 26% of its rate in arrears and, at 24 pence (2 shillings in the pound or 10% of the valuation), the highest rate in the union. Similarly, Kilseely was in the unfortunate position of having 29% of its total rate in arrears from the previous year. These two electoral divisions stood in stark contrast to the average. Less than 6% of the total Union rate was arrears from the previous fiscal period.¹²

The guardians chose to interpret this situation as indicating negligence on the part of certain collectors, rather than a symptom of some deeper malaise, and proceeded accordingly. They may have heard allegations of wrongdoing for as early as 11 June 1845, the guardian Daniel Cullen gave a notice of motion “of the necessity of suspending the collector for Castleconnell, Timothy McNamara, and uniting the collection thereof with some other division of the Union.” A week later the following resolution was put:

Resolved that Mr McNamara and Mr. Bently, defaulting rate collectors and their sureties be forthwith proceeded against by Mr. Murphy, solicitor, for the penalties in their Bonds and that the cost of said proceedings be charged to the respective districts against which they are taken (McNamara – Castleconnell; Bently – Kiltenanlea, Kilokennedy and Kilseely.)¹³

At the time there were seven rate collectors labouring in what were proving to be difficult circumstances. Each was charged with the responsibility of collecting the rate in certain electoral divisions as follows:

¹¹ Samuel Lewis, *A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland*, Volume 1 (London: S. Lewis & Co., 1837), 293.

¹² Minutes, 2 July 1845.

¹³ Minutes, 18 June 1845.

Rate Collector	Electoral Division
John Hackett	Limerick City
John O'Connor	Limerick South Liberties, Mungret, Derrygalvin
Thomas Frost	Kilfeenaghta, Killeely, Limerick North Liberties
Michael Dundon	Patrickswell, Crecora, Fedamore, Ballybricken
John Duhý	Kilmurry, Murroe Abington, Cappamore Doon, Caherconlish
Timothy McNamara (replaced by James Shea 1845-08-27)	Casleconnell
Michael Bently (replaced by John McNamara 1845-09-24)	Kilseely, Kilokennedy, Kiltenanlea ¹⁴

4.2 Management practices

The board knew only one reaction to the difficulties facing rate collectors and that was to crack the whip. At the same meeting at which the pre-famine budget was approved, board member, Mr White, gave a notice of motion for the following week that “no collector be reappointed who has not accounted for or paid up all arrears.” To further encourage or ‘spur on’ collectors the same meeting saw the passage of a resolution “that the collectors and their sureties be bound in the Bonds to collect the whole of the recoverable arrears and the half of the new rate within four months from the date when the warrants shall be delivered to them and the residue of such rate and assessment in the eight months from the time the warrants shall be delivered to them.”¹⁵ Board members undoubtedly thought that putting such time restrictions on them would

¹⁴ See map on page 81.

¹⁵ Minutes 2 July 1845.

result in more productive work and ensure a positive balance in the treasury. In point of fact, at no time during the last half of 1845 was there a negative balance to report.

The following week, at the meeting of 16 July, a notice of motion was made to suspend Mr. Bently, rate collector, and the clerk was ordered to inform him that he was to be suspended at the next meeting and that he must bring in his books and receipts to be checked by Mr. Creaghe, the valuator and supervisor of rates. Bently appeared at the next weekly meeting with collections of £58 17s. 7d. in hand and it was decided to put off his suspension for another week and that during the week he should lodge the said amount with the treasurer. He failed to do so, depositing only £19 10s., and was, therefore, suspended. The board decided to sue Bently's sureties for the difference, namely £39 7s. 7d. The rest of the outstanding rate for his three electoral divisions was not mentioned. However the board directed the clerk to advertise in the Limerick newspapers for a collector for the electoral districts of Kilseely, Kiltenanlea and Kilokennedy. They no doubt hoped that a more diligent person would be able to recover those outstanding amounts.

Bently had actually written a letter to the board which was read at the meeting of 2 July in which he stated that he had met with some opposition in collecting the rate and that the difficulties he had encountered had caused him to be put to an expense of £47 0s. 6d. which he trusted the board would take into consideration. The board ordered that the matter be referred to the guardian of Mr. Bently's collecting district. Perhaps the collector felt justified in withholding a certain amount to defray his alleged expenses. But the board was prepared to have a magistrate determine the outcome of this dispute.

Replacing Bently was not easy. There were four candidates who responded to the advertisement. They were James Healy, John Malone, James Maddin and Bently himself whose application was rejected. Upon consideration of the others, the board voted in favour of Maddin who received eleven votes to five each for the other two candidates. Maddin was therefore appointed and his sureties approved. Copies of the three applications were forwarded to the commissioners. A week later, on 13 August 1845, a letter from the Poor Law Commissioners was read “requesting the Guardians to inform them of the reasons for rejecting the application of Mr. Healy, Cess Collector, who on the 6th inst. applied to be rate collector – and calling the attention of the Guardians to the 73rd section of the Irish Poor Relief Act.”¹⁶ The section to which the commissioners referred states:

County-cess collectors may be appointed to collect the poor-rate on giving security and being approved by the commissioners – failing in which the rate may be collected by any other officer appointed for the purpose with like approval.¹⁷

They were, therefore, not prepared to approve of Maddin’s appointment until a satisfactory explanation was received. Fortunately for the board, at the same meeting a letter was received from Maddin tendering his resignation of the office. It was hastily accepted. The board then drafted a lengthy resolution explaining that Maddin had resigned and that they were willing to appoint Healy who, they were informed, was prepared to accept the appointment provided that he be allowed an assistant. They asked for the commissioners’ guidance on this particular complication. The commissioners’ response, received the following week, was negative. So, on 20 August, a resolution was passed “that John Malone be appointed Poor Rate Collector for the districts of

¹⁶ Minutes 13 August 1845.

¹⁷ Nicholls, 228.

Kiltannonlea, Kilseely and Kilokennedy at the rate of nine pence in the pound on the sum collected.”¹⁸ Two weeks later the commissioners’ letter sanctioning the appointment of Malone was received and read. Immediately thereafter Malone’s letter of resignation was also presented to the board and the clerk was asked to contact Mr. Healy, cess-collector, to see if he was willing to accept the office. On 10 September the board received Healy’s letter declining the office. John McNamara of Athlunkard, whose candidacy had never been mentioned at a board meeting, was then appointed. The Commissioners’ response the following week was to send “enquiries to be answered by John McNamara...” Their letter sanctioning his appointment was received at the meeting of 24 September.

The appointment of a successor to Michael Bently as rate collector for Kiltannonlea, Kilseely and Kilokennedy was finally concluded almost three months after the Rate Books for the fiscal year (25 March 1845 to 25 March 1846) had been approved by the board. Half of the fiscal period had already elapsed. John McNamara had his work cut out for him under circumstances which had proven difficult for his predecessor.

Timothy McNamara’s replacement was more easily resolved. He was the collector for Castleconnell and had collected less than 75% of the rate owed by that district. The local guardian Daniel Cullen had previously given a notice of the necessity of suspending Timothy McNamara and combining his collecting district with that of an adjacent division of the Union.¹⁹ Immediately after approving the budget at the meeting of 2 July, the board resolved that “we deem it necessary to add the electoral division of Castleconnell to Mr. Duhý’s collecting district and that the clerk include in Mr. Duhý’s

¹⁸ Minutes 20 August 1845.

¹⁹ See page 108 above; Minutes 11 June 1845.

Bond that division.” On 16 July McNamara appeared before the board and was unceremoniously suspended and a resolution was passed “that the division of Castleconnell be added to Mr. Duhy’s collecting district and that he be appointed collector for that division.” They also resolved to modify Duhy’s Bond to reflect the additional responsibility. All this, apparently, without prior consultation with Duhy himself for at the next meeting it was announced that he had declined to be the collector for Castleconnell. The board consequently advertised for a successor to Timothy McNamara. At the meeting of 6 August 1845, James Shea was elected by the Board to replace McNamara as rate collector for Castleconnell. Three weeks later his appointment was approved by the commissioners and Shea accepted the office.

The difficulty of hiring and retaining rate collectors does not appear to have been of concern to the guardians. They were interested in seeing that the collectors obeyed the letter of the law and followed orders. Once they had the full complement of seven rate collectors in place, two of whom were new to the office, they adopted a menacing attitude. At the meeting of 1 October 1845, exactly one week after John McNamara had been sworn in to replace Bently, the board passed the order cited below. In attendance were the collectors John Hackett and John O’Connor, both of whom were responsible for electoral districts in close proximity to the workhouse, and for whom, one might presume, traveling to the meetings was not a problem.

Ordered that our clerk write to the collectors who have not attended this day, calling their attention to the order of the Poor Law Commissioners which requires their attendance on the first meeting of the month, and directing them to attend with their accounts, etc. next Wednesday and that, in the event of their not doing so, our clerk summon them before the magistrates for disobedience to the general orders.²⁰

²⁰ Minutes 1 October 1845.

The following week, undoubtedly alarmed by the aggressive attitude of the board, the two new collectors were in attendance. The clerk was therefore ordered to summon before the magistrates Messrs. Dundon, Frost and Duhy “for disobedience to the orders of the Poor Law Commissioners in not attending this Board on last Wednesday, the first in the month, and for not attending here this day as directed by the Guardians on the 1st Inst.”²¹

At the next weekly meeting, the board read a letter from Mr. Dundon requesting that he be allowed, on occasion, to appear by proxy at the first meetings of the month inasmuch as he often had ‘sessions and fair business’ to attend to. The letter assured them that he would be in attendance as often as he could. The board expressed the opinion that this privilege could be allowed Mr. Dundon if the commissioners thought it legal. They ordered the clerk to communicate same to the commissioners. By so doing they were able to maintain their attitude of obsequious subservience to authority while at the same time demonstrating a willingness to allow one of their most important functionaries a certain latitude within which to operate. Later on in the meeting, the board exhibited even greater magnanimity. Dundon, Frost and Duhy were all in attendance and requested of the board that it not press the order passed on the 8th of October in summoning them for disobedience of the orders. They promised that such a thing would not again occur. In consequence the board directed the clerk not to summon them before the magistrates.

The board’s winning formula for dealing with personnel problems proved successful once again. One is inclined to wonder, however, how long such a negative, if

²¹ Minutes 8 October 1845.

not abusive, approach to problem solving would be productive. In the eyes of the commissioners, the key to running a successful poor law union was to provide the necessary financing. The people who had the most important and difficult role to play in the process were the rate collectors. Even before the blight attacked the potato crop and the potential for an alarming increase in the demand for relief became evident, there were signs that rate collectors were meeting with some resistance. The board's response seems curious and potentially counter-productive. The guardians' first reaction invariably implied that negligence on the part of the collector was the reason for rates not being paid. Furthermore they appeared to assume that there were aspiring rate collectors out there ready to replace the less-than-diligent incumbent at a moment's notice.

However, the opposite seemed more likely. Some who had been offered the position turned it down. One cess collector who had priority for the office refused to assume it. One incumbent rate collector rejected the opportunity to expand his territory.

Experience, therefore, should have warned them that the office of rate collector was difficult to fill, that it had some unpleasant aspects to it that many would not be prepared to face and that their present office holders might, from time to time, be in need of support and encouragement rather than chastisement. Do the guardians' actions defy logic? Were there considerations motivating them which are not obvious? What would lead otherwise responsible men to risk undermining the very basis upon which the public service enterprise, which had been entrusted to them, depended for survival?

There is the obvious conclusion that they were ideologically at one with the commissioners to whom they were responsible, who were authoritative, threatening and whose attitude reflected a belief in the inevitability of God's retributive justice. But the

guardians were much closer to the ground, so to speak, and in face-to-face contact with rate collectors. That they had not more compassion would imply an ideological single-mindedness which is difficult to imagine.

One is tempted to speculate that the nationalist movement which was strong in Ireland at the time may have had some adherents among board members in Limerick. The feelings of the guardians towards British rule in general were no doubt mixed. If some of them harboured resentments, they were circumspect about expressing them at board meetings. The only evidence that they were even conscious of O'Connell's faltering repeal movement appeared in the minutes of the meeting of 20 August. The entry simply states: "The petitions ordered to be engrossed on the 28th May last for a Repeal of the Legislative Union were laid before the Board and signed by the chairman."²² On this particular occasion the chairman was John Thomas Devitt filling in for the absent William Monsell, an avowed unionist. Monsell did, however, consider joining the Repeal movement until the acrimonious split between O'Connell and the Young Irelanders threatened to draw him into political controversy.²³ At this point, therefore, he might very well have signed the petitions as representing the will of the people of the Poor Law union of which he was chairman. There is, in fact, much more evidence of nationalist tendencies in the next board under Caleb Powell.

But to speculate that resentment towards the British was motivating members of the Limerick board would imply that they were prepared to see the whole workhouse project fail. Certainly, their frustration at the inadequacy of the Poor Law which they were called upon to administer increased as the famine deepened. But there is more

²² Minutes, 8 August 1845.

²³ Potter, 30.

evidence (which will come to light in subsequent chapters) in the mandates of Devitt and Clare that the guardians were prepared to throw up their hands in despair at trying to administer the Poor Law. At this point, Monsell's board seemed determined to do its duty and apply the law. In fact, Monsell's ambitious vice-chairman, J.T. Devitt, consistently made a determined effort to adhere to the letter of the law despite its obvious inadequacy in order to impress superiors, particularly government office-holders. This too emerges in a subsequent chapter.

Finally, the Malthusian, and subsequently Benthamite, notion that man is essentially motivated by self-serving interests might have been a strong motivational element affecting the guardians' reactions to their management problems. Their decisions invariably reflect an underlying assumption that the people in their charge, whether they be employees or inmates, are pursuing one thing and one thing alone – their own good. It is therefore incumbent upon them, as guardians, to be watchful and ensure that the union's best interests be protected.

William Monsell appeared to try, at times, to moderate the ideologically driven tendencies of his board. One scenario which played itself out in the summer and fall of 1845 demonstrated his quiet strength and leadership most effectively. Early in July the Master had been given a fortnight's leave of absence and his duties were to be handled exclusively by the Assistant Master, William F. Meehan.²⁴ This appeared to be normal procedure but in the course of exercising full authority the Assistant Master ran afoul of the board and they let him know of their displeasure in no uncertain terms. In the process of reviewing the punishment book at the meeting of 30 July, the board did not approve of

²⁴ Minutes, 9 July 1845.

the punishment given in a certain case. This was highly unusual as approval was almost always a process of rubber stamping the Master's sanctions against inmates and sometimes recommending harsher measures. In this case the minutes reflect a contrary reaction:

The punishment given in the case of no. 196 was not approved of and the opinion of the Guardians thereon was that no female or male pauper be confined or otherwise punished in future by the assistant master except under the sanction of the Master or Matron. Further resolved that from henceforth no pauper in this House shall be punished by confinement or otherwise without the direct order of the Master or Matron who are the only persons justified in doing so.²⁵

First they gave the man the authority to act and then, when he used that authority, they not only pulled the rug out from under him but publicly humiliated him in the process. If he reacted harshly to some bad behaviour on the part of an inmate he might very well have been taking his cue from the guardians themselves. But there was to be no slap on the wrist behind closed doors for the Assistant Master. They reacted to his mistake in a manner which was distressingly consistent. Meehan no doubt considered it a public rebuke as his resignation was forthcoming by the end of September.

At the meeting in which Meehan's resignation was accepted, the Board moved a resolution not to replace him.

proposed by Mr. Raleigh, seconded by Mr. Enright and resolved unanimously that the Master undertake the entire duties on trial for a period of three months, at which time the Guardians will be enabled to see whether the duties cannot be satisfactorily performed without an assistant Master.²⁶

Although the resolution was passed unanimously, either some of the guardians began to have second thoughts about the wisdom of such a 'cost-saving' measure or the Master was able to convince some of them of his need for assistance. The following week the guardian, John White, gave a notice of motion that two weeks hence he would move

²⁵ Minutes, 30 July 1845.

²⁶ Minutes, 24 September 1845.

“that the resolution of the 24th September last suspending the consideration of appointing an Assistant Master be rescinded.”²⁷ However, at the meeting two weeks later a resolution to advertise to hire an Assistant Master was defeated. Subsequently, the guardian Thomas Wallnutt gave a notice of motion that he would “move a resolution on this day fortnight deeming it necessary not to appoint an Assistant Master but to have the Master undertake the duties on trial for a period of three months.”²⁸ Mr. White immediately weighed in with a motion to the effect that if such a trial period were undertaken that the Master not receive any sort of extra compensation for it. Clearly a serious difference of opinion had emerged among members of the board as to management priorities.

Saving money at the expense of officers of the union was considered by some guardians a legitimate management practice. Some guardians thought otherwise. As one of the largest unions in the country which had enjoyed the services of an assistant to the Master in the past and was now facing a, some thought temporary, subsistence crisis, this may not have been an appropriate time to be reducing personnel as a cost-saving measure.

Certainly William Monsell was sensitive to the board’s responsibility to its officers as well as its inmates. The chairman’s return could not have come at a more opportune time. The first meeting back after his bereavement leave was the following week, 22 October. It was as if whatever dissention previously existed had evaporated. The same guardian who had been so enthusiastic about trying to operate without an Assistant Master made an unexpected proposal.

²⁷ Minutes, 1 October 1845.

²⁸ Minutes, 15 October 1845.

Proposed by Mr. Wallnutt, seconded by Mr. Brodie and resolved that our clerk be instructed to give notice to the Limerick newspapers that applications will be received for the situation of Assistant Master to the Limerick Workhouse to be decided on next Wednesday week.²⁹

There was a bit of a reaction to this startling development by some members of the board in that there were a couple of notices of motion to increase other officers' salaries. One was that the two school teachers' salaries be raised to the level of their predecessors and the other was to increase from £10 to £13 the annual salaries of the lodgekeeper and wardsman. Two weeks later, however, both these proposals were quietly withdrawn. At the meeting of 5 November, the new Assistant Master, James Culkin, was elected from the four candidates who presented themselves for consideration. He was hired with a salary of £30 per year with rations and apartments which was the same as his predecessor.³⁰

In the three meetings since his return William Monsell seemed to have been able to restore an aura of calm in the proceedings of the board. He obviously prevailed upon the members to return to the Master the assistance which he undoubtedly needed. He may also have persuaded them that saving money by not reappointing or replacing officers who had resigned was no saving at all but a formula for chaos. Potato blight was now recognized to be extensive and he may have anticipated more demand on the services of the house. The chairman's quiet diplomatic leadership would be needed in the months to come.

²⁹ Minutes, 22 October 1845.

³⁰ Minutes, 5 November 1845.

4.3 Approaching the abyss

The year 1845 ended with some ominous signs. Not only was the partial failure of the potato crop an issue fraught with potentially negative consequences on the financial stability of the Union but the overall health of the inmates had taken a turn for the worse. At the meeting on Christmas Eve, with William Monsell presiding and only two other guardians present, the Medical Officer's report was inserted into the minutes. Dr. Michael Brodie may have made weekly reports to the board but rarely were they noteworthy enough to be included in the minutes. This time the board may have been trying to get a message across to the commissioners. The report stated:

Fever continues to prevail in the House, the Hospital so crowded that several of the beds have two patients in each. Want of proper accommodation, therefore, much complained of...Twelve or thirteen admitted from Limerick Fever Hospital during the week. Signed M. Brodie, M.D.³¹

This was followed up by a resolution that the attention of the commissioners be drawn to the slow progress being made by the contractor who was supposed to have the new Fever Wards ready for occupancy by the end of the year. The following week, New Year's Eve, with six guardians present, including Chairman Monsell, the Board was more direct with the commissioners. Their resolution contained a plea for action:

resolved that fever is increasing rapidly in this Workhouse and the Board cannot but feel that the omission of the Commissioners to proceed against the contractor of the Fever Hospital whose time for finishing the Hospital has elapsed and who has now only two or three workmen employed at it is attended with most lamentable consequences to the Poor of this Union.³²

They had no idea at the time, of course, that the potato crop failure, inconvenient as it was in 1845, would return with more or less vigour for four more years and that the consequences to the paupers of the Limerick Union would be lamentable indeed. Meanwhile, early in the new year, the building to treat fever patients was duly

³¹ Minutes, 24 December 1845.

³² Minutes, 31 December 1845.

completed. After several weeks of discussion with government architects about the contractor's claims for cost-overruns, the board agreed to accept the keys at the meeting of 11 February 1846.

The first indication of any trouble ahead had appeared in the minutes of the meeting of 22 October 1845. With William Monsell in the chair, newly returned after an absence of three and a half months, the following resolution was passed:

that the Rural Guardians be requested to report to the Board on this day week the state of the potatoe (sic) crop in their respective districts and that our clerk summon a special meeting for the occasion as also to take into consideration the propriety of altering the dietary of the House.³³

The following week they spent some time discussing the situation and reporting on the state of the potato crop in their respective areas and decided to suspend contracts for foodstuffs such as potatoes, oatmeal and bread. Instead of entering into contracts for these provisions they authorized the clerk to purchase them directly, without having to go to tender and accepting the lowest bidder. They also suggested he try to purchase diseased potatoes in order to make 'farina'. There was an opinion afoot that suspect potatoes could be kiln dried in order to extract the starch before the rot set in and they became completely useless.³⁴ The board also struck a committee to look into the possibility of erecting a kiln in the workhouse for preserving potatoes. After due deliberation, the committee recommended against it.³⁵

The commissioners, in a sealed order delivered by Assistant Commissioner, Mr. Hancock, who was in attendance at the meeting of 5 November, authorized the guardians to depart from the established dietary in the use of potatoes. Three weeks later the board

³³ Minutes, 22 October 1845.

³⁴ E. Margaret Crawford, 'Food and Famine,' in *The Great Irish Famine*, ed. Cathal Póirtéir (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1995), 61.

³⁵ Minutes, 11 November 1845.

received a letter from the guardians of the Waterford Union enquiring whether the soup dietary adopted by the Limerick workhouse “answered the expectations or not.” The clerk was ordered to respond favourably. Eventually a formal proposition was put by guardian Terence Brodie, who was also a physician, “that the soup dietary be generally adopted for the inmates of the House.”³⁶ As in all matters impinging on financing relief, the board was caught between its responsibility to the paupers in its care and the need to impress upon the commissioners that the sacred ‘principle of less eligibility’ was being respected in the management of the Limerick workhouse.

By the spring of the following year even oatmeal, which was served for breakfast, was in short supply and a sort of gruel made from imported corn was being served in its place. On 25 March 1846 the Master reported that “the paupers did not eat the Indian corn made into stirabout.” In actual fact it might have been quite unpalatable when first introduced as the board had just recently asked the commissioners for instructions on how to use it. Nevertheless, the board was not in a position to be magnanimous about the dietary of the house nor was it overly concerned about a potential hunger strike. It immediately passed the following resolution:

Proposed by Dr. Brodie and seconded by Councillor O’Gorman and resolved that having this day examined the stirabout prepared from the Indian Corn Meal for the paupers and having also heard the opinion of our medical officer as to its wholesomeness, we are of the opinion that the Master should continue its use for breakfast in the morning instead of oatmeal and in order to avoid waste the Master only prepare the quantity necessary for those paupers who consent to use it.³⁷

Inasmuch as Easter Sunday was approaching, a day on which a special diet of coffee, meat and vegetables was offered instead of the standard fare, the board followed up with a resolution at the next meeting to withhold Easter breakfast and dinner from any pauper

³⁶ Minutes, 3 December 1845.

³⁷ Minutes, 25 March 1846.

who was still persevering in refusing to make use of the Indian Corn Meal. They ordered the clerk to intimate same to the paupers of the establishment.³⁸ Just as the Irish poor throughout the country were forced to get used to this initially upsetting change in diet, so too the paupers of the Limerick workhouse were required to adapt to it. The special incentives in the form of threats provided by the guardians were probably not needed.

But as the crisis deepened in the winter of 1845-46 and the population of the workhouse approached capacity the guardians began to worry that demand would exceed their ability to provide relief indoors. At the meeting of 11 February 1846, they circulated a copy of a “petition from the Dublin Union praying that the Guardians of the different Unions be empowered to give outdoor relief this year during the approaching scarcity.” This immediately prompted a notice of motion from a board member to support the initiative from Dublin:

Notice of motion was given by Mr. Wallnutt that he will at the meeting of the Board of Guardians to be held on this day fortnight bring forward for their consideration the propriety of adopting a petition to Parliament praying that a clause or clauses may be introduced into the Irish Poor Law Act empowering the Guardians to give outdoor relief in food (under certain restrictions) so as to avert as far as possible the threatening famine and consequent disease now so much to be dreaded in consequence of the loss of the potato crop.³⁹

There was no such motion put before the board two weeks later. Instead they adopted a different tactic to address the problem of the capacity of the house. The board members turned their attention to making arrangements to discharge children whose parents were out of the house. In response to a previous enquiry, the Master had reported to the board that there were 40 children in the boys’ school, 47 in the girls’ school and 18 in the nursery for a total of 105 in this unfortunate situation. He was ordered to send them “to their parents out of the Workhouse not more than ten to be sent out in a day –

³⁸ Minutes, 1 April 1846.

³⁹ Minutes, 11 February 1846.

the Master to select proper persons to go with them and to report on this day fortnight the numbers he has so sent also the names, if any, of the children he has not been able to send.”⁴⁰ As well, they dispatched a couple of women whose husbands had been discovered to be at large in the community. The next week there were seven more women discharged in similar circumstances.

This activity, accompanied by the fact that the weekly death toll in the middle of February had reached a high of fifteen, satisfactorily kept the population of the house just below capacity. The high was announced at the meeting of 18 February when there were 1414 inmates in residence in a workhouse built for 1600. In the weeks that followed the weekly death toll eased slightly and demand tapered off as it always had in the spring when the weather began to improve. The guardians’ desire to alleviate suffering and yet demonstrate to the commissioners that they were respecting the letter of the Poor Law appeared, at times, to have them on the horns of a dilemma. They invariably did what they had to do to apply the harsh realities of the law and yet occasionally they passed a resolution to indicate to the commissioners that they wished to be more compassionate.

Take notice that I will in the event of the Union Workhouse becoming full move a resolution to the following effect – that every individual in the Union requiring relief shall on proper application be supplied with food in the Workhouse, and sleeping apartments be provided for them, so that the Guardians and the rate payers may have the satisfaction to know that none can perish for want of food in this extensive Union. Signed Thomas Wallnutt 18th March 1846.⁴¹

Despite the above example which was the well-meaning expression of a faint hope in a hypothetical situation, the guardians could only do what was within their means. This was provided by the proceeds of the collection of poor rates. Peel’s provision of cheap food in the form of Indian corn from America and his public works schemes would only

⁴⁰ Minutes, 25 February 1846.

⁴¹ Minutes, 18 March 1846.

temporarily keep the pressure off the workhouses. In time, with the passing of the amendment and extension acts, boards of guardians would be required to exercise the authority prescribed for them in the Poor Law using the inadequate means which the same law provided.

The exercise of authority by the board of guardians mirrored the exercise of authority by the state. It was wielded as a blunt instrument used to beat recalcitrant subjects into submission to authority. Fear seemed to be the motivating factor on the part of those in authority. If subjects were not shown the power of those in authority, and the dire consequences of defying authority, then chaos might ensue. And history had recently shown that chaos could lead to loss of the position of authority enjoyed by those privileged to wield it.⁴²

In a society in which the aristocracy was used to, and enamoured of, its position of authority, and truly believed in its innate birthright to exercise such power, the fear of losing place, and face, was a powerful incentive to act. And yet the impulse to do what was right was present in many men. Compassion in the face of suffering motivated some to temper their authoritative urge to over-react by brutal suppression. The catalogue of coercive legislation directed at Ireland by a terrified British government makes such brave men as Peel, and later Gladstone, appear as voices crying in the wilderness. In the early stages of the famine, Monsell was Limerick's voice for doing the right thing for the workhouse inmates. But as chairman of the board he was only one voice. When the guardians acted collectively, their own fear was usually evident. It seemed to be so when dealing with the poor beleaguered rate collectors. It was often the case when dealing

⁴² For those who had forgotten the 'terror' of the French Revolution, the Chartist movement was a more recent reminder and revolutionary feelings were afoot, about to erupt throughout Europe in 1848.

with employees of the union. And, although collectively, the inmates might elicit some compassion, individually they were assumed to be malevolent and, when it sensed danger, the board moved quickly to protect its interests.

Monsell made an effort to moderate the mood of the board and his attendance at meetings, except during his bereavement, was almost perfect. One would have to say his influence was considerable and respect for his opinion and ability was extraordinary. He remained an active member of the board of guardians after his year as chairman ended.⁴³

But perhaps as a parting effort to remind the board of its responsibility to the paupers of the union, on 11 March 1846, the chairman put a lengthy notice of motion in which he proposed that the government should be urged to undertake certain positive measures. His suggestion was to use the Board of Works to set on foot projects in districts wherever distress prevailed. He wanted the government to use the chairmen of local petty sessions and the wardens of (Poor Law) electoral districts to authorize work for any able-bodied destitute person in exchange for food vouchers on a daily basis. This would allow workers to at least keep body and soul together regardless of what happened to the price of food. For the aged and infirm, he suggested that wardens recommend to Magistrates of Petty Sessions the names of persons needing relief and that the Justices authorize food vouchers for them for as long as required. He recommended that the clerk of Petty Sessions keep a register of those relieved, by electoral division, and that the boards of guardians be billed for the costs on the last day of every month. In this way the starving would be fed even if they could not be admitted to a workhouse. He wanted the clergy of the Established and Roman Catholic Churches to work with the Magistrates to

⁴³ Monsell was again chairman of the Board of Guardians for 25 years between 1857-82. Potter, 43.

see that their poor be fed. He recommended the hiring of more wardens if necessary. He suggested that such measures would only be required until 1 September.⁴⁴ In other words he wanted the government to use the structures in place at the time to prevent death by starvation. He wanted the board to make these recommendations to the government in order to give them weight and to alert the government to the dire need at hand.

Monsell had obviously thought a great deal about the current and pending distress and knew that there would be no hope for common labourers until the next harvest which he assumed would be normal. As a landowner he was also willing to assume his responsibility to his tenants and sub-tenants. Furthermore the members of the board agreed with his sentiments and even added a provision of their own the following week.

Their addition was intended to cover a perceived loophole and provided that “any district where Public Works adequate to the emergency are not carried on these provisions should be extended not only to the infirm but also to the able-bodied residing in any such district.”⁴⁵ Peel’s initial public works schemes, while not so comprehensive in their provisions, were much criticized by government officials as an opportunity for landlords to invest public money in their estates.⁴⁶ Monsell’s intentions were obviously to ensure that landlords, as rate-payers, assumed their responsibility to relieve the distress in their districts. Had all landlords been so conscientious, the outcome might have been far less catastrophic.

⁴⁴ Minutes, 11 March 1846.

⁴⁵ Minutes, 18 March 1846.

⁴⁶ Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, 54-55.

Conclusion

Monsell's removal as chairman when the new board was elected at the end of March was carefully orchestrated by the vice-chairman, John Thomas Devitt. It would seem that there were some members of the board who had a more nationalist agenda in mind and could not see any expression for it with an avowed unionist as chairman. At the penultimate meeting of the out-going board on 25 March 1846, Devitt had the following statement inserted in the minutes:

Take notice that it is my intention to propose at the first meeting of the new Board that Caleb Powell Esq., M.P. be chairman and I request a copy of this notice be served upon each guardian summoned to the new Board in order that by a large and full attendance of Mr. Powell's supporters they may exhibit to the Union at large their steady adherence to those principles of Nationality which induced the constituencies of the several electoral divisions to return them this year as their representatives at the Board of Guardians. Signed. John Thomas Devitt.⁴⁷

This was immediately followed by a notice by guardian Thomas Costelloe that once the new chairman was installed he would nominate Devitt as vice-chairman and Alderman O'Gorman as deputy vice-chairman. These latter two would be returning to the positions they had held with the previous board. The new board had been elected for the year ending March 25, 1847, a year that would be very difficult.⁴⁸ In the collection of poor rates there was still £2958 17s. 3d. uncollected for the financial year just ended. This represented 21% of the amount budgeted and was an ominous indication of distress in the community.

Monsell had seen the Union through a year in which there began to be clear signs of the inadequacy of the Poor Law. The harsh nature of his board's treatment of rate collectors and inmates reflected the tenor of the times, but the chairman's obvious

⁴⁷ Minutes, 25 March 1846.

⁴⁸ The elected members numbered thirty-three. Ex-officio guardians, who were self-selected from among the Magistrates of the Union, assumed their seats for the year ending the end of September each year. There were eleven ex-officio members of the Limerick Union.

leadership skills and basic decency tended to lessen the negative impact. However, the types of problems which the board faced on a regular basis were about to change drastically.

CHAPTER 5

POWELL

The year of the newly-elected Board of Guardians (25 March 1846 to 25 March 1847) would usher in some monumental changes in the Limerick Poor Law Union. But before the serious downturn in the fortunes of the Union occasioned by the complete failure of the potato crop of 1846, the guardians were directing their attention to matters such as supporting the nationalist movement in Ireland and reforming the internal structure of the house.¹ Then as the year went on their focus narrowed and became riveted on the financial survival of the union and the dangerous overcrowding in the workhouse. By the end of January 1847, so desperate had the situation become that they had decided to meet twice a week; on Wednesdays to consider solely the admission of inmates and on Saturdays for all other business of the union.

The grim news of the complete failure of the 1846 potato crop was a certainty by mid-September. The population of the house, which had ended the previous year (March 25, 1846) at 1384, began to rise precipitously around the middle of October 1846 and had reached a peak of 2840 at the end of January 1847. Inasmuch as the house had been built to accommodate 1600 paupers, this caused the board some consternation as it scrambled to find places for the overflow. By the middle of December the weekly death toll in the house began to reflect the overcrowding, as well as the increasingly debilitated state of the applicants, and began to skyrocket until, in the week ending 27 March 1847, (the very week in which the next board of guardians was elected) eighty paupers died.

¹ The matter of isolating 'women of questionable character', addressed by the previous board, resurfaced.

Deaths in the Limerick Workhouse

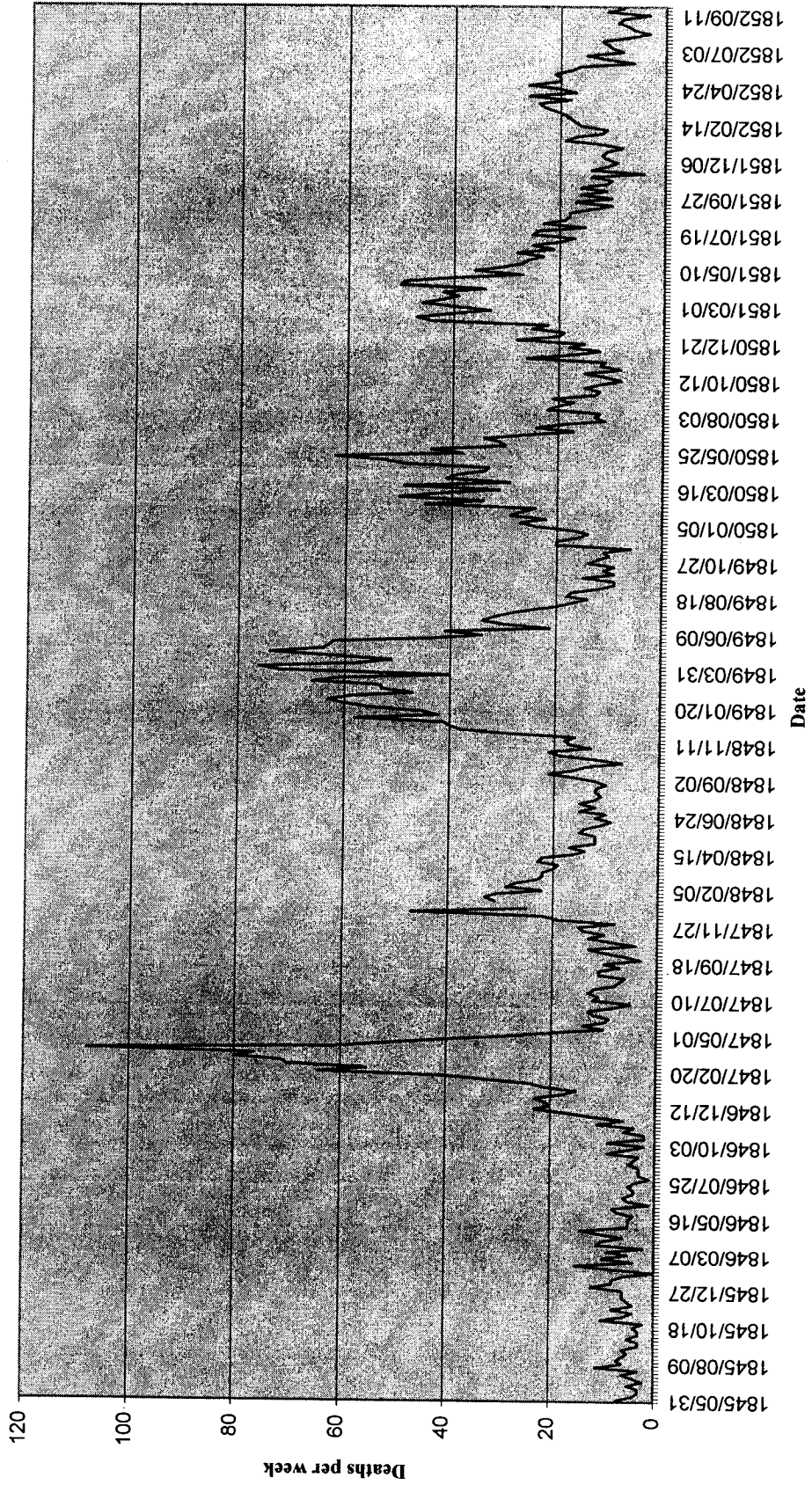


Figure 4. Chart of the weekly death rate in the Limerick workhouse (incl. auxiliaries) during the Famine years.

In the whole year of this Board's tenure, there had been 798 deaths and so in that fateful final week ten percent of the total deaths for the year occurred. As shocking as these statistics were, they indicated just the beginning of trends which would get worse as the years passed, although only once did the weekly death toll surpass eighty.²

The expense, not to mention the sheer logistics, of handling such a calamity had a profound effect on the financial situation of the Union. As early as June 1846, the treasury began to show a negative balance and the guardians were obliged, with the permission of the commissioners, to borrow from the bank using 'rates to be collected' as collateral. At the same time as the guardians were poised to strike a new rate to meet added expenses, they began to receive delegations of concerned citizens petitioning them not to strike a new rate until it was clear what the government intended to do with its Poor Law reform legislation. The petitioners were, of course, to be bitterly disappointed because, not only could the board not wait, but the new legislation (which was enacted during the mandate of the next board) would throw the entire burden of poor relief on the rate-payers. The board members were, of course, aware that borrowing money on the basis of future rate collections was a risky business. The board's strained relationship with its rate collectors had been caused by the latter's inability to complete their collections for the previous financial period. The situation deteriorated further during this board's mandate and was ample proof that the whole process was based on flawed perceptions of the depth of Ireland's poverty and the wealth of Ireland's landlords. In view of the mounting distress, it was not likely to get any easier. If tenants could not pay their rents, the revenue would not be there for land-holders to pay their rates.

² See Chart on the previous page, "Deaths in the Limerick Workhouse." For comparison see Chart on page 229, "Population of the Limerick Workhouse."

Some of the direct costs attached to the increasing numbers of inmates and the mounting death rate were food costs, salaries of personnel such as physicians and other medical staff as well as clergymen, and the expense of retrofitting the house to provide additional accommodation. Coffins had to be purchased at a shilling a foot and that expense alone tripled over the previous year. The board's predicament was a microcosm of what the government was facing all over Ireland but the Limerick Poor Law Union had placed itself in, what it considered to be, an advantageous position by electing a member of parliament as its chairman. It was a vain hope, however, as the new chairman attended only five meetings in the year in which he held the position.

5.1 National reform

Caleb Powell was a radical reformer and an outspoken Irish nationalist and although Robert Peel had reacted somewhat favourably to the plight of the Irish poor, John Russell, who formed his first government in June of 1846, proved to be less capable of getting his government to address the Irish question. Even if Powell had been more sympathetic to the legislative union, rather than the 'repealer' he was, it is unlikely that his intervention at Westminster would have benefited the Limerick Union. As we have seen, the reforms which the new government had planned and the legislation which it was about to introduce into parliament were about to put more strain on the Poor Law Unions by shifting the total financial burden of relief to the landlords. The guardians knew that it was next to impossible to collect the total rate and that any increase in rate would be even more difficult to collect. But in the early stages of the new chairman's mandate, the financial crisis was in the future.

Powell lost no time in acknowledging the recognition given him by the Board of Guardians in electing him Chairman. His fellow guardians insisted that his letter be inserted in the minutes of the meeting of 15 April.

Reform Club
London, April 10, 1846

Brother Guardians:

It is superfluous for me to assure you how highly I appreciate the honour you have conferred upon me in selecting me to be chairman of the Limerick Union for the current year.

Which I candidly acknowledge that my personal pride, perhaps vanity derives no slight gratification from the mark of public confidence and popular approbation evinced toward me by my fellow countrymen and colleagues at the Board of Guardians. Yet that gratification is inconsiderable indeed compared to the satisfaction I experience in contemplating the earnest, honest and uncompromising assertion of Irish Nationality by the faithful representatives of so intelligent and important a portion of Irish community as is comprised in the Limerick Union.

(Signed) Caleb Powell³

His strong reference to Irish nationality appeared to have met with the approval of his 'brother' guardians. They elected him chairman and welcomed the contents of his letter as though it was important to make the point to the commissioners and the press who attended their meetings. Other references to the nation's struggle against British mismanagement of Irish affairs were soon forthcoming.

The Young Irelanders had for several years been generating a frenzy of nationalist sentiment in the country. Their paper, the *Nation*, full of patriotic poems, ballads, stories and propaganda, had been received with enthusiasm.⁴ Although literacy was low, the monster meetings which they had helped organize with O'Connell had created a wave of nationalist sentiment which was not lost on the Limerick board of guardians. While one of Young Ireland's most prominent activists and a local Limerick member of parliament, William Smith O'Brien, was incarcerated in the Tower of London

³ Minutes, 15 April 1846.

⁴ Sean O'Faolain, *King of the Beggars: A Life of Daniel O'Connell* (Dublin: Poolbeg Press, 1995), 291-292.

for defying parliament by refusing to serve on a parliamentary committee, the Board took the opportunity to express its support of his protest.⁵ The mayor of Limerick, E.F.G. Ryan, elected member of the board for the John Street Ward, gave a notice of motion on 6 May 1846 that he would move an address of sympathy and confidence for Smith O'Brien's "noble, patriotic and self-sacrificing conduct and declarations of our determination to sustain him by every means in our power in the consistent course he is now adopting."⁶ The following week his motion was adopted unanimously. The board was honoured by a thank you letter from Smith O'Brien to John Thomas Devitt, Vice Chairman, which was read at the meeting of 6 June.

So strong were some members' feelings about British mismanagement of Ireland's affairs that Devitt, perhaps encouraged by the chairman, took the opportunity to use the board as a forum for debate on the issue of repeal of the union. On 1 July he handed in a notice of motion by which he proposed to use the entire meeting of 12 August to address the subject. He wished on that occasion to have the board adopt "a petition to the Commons House of Parliament praying for a repeal of the Union."⁷ Devitt called for his notice to be sent individually to every member of the board so that attendance would be high and that opponents of the motion could express their point of view. The actual motion had to be postponed until 26 August but on that occasion, with Caleb Powell, MP, in the chair, and twelve other members present, it was adopted unanimously and coupled with a petition for presentation in the House of Commons by the chairman.

⁵ Oliver MacDonagh, *The Emancipist, Daniel O'Connell 1830-1847*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 285-288.

⁶ Minutes, 6 May 1846.

⁷ Minutes, 1 July 1846.

At the same meeting they expressed their alarm at the unfortunate turn the repeal movement had taken with the apparent split of the 'Young Irelanders'. Mayor Ryan's motion was also adopted unanimously.

that while we sincerely deplore that any dissension should have occurred in the meetings of the Repeal Association and ardently desire that circumstances may arise to obtain for our country the renewed cooperation of that distinguished Irishman W. S. O'Brien in the proceedings of that Patriotic Body. We deem it a duty unavoidably imposed upon us as sincere Repealers at this junction to proclaim that our confidence in the wisdom, ability and integrity of our veteran Leader and Liberator O'Connell is undiminished and that in his undeviating efforts to Repeal the Union he may rely on our cordial support.⁸

The board was torn by its support for local patriotic hero Smith O'Brien and its obvious appreciation of O'Connell's lifetime commitment to its own shared goal. But it seemed clear that, although they were for repeal, they were not prepared to endorse the extreme measures which Smith O'Brien and the 'Young Irelanders' appeared to be advocating. One member of the board, who was ill at the time, felt so strongly about the issue that he was compelled to put his sentiments of support in writing. Yet he made it clear how far he was prepared to go. The members were proud to include his letter in the minutes.

Hotel Lisdoonvarna
Monday 24 August 1846

My Dear Devitt:

I perceive by the newspapers that you are to bring forward the Motion for Repeal of the Union on Wednesday 26th.

I must regret that it will not be in my power to attend as I am just now beginning to feel some benefit from this place. I need not assure you of the sincere interest I take in the success of this measure and I fully identify myself with the moral force principle alone as laid down by O'Connell for the achievement of Repeal.

I am truly yours,
(signed) Martin Honan.⁹

By this time the repeal movement was in serious decline and O'Connell was in rapidly deteriorating health. But the board's attempt to use its influence to prevail upon

⁸ Minutes, 26 August 1846.

⁹ Minutes, 26 August 1846.

the campaign for repeal of the union was an interesting turn of events and undoubtedly a departure which the previous chairman, William Monsell, would not have condoned. He was notably absent from meetings in which pro-repeal resolutions were passed unanimously. Yet the new board seemed to have a clear political agenda and no hesitation whatsoever in expressing it openly. Monsell had been a powerful presence, and no doubt still had a great deal of influence among some members of the board, but to nationalists his strong loyalist tendencies must have been an irritation. This board, of which the nationalist MP was chairman and J. T. Devitt was, for the most part, acting in Powell's absence, probably reflected the feelings of well-heeled Irish nationalists of the day. It was still interested enough to push the repeal agenda, somewhat taken aback and disappointed at the apparent split in the movement and definitely not prepared to move to physical force as a means of achieving an independent parliament.

Powell appeared to have been the instigator behind Devitt's initiative to use the board meeting to express nationalist sentiments to the press and the community. His attendance at the meeting of August 26 (only his second), at which the chairman was ceremoniously given the board's petition to present to the House of Commons, was a staged opportunity for the benefit of the press. Powell was aware that he might be facing the electorate soon as Russell would want to go to the country to secure a firm mandate. Powell wanted his constituents to know that he was the champion of the nationalist cause. The ploy did not succeed as William Monsell and Smith O'Brien topped the polls for the two Limerick seats.¹⁰

Devitt, for his part, was acting as a good vice-chairman and doing the bidding of

¹⁰ See note 3, page 103.

the chair. After this episode, perhaps due to the necessity of addressing more important matters, such as starvation and death, there was no more reference to the nationalist agenda. When Devitt was on his own, which was the case for most of Powell's mandate, he was busy implementing the Poor Law and looking after his career as a public servant. Powell's own loyalties lay elsewhere than in the Limerick union. Had he been prepared to assume the responsibility bestowed on him, he would have been present at more than five meetings in the year he was chairman. This gave Devitt, as vice-chairman, ample opportunity to occupy the chair and, for all intents and purposes, earned him the right to succeed Powell at the end of his mandate.

Powell, for his part in the House of Commons, was outspoken in his criticism of British management of Irish affairs. In a lengthy speech on 17 April 1846, he ably demonstrated how outrageous and unacceptable a measure as odious as the coercion act under consideration would have been to England. He summed up his position, made some sensible recommendations and warned the government:

Before I conclude, I would take the liberty of suggesting what in my opinion will promote the desired tranquility of Ireland. In the first place, the Irish people should have equal laws, impartially administered. The Government ought not to proscribe the constitutional expression of political opinion. Then there is ample scope for the physical amelioration of the people, by reclaiming the waste lands of Ireland; and the Legislature would be well justified in compelling those proprietors who cannot or will not bring them into cultivation, to transfer them to those who are prepared to make them available for the exigencies of the community. Or will the Legislature assent to a Repeal of the Union, and then an Irish Parliament will devise those measures which are calculated to accomplish the prosperity of the people, without infringing their political privileges? But if adverse and hostile legislation is persevered in, the Government may discover some fine morning that the Irish nation has resolved to right itself.¹¹

The act to which he was referring applied only to the parts of Ireland experiencing agrarian unrest, and gave the Lord Lieutenant draconian powers to proclaim districts and empower the magistracy and police to search, disarm and conscript

¹¹ Hansard, Volume 85, (24 March 1846 to 1 May 1846), 745; in reference to 11 & 12 Vict., c. 2.

anyone into a search party. The act was passed eventually and his intervention proved unfruitful. It was another example of England's entrapment in its own negative rhetoric which so often expressed itself in a pejorative attitude toward the Irish people – an attitude which was also reflected in its response to the famine crisis.

Britain's representatives in Ireland responsible for the implementation of the Poor Law were, however, circumspect enough to avoid becoming embroiled in controversy. While the Poor Law commissioners received the minutes of the board meetings weekly, they never reacted openly to these messages of a nationalist nature but studiously concerned themselves with the business of the Poor Law and how it was being administered by the guardians. At this late date, the commissioners, as the voice in Ireland of the British government, undoubtedly felt that the best way to prevent the repeal agenda from gaining ground and threatening the cherished integrity of the empire, was to ignore it.

Overwhelming force, which the British always had at their disposal against the Irish, appears to have lulled the commissioners into a temporary sense of security at times, even smugness. Whatever power O'Connell and adherents of the repeal association could generate in their legitimate pursuit of an Irish legislature seemed, at this point, to require no response. At other times, of course, the fear in the British response was palpable as exemplified by the huge military presence in Ireland and the stack of coercive legislation to control expressions of national exuberance. Virginia Crossman has focussed attention on the array of coercive legislation passed in the first half of the nineteenth century and argued that the British government preferred to usurp constitutional liberties rather than to overtly resist political campaigns in repressing the

‘desire for liberation.’¹² The mix of motivating forces, pride or fear on the part of the British and desire and anger on the part of Irish nationalists, was a lethal combination which seemed to afford only temporary advances forward, usually in the midst of veiled threats of violence. The British never learned the secret formula for governing Ireland peaceably and always had to fall back on force as a last resort. The Irish never seemed to be able to muster together enough positive energy to prevail over a sufficient number of the British intelligentsia who might have been disposed to welcome the Irish desire for national liberation as an affirmative development. The famine was just beginning to seriously compromise the ability of the Irish as a nation to muster enough energy to even communicate their national aspirations.

5.2 Reform of women of ‘questionable character’.

The guardians returned in the spring of 1846 to the perceived problem of the influence of women of questionable character on the other inmates of the house. At the meeting of 6 May 1846 they struck a committee to look into providing separate accommodation for prostitutes and women with infant bastard children. The committee reported the following week with five definitive recommendations which were adopted unanimously by the board. The first involved taking over an old storehouse space which until that time was being used as a fever hospital and dividing it into two rooms, one for sleeping and the other to be used as a day room. A portion of the adjoining yard was to be walled off for the women’s use. The second recommendation revealed the extent of the guardians’ fear. It was that these women be kept entirely separate from the other

¹² See Virginia Crossman, *Emergency Legislation and agrarian disturbances in Ireland, 1821-41*.

inmates of the house and never be allowed to leave the portion of the building fitted up for them. The third exposed the lengths to which the guardians were prepared to go to ensure compliance. It called for the hiring of a superintendent, at £10 per year, to be put in charge of the isolated inmates. The fourth recommendation indicated that their concern was genuine and that they did not have some deep-rooted prejudice against prostitutes and women with infant bastard children. It was that upon the certification by one of the chaplains of the house of his belief in the penitence of any of the inmates of the ward, that she be transferred to the body of the house. The fifth recommendation had to do with providing plans and specifications for these new arrangements. Mr Creaghe, the valuator and supervisor of rates, was asked to provide this information.¹³

Two weeks later, based on information from Mr. Creaghe that the probable cost would be £31, the board resolved unanimously to go ahead with the project. The commissioners, however, must have had other concerns in mind when they brought the matter to the attention of the chief architect of the Poor Law Unions, George Wilkinson. In a lengthy report which the board received on 17 June, Wilkinson recommended that, instead of interfering with the present house, a new temporary building seventy-two feet in length be built for the purpose. He even revealed that the commissioners had funds of £185 available for such a project. On 22 July the board was ready to proceed and passed the following resolution:

¹³ Minutes, 13 May 1846.

Proposed by E.F.G. Ryan, Mayor, seconded by William Monsell, Esq. and resolved unanimously that the plans and specifications as furnished by Mr. Wilkinson for the erection of a House, etc., for the accommodation of women of bad character be adopted by this Board and that tenders be advertised for the erection of such buildings in accordance with such plans and specifications. Tenders to be received this day fortnight. The building to be completed within three months from the date of accepting the tender.¹⁴

Tenders were duly opened two weeks later and the contract awarded to Mr. Duggan. The same evening the authorization to proceed was received from the commissioners. The board was careful to insert a penalty clause of £25 per week if the project was not completed within three months. No cost overruns above the contracted price of £400 were to be permitted. Mr. Creaghe was appointed to oversee the construction project.¹⁵ In fact the project was completed by the end of the year but, by that time, the need for additional accommodation was so great that the facility was never used for its intended purpose. It became one of several outbuildings which were hastily constructed during the famine to try to accommodate the precipitous rise in client demand. In fact, so crowded did conditions get that the guardians eventually had to resort to the use of rented facilities elsewhere in Limerick City as temporary satellite workhouses.

There has been much written in recent years about the plight of women in the famine and some, notably women, historians have addressed the issue of the construct of 'the woman of questionable character' which was at the root of the pervading fear in nineteenth century discourse.¹⁶ It is safe to say that the Limerick guardians were mainly concerned with the welfare of the other women inmates. They were also convinced that remorse and rehabilitation were possible. But their fear of the danger posed by women

¹⁴ Minutes, 22 July 1846.

¹⁵ Minutes, 5 August 1846.

¹⁶ See also Margaret Kelleher and James Murphy, eds, *Gender Perspectives in Nineteenth Century Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1997).

of questionable character was honestly acquired, if misplaced. It pervaded the literature of the day. Maria Luddy has written about prostitution in nineteenth-century Ireland and asserts that prostitutes were to be found in large numbers in all the workhouses of the country. One would think that Limerick, as a port city, would have had more than its share. Luddy goes so far as to aver that, "Indeed many guardians feared that some women gained access to the workhouse for the sole purpose of procuring."¹⁷ She makes further reference to the report of the Carlow Union from 1854 which noted that, "although there is no separate ward in the workhouse for prostitutes, the master and matron, who are aware of the importance of the matter, do all in their power to prevent prostitutes from associating with other females".¹⁸ This issue was not, therefore, a product of the lurid imaginations of the Limerick guardians but a genuine concern of other boards of guardians as well.

Such solicitous behaviour resembles what is described as the 'rescue work' conducted by charitable organizations in nineteenth-century Ireland by which members of the upper class justified their ascendant position in society by maintaining that the poor were "perpetually children, that is, morally, physically and intellectually inferior, forever needing to be shown the proper way to behave." It appeared to be part and parcel of the image which the English needed to create of the Irish by which their presence as the colonizing force could be justified to themselves. The guardians, as agents, in a sense, of the commissioners in the implementation of the Poor Law, were merely participating in the process. Margaret Preston argues that the work of Dublin charities,

¹⁷ Maria Luddy, "'Abandoned Women and Bad Characters': Prostitution in Nineteenth-century Ireland," in *The Irish Women's History Reader*, ed. Alan Hayes and Diane Urquhart (London: Routledge, 2001), 87-88.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

as an example, actually strengthened English rule in Ireland by perpetuating the belief that the Irish poor were morally, intellectually and racially inferior.¹⁹

But a darker, purely gender-based, prospect presents itself as well. From a purely sexist perspective, the guardians may very well have shared the belief that there was something inherently more evil about women offenders. Preston quotes the late nineteenth century criminal anthropologist Caesar Lombroso:

In his book *The Female Offender* Lombroso portrayed the poor, criminal female as degenerate. 'their moral sense is deficient; they are revengeful, jealous and inclined to vengeance of a refined cruelty'. He further argued, 'women are big children; their evil tendencies are more numerous and more varied than men's but generally remain latent. When these are awakened and excited they produce results proportionally greater... [T]he criminal woman is consequently a monster.' Lombroso asserted that a poor, criminal woman loses much of her maternal instinct 'because psychologically and anthropologically she belongs more to the male than to the female sex. Her exaggerated sexuality so opposed to maternity would alone suffice to make her a bad mother'.²⁰

Although *The Female Offender* was published in London in 1895, Lombroso was no doubt expressing a point of view which was held by virtue of observations made throughout the century. We will see, for example, the reaction of female inmates of the Limerick workhouse as conditions worsened during the remaining years of the famine. They, not the men, revolted against the deteriorating conditions in the house. The press took a very harsh and critical attitude towards rioting by female inmates. Whether the press created or reflected public opinion, much journalistic expression was highly pejorative when it came to female offenders. One would have to conclude that if Irish men were the victims of a form of racial and class-based prejudicial discourse, then Irish women were doubly cursed.

Liam Kennedy who studied the effects of the famine in Ireland on bastardy came

¹⁹ Margaret Preston, "Discourse and Hegemony: Race and Class in the Language of Charity in Nineteenth Century Dublin," in *Ideology and Ireland in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Tadhg Foley and Seán Ryder (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), 103.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

to a similar conclusion. As he put it, “There were many victims of those terrible years. Few could have stared into a deeper abyss than the unwed woman with child.”²¹

Kennedy examined the illegitimacy statistics in twenty-four parishes between 1830 and 1865 and compared 1840-1845 to the famine years on the basis of three hypotheses; anomie and sexual exploitation, which suggested the possibility of increased illegitimacy, and nutritional deprivation, which suggested a decrease. The actual statistics, however, were inconclusive. While overall illegitimacy decreased along with fertility during the famine years, the twenty-four parishes studied split down the middle with half showing a percentage decrease in illegitimacy and half showing an increase. Even a regional comparison proved inconclusive as the hardest hit part of the country, the southwest, had parishes in both categories. Despite these data and Maria Luddy’s claims of the presence of prostitutes in all the workhouses in the country, Irish illegitimacy rates were among the lowest in Europe.²² One wonders why the guardians, amidst rising distress and a growing financial crisis, would have spent the time they did in addressing this imagined evil. The conclusion which seems to present itself is that the rhetoric upon which the construct of ‘women of questionable character’ was built was overpowering and inescapable. They felt it their duty, therefore, to address this concern shared by many.

5.3 Solvency of the Union

Two issues served to focus the guardians’ attention on the immediate needs of the

²¹ Liam Kennedy, “Bastardy and the Great Famine: Ireland, 1845-50,” in *Famine, Land and Culture in Ireland*, ed., Carla King (Dublin: UCD Press, 2000), 24.

²² *Ibid.*, 6.

union and its inmates. Their gravity was such that matters of national aspirations and internal moral reform of a theoretical nature were put aside so that the board could deal with its very survival and its primary purpose, the welfare of the inmates. Both surfaced simultaneously at the meeting of 18 November 1846. The first was the financial state of the union and the second, the precipitous rise in demand for admission. These problems, of course, did not come out of the blue. They had been building up for some time.

At the previous meeting a discussion had arisen as a result of statements made by members of the Finance Committee and the following resolution was passed:

resolved that our Clerk be instructed to call a special meeting of this Board on Saturday the 21st day of November in order to take into consideration the financial state of the Union workhouse which the Committee report as being in a most depressed condition and that the most pressing demands are daily making for liquidation of debts long due and which are now peremptorily demanded... further resolved that the Clerk be instructed to inform the several collectors that the utmost necessity exists for money to support the workhouse in its present circumstances and to request that they will employ as much diligence in the collection as may be practicable.²³

In fact the current account had been in a deficit position since June and the following week, as a result of the payment of many important bills, plunged to the negative sum of £911. At the rate at which the collectors had been paying into the treasury, the prospect of overcoming the deficit without borrowing money was slim indeed.

It would have to be said that Powell's board was haphazard in its approach to financing the union. No annual rate was set and approved early in its mandate. Instead, the finance committee proposed a new poundage rate to the board on 5 August 1846, which was accepted unanimously. But then the rate books were only prepared for the approval of the board in a piecemeal fashion. The rate books for thirteen of the twenty-five electoral districts (including all of Limerick City's seven districts) were presented and approved on 23 September, Castleconnell alone on 7 October, another six districts on

²³ Minutes, 11 November 1846.

11 November and five more on 2 December.²⁴ But in order to approve and sign the rate books for a given district the board had to have in place a collector ready and willing to undertake the risk along with sureties to back him financially in the case of failure. This would prove, as the year went on, to be more and more difficult to achieve.

The board's relationship with its rate collectors makes for fascinating reading and provides a solid example of the use of force in nineteenth century management practices. At its final meeting on 1 April 1846, the previous board, with William Monsell in the chair, passed the following resolution:

Resolved that the securities of John McNamara, Michael Dundon, James Shea, John Duhy, and Thomas Frost being collectors of the union who have not paid up their collections be proceeded against forthwith and that Mr. Joseph Murphy, Solicitor, be given instructions to the same effect.²⁵

Of the seven collectors engaged by the union at the time, the two whose names were missing from the resolution, John Hackett and John O'Connor, were the two city collectors. It seems obvious that, because of their proximity, it was easier for them to bring in their receipts and keep the clerk of the union apprised of their progress. The rural collectors not only had more ground to cover in their work but farther to travel to demonstrate their accountability. The out-going guardians perhaps wanted it on record that they had pushed for results until the very end. At any rate the resolution was remarkably consistent with the attitude they had taken with the collectors all through their mandate.

At the beginning the new board seemed more tolerant and even somewhat supportive. John Hackett was refused by a sub-inspector the aid of the constabulary to protect him from violence in executing Magistrates' warrants for poor rates. Upon being

²⁴ Minutes, 5 August 1846; 23 September 1846; 7 October 1846; 11 November 1846; 2 December 1846.

²⁵ Minutes, 1 April 1846.

informed of this the board ordered the clerk to forward to Mr. Williams, the sub-inspector, a copy of the Poor Law commissioners' letter of 31 January 1843, which made it clear that rate collectors, if necessary, could count on the backing of the constabulary. It also asked the Mayor, Mr. Ryan, to call on Mr. Williams to communicate to him the board's wishes and the collector's prerogative.²⁶ Two weeks later the board received a letter from the Mayor indicating that the aid of the police would be given a rate collector whenever resistance would be offered. The board ordered a copy of the letter be sent to Mr. Hackett.

As to financing, the new guardians started out with the best of intentions. At their second meeting they asked the clerk to inform Mr. Murphy, the solicitor, that they were "anxious to make an arrangement for striking a new rate and cannot do so on account of the outstanding arrears which prevents the collectors' books from being closed."²⁷ The solicitor's response was such that the suits demanded by the previous board were not pursued. In the middle of May the clerk received an order that "the list of irrecoverable rates now handed in by the Castleconnell collector be referred to the Guardians of that division to report on...and that a form of declaration before a Magistrate be made by the collector and rate payers in case of untenanted premises."²⁸ It would seem that James Shea, the collector for Castleconnell, was at least attempting to sort out the problems in his electoral division. Mr. Murphy and the board were clearly of the opinion that he should be allowed to continue his efforts.

At the following weekly meeting, 20 May 1846, the board tried a new tactic,

²⁶ Minutes, 22 April 1846.

²⁷ Minutes, 15 April 1846.

²⁸ Minutes, 13 May 1846.

perhaps in a mood of mounting anxiety, because several contractors who were awaiting payment had demanded what was referred to in the minutes as 'large sums of money'.

To make their intentions clear the guardians resolved:

We deem it but right by every means to press the collectors to collect in the rate still outstanding, as it is our determination to have all the recoverable rate collected, before striking a new rate, and with that view orders be this day made on the following collectors for the payment of the following sums of money before this day fortnight: O'Connor - £40; Frost - £150; Dundon - £120; Duhy - £200; Shae - £50; McNamara - £150 and that the Guardians be noticed to attend on that day relative to the collectors' accounts. Further that the collectors attend with their books.²⁹

Two weeks later the collectors were called in and the board decided to give them one month to close their accounts and to finish their lists of irrecoverable rates. At the end of the month Mr. Murphy was to proceed against their sureties, "the parties to be sued to be then named by the Board."³⁰ A week later the board agreed to borrow £1000 from the Treasurer and as a result of paying some long overdue accounts, the first negative sum appeared in the union's current account when the clerk reported to the meeting of 17 June. From this time on the board operated for the most part in the red ending its mandate with a deficit of £1786.

The month of June produced only £159 from all seven collectors, far short of the targets set by the guardians for the six collectors mentioned in the resolution. From then on relations with the collectors went from bad to worse as the prospect of legal proceedings against them and their sureties loomed. This led to a rash of resignations. From the point of view of the collectors it must have seemed to be scant appreciation for what they perceived to be 'laying one's life on the line'.

On 22 July the guardians passed a resolution unanimously to instruct the solicitor to proceed against McNamara, Duhy and Frost and their sureties and in the same breath

²⁹ Minutes, 20 May 1846.

³⁰ Minutes, 3 June 1846.

warned the other collectors in arrears “that if their rates were not paid up in a fortnight a similar course will be adopted toward them.”³¹ Murphy was given permission to proceed as he saw fit using his own discretion. At the beginning of September the guardians wrote to the commissioners to explain the difficulties they were having and to seek advice. The board members were afraid they might take some unfortunate legal step that would exonerate the collectors and their sureties from the liabilities of their bonds.

The commissioners’ advice was to proceed aggressively and a series of motions were passed at the meeting of 16 September ordering all five rural collectors to appear at the next meeting with a specified amount due and payable to the union. Each was instructed to produce his books of accounts and other documents relating to the poor rate, properly made up and balanced. None of the money specified in the resolutions was paid in the following week. In fact only Shea and Frost were in attendance at the next meeting but they were not called before the board. The clerk was simply instructed to proceed at petty sessions against the collectors for disobedience “of the Orders on last Board day in not paying the sums of money required.” The clerk was also asked to get in touch with four local Barony Cess Collectors by the names of Apjohn, Peacock, Healy and O’Grady to see if they would also undertake the collection of poor rates.³² Evidently the board had lost confidence in some of its rate collectors.

In the midst of all this internal strife, the city collector John Hackett applied to the board for an increase in his poundage rate from 7 to 9 pence in the pound. Some guardians objected to this but the resolution to grant the increase obtained the necessary votes and a challenge to rescind was defeated. Shortly thereafter the rural collectors

³¹ Minutes, 22 July 1846.

³² Minutes, 23 September 1846.

applied to the board to have their poundage rate increased from 9 pence to one shilling in the pound. While this was under consideration John Duhy and Thomas Frost resigned and the Barony Cess Collectors Apjohn and Healy agreed to take over their respective collections provided they were paid one shilling in the pound. The board had little choice but to accept their offers. Then John McNamara, only a little more than a year on the job, resigned and, inasmuch as the Barony Cess Collector O'Grady refused to serve, the board advertised for a replacement. Laurence Cusack was hired to replace McNamara on 9 December 1846, also at the rate of one shilling in the pound.

Cusack must have been shocked at what he encountered in the electoral districts in the south of County Clare, Kilseely, Kilokennedy and Kiltenanlea, and he resigned six weeks later. The board at first attempted to refuse his resignation. Even after he had visited the clerk and handed in his rate books and other papers and told the clerk that he would not continue as collector, the board passed a resolution ordering him to "...collect and pay into the Treasurer within six days the sum of £20."³³ The board finally capitulated and accepted his resignation at its meeting of 6 March 1847. It also decided that it would not only advertise for a replacement in the local newspapers but print handbills for circulation in the electoral districts. The guardians seemed to be awakening to the fact that it might be difficult to find people brave or foolhardy enough to act as poor rate collectors.

In the month of February, scarcely six weeks before their mandate ended, the guardians finally decided to come to grips with the financial malaise and at the same time establish a new rate for the year beginning 25 March 1847 which would truly reflect the

³³ Minutes, 6 February 1847.

needs of the Limerick union. They formed a 'new rates' committee which reported its first findings on 27 February 1847. Perhaps in an effort to illustrate the desperation of the situation the committee suggested rates per electoral division which ranged from 24 to 72 pence in the pound with all seven city districts to be charged 72 pence. At twelve pence to the shilling, this would have meant six shillings of (poor relief) tax per pound of valuation on a property. With twenty shillings to the pound, the poor rate would, therefore, have been thirty percent (30%) of the valuation or anticipated rent. Many landlords were not even receiving full rental for their properties due to the starvation and consequent inability of people to work. Then the committee asked for and got a resolution "...that 200 copies with a financial statement of the Union be printed and a copy forwarded to each guardian and the guardians noticed that its adoption will be taken into consideration on this day week."³⁴ Finally it requested to be able to meet again to consider the expenses attendant on the collection of rates.

At this subsequent meeting the members of the 'new rates' committee undermined their credibility altogether, and that of the board as well, by getting the guardians to pass a resolution reducing the rates of remuneration for collectors as follows: city collectors were to earn 4 pence in the pound for the first 4 months; 2d. for the next 2 months and rural collectors 8 or 9 pence in the pound (depending on the area) for the first 4 months and 4 or 6d. for the next 2 months. In other words the collectors were being offered less to work harder in the first third of the year and then, a disincentive to complete their collections by mid-year. But the mismanagement 'pièce-de-résistance' was that "for all recoverable rate outstanding at the expiration of six

³⁴ Minutes, 27 February 1847.

months from the date of the signature of each collector's warrants there be deducted from his poundage salary a sum of one shilling in the pound."³⁵ This draconian measure was intended to guarantee to the union seventy-five percent of the rate in city districts and sixty percent in rural districts before the rate-collectors would begin earning a penny.³⁶ It seems not to have occurred to them that not many would be desperate enough to agree to such terms. And to top it off the board demanded fresh bonds in increased penal sums for all collectors and their sureties. This irrational show of force on the part of the guardians is another example of the dynamic process of being swept up by the prevailing distress and anxiety to the point where sensible collective decision-making seemed almost impossible to achieve.

By the end of the month Healy and Apjohn had resigned and a collector by the name of John Brennan had been hired to replace Laurence Cusack. For the turnover of command to the new board at the beginning of April 1847, the Limerick union had five collectors to do the job that seven could not do and these five were being forced to work for reduced rates.

Nevertheless the board pressed on with its plan to right the financial ship. The meeting of 27 February, at which the guardians had agreed to publish two hundred copies of the financial statement of the union and the proposed new rate, had raised some concern, if not anxiety, in the local community. Two delegations of concerned rate-payers appeared at the next meeting, presented their petitions and had them read into the minutes of the meeting. The first delegation, from Richmond Place Ward, put its case, at

³⁵ Minutes, 17 March 1847.

³⁶ For example, at 4 pence in the pound on 1000 pounds, by the time a collector had collected 750 pounds or 75% of his collections he would have earned 12.5 pounds but the penalty, if the rest remained uncollected, would also be 12.5 pounds. At 8 pence in the pound the break-even point is 60%.

some length, in three points which, valid though they were, had not much chance of having an impact on the guardians or the commissioners.

That a delegation of citizen rate-payers would present itself to a meeting of guardians was remarkable and a clear indication that the people they represented felt besieged. The rate-payers first point, that a new rate not be struck until it was known what the new government's intentions were, seemed to indicate that they hoped for some relief in the forthcoming legislation to amend the Poor Law. They must have felt that no government, under such distressful circumstances would impose a greater tax burden. They were to be disappointed in this regard as the forthcoming amendments did not favour landlords. But they articulated as much in their second point by asking that the Loan Commission put off collecting the capital cost of the workhouse so as not to "add to the pauperism and wretchedness of an already cruelly taxed union". The petitioners then tried to turn the attention of the guardians toward defaulters by asking that the board put all its efforts into collecting the arrears of rate before striking a new rate. They felt that the extreme rate proposed, if it were levied, would punish the honest rate-payer for the sins of the tax evaders and, therefore, be unjust. Of course, from the guardians' vantage point, they had spent the better part of their mandate trying to collect the arrears of tax – to not much avail. Finally, the petitioners requested that the National Bank be asked to let the amount due them stand out for the time being as long as the interest was paid. They couched their petition in very diplomatic terms and took care to thank the guardians of their district Dr. Terrence Brodie and William Gabbett for their "zealous

and constant attention” to the duties of their office.³⁷ The second delegation, representing the ‘St. John’s Meeting’ made a similar plea.

The guardians agreed simply to postpone striking a new rate for one week. However, the immediate reaction of these delegations to its original proposal obviously made an impression on the ‘new rates’ committee. The adjusted rate proposed and accepted at the meeting of 31 March was for an average of 21 pence in the pound of valuation with the highest rate, that of the Limerick City districts, set at 36 pence.³⁸ Even though 36 pence was only half the original rate suggested it still represented fifteen percent (15%) of the valuation and a tremendous burden on the rate-payers. Nevertheless the board had stood up and delivered its plan for the survival of the union workhouse. And it had done so with the full knowledge and backing of the poor law commissioners. The guardians’ best judgement was as harsh and uncompromising as that of the British government and there was no doubt that Irish property would be paying for Irish poverty.

5.4 Capacity of the house

The second issue that forced the guardians to focus their attention on the inmates was the escalating demand for admission to the workhouse. The matter had come up at a couple of previous meetings and a temporary committee had surveyed the house to see where expansion of sleeping arrangements could be made possible. On 18 November, with the population of the house already over the limit at 1711, the board passed the following resolution:

³⁷ Minutes, 6 March 1847; see Appendix II for the texts of the petitions.

³⁸ See Appendix III for details.

Resolved that as the workhouse is now nearly full it becomes absolutely necessary to provide further accommodations for the numerous applicants, that the following Committee be appointed and requested to report to this Board on next Wednesday the best mode of carrying out this desirable object. Committee: The Mayor, Mr. Honan, Mr. Wallnutt, Mr. Monsell, Mr. O’Gorman, Dr. Brodie... further that the Master lay before us on next Wednesday an account of the numbers of beds and number of inmates in each ward also, in addition, the numbers that can be accommodated according to existing arrangements – and that the Medical Officers be requested to report on the propriety of putting up hammocks as recommended by the committee on 28 October last.³⁹

The committee made another thorough tour of the workhouse and identified 450 potential additional spaces and 100 more when buildings presently under construction were handed over. At a special meeting on the following Saturday 21 November, with 1842 inmates already in the house, the committee identified the house’s potential capacity at nearly 2400.

As the numbers began to overwhelm the guardians, expressions such as ‘the admission of paupers was left to the Master’ would appear in the minutes of the meetings because there was too much other business for the guardians to spend time considering admissions issues. It was, however, clear in the Poor Law that guardians were supposed to be implicated in the process of admission as inmates were charged to the electoral districts which the guardians had been elected to represent. By early November the population reached 1666, for the first time surpassing the figure of 1600 which the workhouse had been built to accommodate. Then by early December the number of inmates exceeded 2000. On 27 January 1847, with the population of the house at 2723, the guardians decided to meet twice a week with Wednesdays devoted solely to the admission of paupers. Saturday’s meeting was to deal with all the other business of the union. Inevitably, with the attention of the guardians now fixed on the financial survival of the union and the physical survival of the inmates, the Wednesday meetings were

³⁹ Minutes, 18 November 1846.

sparsely attended. By the middle of March the experiment had to be terminated and regular Wednesday meetings were resumed. The concern of individual guardians for whom and what was being charged to their electoral districts was overtaken by the need to find a place for the poor souls who were showing up in record numbers.⁴⁰

Much of the potential for extra accommodation was related to the health of the inmates and the current use of hospital and fever ward accommodation. There were ominous reports from time to time from the medical officers about the many and varied problems with which they were dealing. For example, in August there was an outbreak of “ophthalmia of bad character”, a form of conjunctivitis, among the female inmates and the medical report stated that “the number affected is so great that the Hospital accommodation is quite insufficient.” The report recommended that one of the dormitories be opened to receive those who could not be accommodated in the hospital. The Master was ordered to temporarily open “Girls’ dormitory No. 1” for the purpose.⁴¹ Where he was to put the girls who occupied the space was not reported in the minutes. But this outbreak occurred in summer. As winter approached fever became the predominant medical concern.

Reference to the medical officers’ reports in the minutes of the meetings were always very brief but sometimes pointed to grave concerns. At the very end of the meeting of 23 December, the following brief note preceded adjournment:

Ordered that the following report on the Medical weekly return be inserted on the minutes. Eight patients labouring under fever at the time of admission were received this week – and twenty-three deaths this week, the number of sick in Hospital, etc., seven hundred.⁴²

⁴⁰ Minutes, 4 November 1846; 11 November 1846; 2 December 1846; 9 December 1846; 27 January 1847, 6 March 1847; 17 March 1847.

⁴¹ Minutes, 19 August 1846.

⁴² Minutes, 23 December 1846.

Two weeks later, and even more succinctly, the medical officers' report stated, "In the present overcrowded state of the House with insufficient Hospital accommodation some of the infant children die in the Nursery and dormitories." (signed) M. Brodie M.D.⁴³

This almost produced immediate results as a delegation which had been sent off, on the spot, to view the newly constructed building recommended that it be altered slightly to provide hospital space for women and children. But a week later the board decided to use the building as originally intended, i.e., for prostitutes and women with infant bastard children. Six weeks later, in a week in which there had been forty deaths, the board finally came to its senses:

In consequence of the Medical Officers' reports this day of an increase of fever we have thought it advisable, after an examination of the wooden sheds, to recommend forthwith that they be occupied by the men – and that the new building lately given up by Mr. Duggan be used for the purpose of an infirmary or Fever Hospital as occasion may require at the discretion of the Medical Officers in order that all patients be removed from the body of the house.⁴⁴

Then on 6 March, with the current account running a deficit of £1985, another adjustment was approved by the board at the same time as the minutes reveal the desperation of the situation for patient care.

Report of the Medical Officers read – ordered that one of the back stores be properly fitted up as a temporary Hospital to be at the disposal of the Medical Officers and the class of inmates lately in the Sickward to be removed there. The want to the patients of whey and gruel could not be helped for want of funds to purchase oatmeal, but the clerk has been advanced money this day by Mr. Monsell and Mr. Honan to purchase meal.⁴⁵

The next week, even though the board had a scant two weeks left in its mandate, the guardians ordered the construction of a shed for three hundred fever patients. This was followed up by a special request to the commissioners to respond to the urgent need expressed in the medical officers' reports. The commissioners did not respond directly.

⁴³ Minutes, 6 January 1847.

⁴⁴ Minutes, 27 February 1847.

⁴⁵ Minutes, 6 March 1847.

Instead, at the final meeting of the board's mandate, 31 March 1847, the following cryptic message was inserted in the minutes, "sealed order and letter from the Poor Law Commissioners limiting the number of inmates to 2000."⁴⁶ The reality seemed to be of little concern to the commissioners. From the distance of Dublin, it appeared that, at approximately 2500, the population of the Limerick workhouse was getting out of control. Occasionally, the compassion of individual guardians in the face of the terrible suffering which they witnessed elicited the type of response indicated in the above citation. However, the collective decisions taken by the board usually tended to comply with the commissioners' directives and favoured the financial well-being of the union over the welfare of individual inmates.

In point of fact, the want of accommodation was also approached from another direction as means were sought to discharge inmates. Early in December, the number in the house having just passed two thousand, the guardians ordered the Master to furnish them with a list of the women in the house whose husbands were not in the workhouse. They also asked for a list of the children whose parents were out of the workhouse. The next week, the committee appointed by the board to examine these lists recommended, and the board approved, the dismissal of twenty-five women with sixty-one children – a total of eighty-six inmates. They then ordered that information be taken against the husbands of eighteen more women for desertion. Presumably, if the claim of desertion could be disproved, the women would be discharged.

Sometimes, however, it appeared that the initiative for dismissal came from the inmates themselves. On 20 January 1847, the board ordered "that the sixteen boys in the

⁴⁶ Minutes, 13 March 1847; 17 March 1847; 24 March 1847; 31 March 1847.

school who have given the Master notice to leave the House be discharged as they state their parents are out of the Workhouse.”⁴⁷ The letter of the law called for whole families to present themselves for relief for the obvious reason that, if husbands or parents were not desperate enough to demand relief for themselves, then the state had no obligation to support their wives or children. Still, under the circumstances, and in the middle of a Limerick winter, it seemed heartless for the board to be abandoning these poor people to their own devices. Nevertheless the board was acting with the clear understanding that its responsibility was to implement the Poor Law, that is to say, do the bidding of the commissioners. When it came to collective decision-making, the guardians’ preoccupation with implementing the law prevailed, and no amount of knee-jerk emotional response was capable of distracting the body from its purpose.

The committee which had been established on 18 November to look into additional accommodation accomplished more than just recommended rearrangements. Thankfully, the medical officers had advised against the use of hammocks⁴⁸, and, as we have seen, their reports on the rising crisis of hospital accommodation had made an impression on the board, if not on the commissioners. The committee, taking advantage of this situation, persuaded the board at its meeting of 9 December to send an urgent request to the Poor Law commissioners for assistance from the architect, Mr. Wilkinson, to aid in getting more accommodation space. A week later, having already met with the Assistant Poor Law Commissioner, Mr. Hancock, accompanied by Mr. Barney, architect, representing Wilkinson, the committee recommended the immediate erection of two wooden buildings, 130 feet each in length, to contain little but platforms for sleeping

⁴⁷ Minutes, 9 December 1946; 16 December 1846.

⁴⁸ See citation on Page 157.

berths. Tenders from two contractors were opened and Mr. Duggan, being the low bidder, received the contract. All this was concluded within the space of a week and, no doubt due to the presence of the Assistant Poor Law Commissioner, approval was received simultaneously from the commissioners.⁴⁹ Capital costs, of course, were different from operating expenses and more readily approved as they were considered an investment. By providing additional sleeping accommodation, the board and the commissioners were no doubt acknowledging that the demands of the medical officers were legitimate. At any time fever might entirely overwhelm the workhouse and any additional space might mean the difference between life and death.

Conclusion

The changes which took place in the Limerick Poor Law Union in the year of Caleb Powell's tenure as chairman, from 25 March 1846 to 25 March 1847, were devastating and unforeseen. The previous board under William Monsell had experienced an average clientele of 1250 inmates within a modest range from a low of 1070 to a high of 1414. It had never experienced a deficit in its current account. The partial failure of the potato crop of 1845 had posed a problem but Peel's government had reacted quickly and efficiently by establishing relief committees and providing low cost food for distribution throughout the country. This cushioned the blow to the union workhouses.

The complete failure of the 1846 potato crop heralded a catastrophe of entirely different dimensions. The change of government in June 1846 proved unfortunate for

⁴⁹ Minutes, 9 December 1846; 16 December 1846.

Ireland. The real gravity of the situation was not known until half of the new mandate had passed. The preoccupation of Powell's board with pushing its nationalist agenda and its penchant for moral rescue work were quickly sidetracked. Its attention re-focused, it was forced to deal with the crippling effects of the growing pauperism on its finances and the facilities of the workhouse.

Powell's board adjusted slowly and inefficiently, sometimes showing signs of genuine concern, but at other times adhering blindly to the letter of the law, as if following the directives of the Poor Law commissioners were its only responsibility. When it imitated the commissioners' preoccupation with the letter of the law, it acted badly, as in its handling of the rate collectors. When it adopted measures proposed by some of its guardians (and sometimes by its own committees), it acted responsibly, as in its attempts to assist the medical officers by providing additional space.

It must be said that Powell's board was blindsided by the second and complete failure of the potato crop in 1846. It was singularly unfortunate in losing the potential co-operation of Peel's government and by having to await what Russell's might have in store. It is difficult to imagine how another group of guardians would have fared under the circumstances. But Powell's board showed little stomach for resistance to the rigidity of government implementation of the Poor Law and even less for trying to influence the outcome of government reform of that law. This might be considered somewhat ironical in view of its early assertion of nationalism, but it is quite clear that, by the end of Powell's mandate, his vice-chairman had assumed his role. Under Devitt's influence, the board showed itself to be so utterly enthralled with the authority of the commissioners and so unable to adapt quickly to the rapidly deteriorating crisis that its

record left much to be desired by the inmates and rate-payers of the Limerick Poor Law Union.

CHAPTER 6

DEVITT

John Thomas Devitt was unanimously elected chairman by his fellow guardians at the meeting of 31 March 1847 after the clerk had announced the names of the newly elected who were to serve until 25 March 1848. Devitt had earned their support by virtue of the yeoman service he had put in filling in for the previous chairman. His devotion to the union was unwavering until his appointment as paid vice-guardian to one of the distressed unions which was announced at the meeting of 16 February 1848, six weeks from the end of his mandate. The appointment of Devitt's fellow guardian Dr. Terence Brodie as vice-guardian to yet another distressed union was also announced at the same meeting.¹ The guardians were effusive in their praise of the two men who had served so selflessly by their regular attendance and committee work throughout many years. The fact that one or another of the Assistant Poor Law Commissioners was often in attendance at board meetings in Limerick gave the commissioners plenty of insight into the knowledge, capability and devotion to duty of these two men. Although their appointments were well deserved and they both had plenty of experience dealing with terrible distress, they were, no doubt, being thrust into situations which were even more calamitous than that of Limerick.

If the previous year had been characterized by change brought on by the second potato blight, the year of Devitt's chairmanship was characterized by the implementation of the Temporary Relief Act (Soup Kitchen Act), rampant fever and the

¹ Minutes, 16 February 1848.

effects on the union brought on by the amendments to the Poor Law Ireland Act. All three of these issues were closely bound up with the precarious financial state of the union and there were times during the year when even the most deferential and loyal guardians questioned the ability of the union to survive the government's disastrous relief policies.

Their frustration and disgust finally erupted in the form of a resolution which, while it had little hope of bringing the government to its senses, at least articulated the desperation the guardians were feeling by the time that the burden of relief had fallen totally on the landed proprietors. They focussed their attention on one small section of the Poor Law but their purpose was a general amelioration of the unfortunate overall consequences of the legislation:

Proposed by John C. Delmege, seconded by Pierce Shannon and resolved that a petition be forwarded to our County representatives in the House of Commons and also a memorial to the Lord Lieutenant praying that the 1st and 2nd Vict., Ch. 56, sec. 34 be repealed or amended so as to extend powers to Boards of Guardians to purchase or hire land in connection with the workhouse establishment, in hopes thereby of converting them into self-supporting schools of Industry; instead of being as now, taxes upon industry, taxes upon property, prisons where much of Ireland's only available wealth (Labour) is locked up useless to the inmates, and a grievous burthen to the community. And also that Boards of Guardians may be empowered to purchase in quantity, wool, flax, leather, etc., in order profitably to employ those Paupers whose age, trade, or sex disqualifies them from being engaged at outdoor or agricultural labour. The manufacture principally to consist of strong linen, flannel, frieze and coarse stuffs, etc., with which the inmates of workhouses are to be chiefly clothed instead of paying (as we now do) hard cash for imported fabrics, thereby imposing additional burthens on the overtaxed ratepayers and causing the females and children in our Poor Houses to be reared up in ignorance and sloth.²

Their exasperation was palpable and it was not surprising in that the population of the house was in excess of 2600, at the time, even though outdoor relief had been sanctioned by the amendments to the Poor Law.

Ironically one of the members to whom they were to send such a resolution was their fellow guardian and former chairman, William Monsell, who had defeated Caleb

² Nicholls, 225; Minutes, 23 February 1848.

Powell in the election of July 1847. Monsell had, in effect, been the only guardian to promote local manufacturing within the union. He had brought samples to the board of flannel and stockings made by the poor in the neighbourhood of Tervoe where his estate was situated. The board, on at least two occasions, had made significant purchases of these items and, although they were not manufactured in the workhouse, the industry which they represented probably kept some poor people from having to avail of its services.³

Had the framers of the law put more power in the hands of the guardians rather than lodging most of the decision-making power in Dublin with the commissioners, there might very well have been model Poor Law Unions here and there in Ireland which could have put Irish labour to good use to produce some income for the union. To the contrary, the legislators were so ideologically engaged, that is to say, so in awe of the market and so loathe to interfere with the 'invisible hand' that drove it, that they thought it counter-productive to allow paupers to produce products which might undercut the efforts of industry. It was a scenario designed to keep the unions in a downward spiral while at the same time demoralizing the poorest of the poor. The Limerick guardians felt so constrained that the best they could come up with was the occasional emotional outburst such as the one cited above. Whatever knowledge, professional expertise and creative ability they might have been able to contribute to the union was curtailed by the strictures written into the law. The chance that the government might change the law sufficiently to transfer more power to the guardians was slim indeed. Instead the government's

³ Potter, 31; Minutes, 7 April 1847; 21 July 1847.

plan was to finally force the landlords to assume their responsibility. To accomplish this, the legislation had to centralize decision making rather than diffuse it in the interest of delivering services. This chapter will, therefore, examine the implementation and financial consequences of the Temporary Relief Act, the Union's battle against the ravages of rampant fever and the effects on the Limerick Union of the Poor Law Amendment Acts.

6.1 The Soup Kitchen program

The implementation of the Soup Kitchen Act was intended to provide a transition period between the termination of the public works program, which had been costly and ineffective, and the amendments to the Poor Law Act which the new government intended to introduce. By these amendments the government hoped to finally force Irish property to pay for Irish poverty. But in the meantime a stop-gap measure was required. The bill was called the Temporary Relief Act because its purpose was to get the people through to harvest when the land would once again provide sustenance. The fact that the acreage in potatoes was greatly reduced due to the previous year's blight was a consideration which did not influence government policy makers. In fact the lack of blight in the harvest of 1847 enabled them to convince themselves that the famine was indeed over. Neither the Soup Kitchen program's success in restoring energy to the population nor its cost effectiveness could deter the government from its Poor Law reform program. Although it seemed foolhardy for the government to terminate a successful and affordable program, its agenda, as Peter Gray and others have argued, was so ideologically driven that it had less to do with saving lives than demonstrating the

efficacy of *laissez-faire* economic policy and the necessity of modernizing the Irish economy.⁴

The Limerick Poor Law Union was quick to respond to the provisions of the bill. The legislation called for leaders of Poor Law Electoral Divisions to set up local relief committees consisting of magistrates, Roman Catholic and Church of Ireland clergymen, the local guardian(s) and prominent rate payers.⁵ These committees reported to a central Relief Commission in Dublin which sent Inspecting Officers to see to the implementation of the Act.⁶ The city electoral divisions opened their soup kitchens on 3 April 1847, Derrygalvin and Patrickswell on 17 April and the rest of the electoral divisions on 1 May, weeks before most other unions.⁷ At one point in the approximately five months of the program the Limerick Union was feeding 71,428 persons or fifty-four percent of the whole population of the union. By the time the program ended in mid-September there were still 17,500 people being fed daily.⁸

How the Soup Kitchen program was to be financed was a matter of some consternation to boards of guardians in general because many unions were in a state of financial distress. Certainly, in April of 1847, Limerick was no exception in this regard as its operating account was more than £1750 to the negative. Nevertheless, because money for this relief had to come from the rates and many unions, including Limerick, were not in a position to finance a soup kitchen, loans were made available from the

⁴ Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, 331-338.

⁵ Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, 138-142.

⁶ Christine Kinealy, "The Irish Poor Law, 1838-62" (Ph.D. thesis, Trinity College, Dublin, 1984), 106.

⁷ Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, 82.

⁸ *British Parliamentary Papers: Famine (Ireland)*, Volume 8, Supplementary Appendix, (Shannon, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1968), 60.

government provided the guardians agreed to make an additional rate to repay them.⁹

The first indication that the Limerick guardians were ready and willing to comply with this stipulation came early in the program and, inasmuch as it was an over-reaction,¹⁰ was typical of Devitt's eagerness to comply with the commissioners' directives.

His Excellency's Warrant ordering the sum of £1444 to be paid to the Finance Committee being an estimate of Limerick electoral district for one fortnight for the Temporary Relief of the destitute under the 10th of Vict. It was moved by the Mayor, seconded by Mr. Honan and resolved unanimously that a rate of 5 pence in the £ on the valuation of £67,243 of the Limerick electoral district be declared this day for the purposes mentioned in his Excellency's Warrant of the 6th Inst. Directed to this Board.¹¹

Eventually the government agreed that only three pence in the pound were to be used to repay these loans as it had become obvious that many unions were having so much trouble collecting their regular rates that additional levies were unlikely to be collected in many instances. Finally, just as had been the case with the public works program, a portion of the sum advanced by the British government to the Soup Kitchen program was to be remitted.¹² Nevertheless, pressure was kept on the unions to pay back as soon as possible. The purpose of the resolution was to assure the commissioners that the Limerick Poor Law Union was in compliance. The reality was being studiously ignored by all concerned as though keeping up the practice of high-handed, ideologically driven legislation and resolute compliance would somehow achieve positive results – the demand for workhouse admissions and the death-rate inside notwithstanding.

The Limerick guardians passed similar resolutions to that of 7 April on at least three occasions, levying additional rates on the different electoral divisions to cover the costs mentioned in the Lord Lieutenant's warrants. By the month of June they had

⁹ Kinealy, *The Irish Poor Law*, 107.

¹⁰ Five pence on the valuation of £67,243 yields £1400 which, if collected, would have just about paid off the loan. Even the government eventually agreed it was too much to ask.

¹¹ Minutes, 7 April 1847.

¹² Kinealy, *The Irish Poor Law*, 117.

officially agreed, by board resolutions, to collect an additional £25,000 to repay these advances. In view of the difficulty they were having retaining rate collectors and the increasingly alarming stories from rate collectors about the dangers they faced in attempting their collections, the guardians were keeping up a brave front in what must have been an atmosphere of growing consternation. They finally reacted in frustration to a visit of the inspecting officer.

The Inspecting Officer of the Union Captain O'Brien having read for the Guardians a circular to him No. 41 dated 20 May to ascertain the measures taken by the Guardians for levying the rates under the Act 10 Vict Cap. 7. It was resolved that he be informed that in receipt of the Lord Lieutenant's Warrants the rates for the several divisions were declared, but at the same time a very heavy rate for six months for the maintenance of the Workhouse which is much in debt had been made, the collection of the rate only commenced in some of the districts in April. It was therefore out of the power of the Guardians without much difficulty and delay to include the Warrants in their present collection.¹³

The resolution continued on to describe the impossibility of finding competent people to undertake the task of rate collector and the financial embarrassment in which the union found itself at that particular juncture. Were it not for the fact that these guardians, especially under the chairmanship of Devitt, were compliant to a fault with the provisions of the Poor Law and its many regulations, it would almost seem that the resolutions to repay the advances were passed solely in order to keep the relief flowing. The board must have had serious doubts about its chances of collecting the rates previously struck, let alone those to cover the expenses of the Temporary Relief Act. It may have hoped that as the government saw the positive results being achieved by the program, in the improved appearance of the people which was being widely reported, in the easing off of pressure on workhouse admissions as the summer progressed and in the positive trend in death statistics, the government might assume financial responsibility as well as credit

¹³ Minutes, 2 June 1847.

for the program's success. The hope was not entirely in vain as the government did indeed remit a portion of the debt incurred. But in the commissioners' final report on the program in Limerick, of the total amount of £35,556 advanced to the union, £10,447 became a grant in aid of rates and the rest had to be paid back.¹⁴

The week after the above resolution was passed, perhaps in response to the guardians' expressed desperation in their quest for competent rate collectors, one of their own, James H. Barry, the elected guardian for Ballybricken, resigned his seat to offer his services as rate collector. He was hired on the spot to undertake the collection for the divisions of Kilmurry, Caherconlish, Cappamore, Murroe, Doon and Abington, at the rate of 1s. 6d. in the pound. He had to agree to complete the collection in four months to maintain that rate. The rate was to be reduced to 9d. for the two subsequent months and thereafter one shilling per pound was to be deducted from his earnings for all recoverable rates not collected.¹⁵ He began his work on 30 June and may have had occasion to regret his decision for as the four month deadline was looming, the board received the following letter:

Gentlemen: As my man was serving six days notices on the rate payers of the Abington electoral division on Thursday last, he was pursued by two armed men one of whom fired at him and fortunately missed him. The other man pursued him but to no avail as fortunately he escaped. I remain Gentlemen, Your obedient servant, (signed) James H. Barry.¹⁶

By the following January, Barry was reporting to the board a list of prominent defaulters whose fifteen day notices had already expired and the rates still remained unpaid.

Among these were such prominent citizens as Captain William Gabbett, Samuel Maunsell, Lord Cloncurry, Sir Matthew Barrington, Rev. John Delmege, Sir Richard de

¹⁴ *British Parliamentary Papers: Famine (Ireland)*, Volume 8, 60.

¹⁵ Minutes, 9 & 16 June 1847.

¹⁶ Minutes, 20 October 1847.

Burgo and Colonel George Wyndham. The board ordered that the commissioners be requested to have proceedings taken in the Supreme Court against them and that the Clerk intimate these orders to the parties. A similar letter to the guardians two weeks later from another collector prompted the board to write to the commissioners expressing the conviction that "...we believe of the utmost consequence that the Collectors get every facility and aid from the authorities..." This was one of the rare occasions when the guardians expressed some sympathy rather than turning their invective towards the rate collectors in the hope of motivating them.¹⁷ Barry's results continued to be less than satisfactory and, as a result of one of his reports, the board, with Devitt in the chair, actually turned on its own members:

List of defaulters of Poor Rate – twelve highest rate payers in each electoral division of Mr. Barry's collecting district read. Resolved that Mr. Barry Collector furnish us with the cause why he does not get the Rate from the three members of the Board namely Samuel Maunsell, Thomas O'Brien and George Duh, Esqs. who have been returned in the list of defaulters above referred to.¹⁸

None of the three was present at the meeting to give an explanation. This was unfortunate because they may have provided a first hand account of just how desperate the situation was for some landlords. But the fact that the chairman felt strongly enough to mention their names for the record was an indication that he had little sympathy for anyone, especially a fellow guardian, who would defy the legislation which the board was charged with implementing.

On 25 August Captain O'Brien attended the board meeting to discuss the transition from temporary relief to the new measures. He informed the guardians that according to his estimates, by 12 September when the last of the soup kitchens would

¹⁷ Minutes, 19 January 1848; 2 February 1848.

¹⁸ Minutes, 16 February 1848.

close, there would be 1600 persons or more than three percent of the urban population still on the relief lists, and 16,000 or twenty percent in the rural districts. The board spent a great deal of time in conversation on the matter and decided to strike a committee to “suggest the necessary arrangements and report to the board relative to the mode of providing relief for the destitute poor of the Union.” Because it was the end of summer the workhouse was experiencing the usual reduction in demand for accommodation as well as a period of relief in the rate of inmate mortality. The guardians had a brief window of opportunity to discuss the transition. But the harvest of 1847 was not to provide much in the way of relief and the workhouse was about to be plunged into a precipitous upswing in demand for accommodation brought on by the cessation of the Soup Kitchen program. The resulting debilitation among those who were then forced into the crowded conditions of the workhouse enabled those familiar contagious diseases to once again take hold.

6.2 Rampant fever

Although the fever situation had been well known to the new board of guardians, as twenty-four of the thirty-four incumbents had been re-elected and most of the ex-officio members had been renewed, they could not have been prepared for the one hundred and eight deaths which occurred in the second week of their term of office. The week ending 10 April 1847 was the single worst seven day period for famine-related mortality in the history of the Limerick union.¹⁹ It caused the guardians to fear for their own lives. They took immediate measures to protect themselves, although their motion

¹⁹ See chart on page 132.

was slightly cryptic:

Resolved that an outer staircase and entrance be made at the north east side of the Boardroom and a doorway to the Boardroom – for a passage for Guardians – and that a railing or box be placed at the lower end of the room where applicants for admission are to appear and that the Poor Law Commissioner's sanction be requested and that Mr. Wilkinson be requested to send down plans and specifications forthwith.²⁰

The commissioners' slow response to this request brought on a more urgent and unequivocal plea a couple of weeks later. In his instructions to the clerk of the union, whose job it was to reply to inquiries made by the commissioners, the chairman insisted that the following statement be included:

the Chairman respectfully requests also to call the attention of the Poor Law Commissioners to the necessity for providing a passage to the workhouse different from that by which the Paupers are admitted as the Guardians are at present most unnecessarily exposed to contagious disease which unhappily prevails to so great an extent here as well as in other Unions in Ireland. This subject has been forwarded on the minutes twice already but no reply has been given to the Board.²¹

In order that the message appear not only in correspondence but also on the official record, they also passed a resolution “that the attention of the Poor Law Commissioners be called to our resolution of this day fortnight respecting a second entrance to the Boardroom the plan of which they are immediately requested to supply.” Mr. Wilkinson's plans and specifications were received by the board at its meeting of 26 May. The clerk was ordered to proceed immediately to request tenders from local builders.

The guardians' concern for the officers of the union was less evident. The officers were, of course, often in direct contact with the paupers in the exercise of their duties, some more so than others. Piers Creaghe, the valuator, was not one who normally had contact with inmates in the course of his workday but was thrust into a very precarious situation as a result of the implementation of outdoor relief programs. In a

²⁰ Minutes, 28 April 1847.

lengthy eight point resolution which was intended to ensure that the cost of outdoor relief be justly and equitably distributed, the board, perhaps inadvertently, put his life in danger. Its motion was bound to have consequences:

Resolved that for the more immediate purposes of the outdoor relief system, it is necessary that minute and correct information be obtained from the Rate Books of this Union and for that purpose Mr. Creaghe (our valuator) be instructed to proceed forthwith with the revision of this Union first commencing in the rural districts. The Rate Books to contain:

1. The townlands' names as are given in the Ordnance Survey maps in the order of parish or parishes.
2. The description of property to be fully stated House or land or labourer's house and garden, or cabin.
3. The names in the case of the occupier and immediate lessor to be fully stated.
4. Every occupier to be rated separately and distinctly so as to show the quantity of land he is in possession of, the valuation, etc., and on no account joint rating to be allowed.
5. The valuation will in the cases of labourers' houses, cabins, etc., no matter of what value, be separate and in no instance to be included in the valuation of the farm where they reside.
6. He will when finished with the revision of an electoral division compare same as regards houses, etc., with the census return.
7. That the revisor proceed at once to the electoral divisions to ascertain of his own personal examination the necessary information and report to the Board when the revision is complete for an electoral division.
8. He will in the case of immediate lessors take the names of the occupiers (to be entered in red ink) in his valuation book.²²

The valuator, no doubt, immediately sensed the danger in such an operation and wrote to the guardians requesting that they not oblige him to carry out their order. They read his letter and resolved that "there appears to be no reason why he should not proceed forthwith in accordance with the instructions prescribed in the resolution of the 28th April last relative to the revision of the Union."²³ Creaghe then requested reimbursement for travel expenses and assistance in compiling information. The board granted him 16 shillings and 8 pence for each day he was to be out on revision work in the rural districts. He therefore went ahead with the process dutifully reporting to the board whenever he finished an electoral division.

²¹ Minutes, 12 May 1847.

²² Minutes, 28 April 1847.

²³ Minutes, 5 May 1847.

This work required him to be in contact with the inhabitants of the poorest dwellings in the union each one of which had to be inspected and valued. The necessity to ascertain personal details on the members of each family ensured that he would have to interact with a huge proportion of the population at a time when fever was rampant not only in the workhouse but throughout the community.²⁴ The task took him the better part of the year. His death was announced at the meeting of 16 February 1848. The notice was brief and to the point and, perhaps unintentionally, revealed the guardians' preoccupation with their financial plight, "The Clerk having reported the death of Mr. Creaghe, Valuator, resolved that we do not think it necessary to continue that office and that, therefore, no appointment be made." The next week a letter from his widow was read asking what amount of money was due to her deceased husband. Two months of his salary as valuator yielded £20 and his percentage as superintendent of construction projects another £16 13s. 6d. He had been the highest paid officer of the union.

Others were able to escape the foetid atmosphere of the workhouse by taking a leave of absence to recuperate from an attack of fever. The schoolmaster's request for a leave of absence, due to illness, was granted on 13 March 1847 and was to be for one month. On 21 April it was extended for another two weeks. Then, as he had still not recovered, on 19 May he was granted another extension until 10 June, if necessary. At the end of June as the board was paying the quarterly salaries of the officers of the union, the schoolmaster was paid £1 as he had, in effect, been absent for the whole quarter. He

²⁴ MacArthur, William P., "Medical History of the Famine," in *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History 1845-52*, ed. R. Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1994), 272-273.

immediately wrote to the board begging that his salary not be deducted from him on account of his leave of absence caused by illness. The board evidently looked into the legal implications of their decision to pay only a fraction of his wages. The clerk was ordered to pay the schoolmaster his full salary “in consideration of his faithful services and conceiving that the Board are bound by law to do so as his absence was caused by severe fever caught in the discharge of his duties.”²⁵ Had it not been for the legal imperative, it seems likely that the board would have thought nothing of saving the cost of his salary.

A nurse’s assistant who could not afford the luxury of a place to recuperate on leave of absence had to recover from fever in the workhouse. The guardians were less than sympathetic. Inasmuch as she had been replaced by a pauper, the board saw an opportunity to discontinue a paid position. They saddled the Assistant Master with the responsibility of informing her “that her services will be dispensed with.” She suffered a long illness and by the time her health had begun to improve she was destitute. Four months after her illness was first reported, the board received a “letter from Eliza Hayes, late nurse in the Infirmary Wards stating that she is not yet recovered...and that she has no means to support her. Ordered that she be allowed to remain in the House for two months at the end of which she be allowed £1 10s. 0d. to get home to her place – Belfast.”²⁶ Eliza Hayes had come to her position recommended by the Sisters of Mercy and approved by the two physicians Michael Brodie and Daniel Griffin. She had been engaged at an annual salary of £5 and pauper’s rations. During the fifteen months of

²⁵ Minutes, 13 March 1847; 21 April 1847; 19 May 1847; 7 July 1847; 14 July 1847.

²⁶ Minutes, 29 July 1847; 24 November 1847.

service before her illness began she often had to sleep in the wards with the fever patients due to lack of proper accommodation.²⁷

It seems clear from these and many other cases involving employees of the union that the guardians' diligence to do the bidding of the commissioners far outweighed their concern for individuals in their charge. Although there are examples in the minutes of individual guardians supporting individual officers from time to time, as one might expect, the collective decision-making inevitably resulted in brutally harsh treatment of employees and callous disregard for individual's lives. In other words, despite the compassion shown at times by individual guardians, the board, as a whole, accepted the hard line 'letter of the law' attitude expounded by the commissioners and other government ministers and administrators.

The essence of such discourse was that those in whom authority was vested knew what would allow the common good to prevail and that, therefore, their directives should be obeyed, regardless of the effect on individuals. That they might have been seduced by a questionable ideological perspective, or ill-informed, or too harsh in their judgement of the poor could not be taken into consideration. For the guardians to question the law, or the commissioners, or the Poor Law inspectors would have meant placing themselves above the law and questioning the wisdom of their superiors. Instead the guardians took the attitude that what was handed down, as espoused by enlightened members of the elite governing classes, must at times be imposed in order for the less enlightened to be brought into line and up to a level of behaviour which, in their opinion, was acceptable in society. The instrument which the board of guardians used in dealing with its employees

²⁷ Fortunately for Eliza Hayes by January 1848 the need for her services was so great that the Medical Officers' Report recommending that she be reinstated was accepted. Minutes, 5 January 1848.

was blunt indeed. There was not much refinement in its application. If individuals suffered unconscionable neglect or brutal treatment, they had little or no recourse to protect themselves and so they were easily dispensed with. The guardians, of course, had the financial well-being of the union and its hard-pressed rate payers with which to concern themselves. Whenever they did consult the commissioners on matters of procedure, they inevitably received advice which adhered meticulously to the letter of the law. They were safe, therefore, in assuming that a conservative, legalistic approach would meet with the approval of Dublin Castle.

If the guardians were afraid for their lives due to having to be in the same room with potentially fever-ridden applicants and one officer had died and others had had brushes with death due to fever, neither group had to face these perils debilitated by starvation. Paupers were in an altogether more fearful situation. The alarming rise in deaths per week among the inmates of the house had begun in the winter of 1846-47. It corresponded with the rise in demand for workhouse admission, not only in Limerick, but all over Ireland. Already in January 1847, ninety-three of the workhouses, including the one in Limerick, were overcrowded. Fever had begun to spread throughout the country, and was particularly prevalent in Limerick City.²⁸ It was obvious that the overcrowded conditions of the house were detrimental to the health of all the inmates. Even while the guardians were scrambling to provide additional accommodation to meet the demand, they were being constantly reminded that the admittance of more paupers would exacerbate the spread of contagious disease.²⁹ That fateful week of 10 April, with

²⁸ MacArthur, 286, 308.

²⁹ Christine Kinealy, *The Irish Poor Law*, 110.

one hundred and eight deaths in a population of 2105, could not have more vividly brought home to the Limerick board the gravity of the crisis it was facing. It even triggered a related crisis in burial space, picked up in the local press, which necessitated the hiring of more land to inter the unfortunate victims. So desperate were the guardians at one point that they were delaying the interment of deceased inmates in the hopes that their relatives would come and claim the remains for burial in their home place.

The Master reported that any of the dead Paupers not removed by their relatives during the past eight days still remain uninterred as he would not be allowed to bury them in any of the Church yards about. That he caused under the circumstances twenty perches of the workhouse land to be consecrated as burial ground if the Board now sanction the burials there.³⁰

The board granted the request. But shortly thereafter the weekly death toll dipped to less than twenty as the Soup Kitchen program and the summer weather eased the pressure on the debilitated population. The guardians knew that the respite would be temporary as free food was to be stopped at the time of the harvest, specifically 12 September.³¹ In anticipation of a huge demand for admissions by sick and starving paupers in the aftermath of the termination of the program and in light of the new emphasis on the workhouse test for the able-bodied destitute, they sought additional hospital space in Limerick City.

In dealing with the fever situation among the inmates, the guardians were obliged to make arrangements with two local institutions, John's Hospital and Barrington's Hospital, to receive inmate fever patients for a fee. Once the Poor Law had been amended to allow outdoor relief, the workhouse became the test of destitution for the

³⁰ *Limerick Reporter*, 11 May 1847; Minutes 12 May 1847.

³¹ *British Parliamentary Papers: Famine (Ireland)*, Volume 8, Supplementary Appendix, (Shannon, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1968), 60.

able-bodied.³² Although facilities and staff for addressing the health needs of inmates were well established in workhouses, they were never intended to handle outbreaks of epidemic proportions. The Limerick Poor Law Union was constantly playing catch-up to adapt existing facilities or build temporary wards to handle fever outbreaks.

Furthermore, the amended Poor Law clearly encouraged the clearing of the house of the weak and infirm and replacing them with able-bodied paupers. The board, therefore, established a committee to advise as to the appropriate method of responding to the present fever crisis.

From the time of its inception on 29 September 1847, the committee met at regular intervals, studied options, consulted local care-givers and made recommendations. It negotiated the arrangements with John's Hospital and Barrington's Hospital to receive workhouse fever patients and the arrangement worked well for a time.³³ The committee encouraged the board to use the money passed on to the union by the Limerick Relief Committee to support local fever hospitals in Cappamore and Kilokennedy to take the pressure off the workhouse fever hospital. It recommended the establishment of other temporary fever hospitals in the regions, and enquired into the possibility of building a large fever hospital in proximity to the workhouse.

One of the committee's earliest recommendations was in response to the prerogatives of the amended Poor Law. It seemed to be more directed to the expedient of conforming to the law than the well-being of future inmates of the house:

³² The Extension Act required the able-bodied who sought relief to enter the workhouse to demonstrate that they were truly destitute.

³³ Minutes, 1 December 1847.

It was ordered that the sheds erected last winter be forthwith properly repaired and that the Fever Hospital be cleared out of all cases – the persons now there in measles to be sent to the temporary fever hospital – Barrington’s Hospital – and any cases of measles or other contagious disease that may arise in the workhouse from this forward are to be sent there also in order that our Fever Hospital be available for the admission of healthy paupers. The Master to take the necessary steps to have the Hospital purified.³⁴

One has to hope that purifying the premises was not a mere afterthought.

The fever committee was also given the mandate to look into the possibility of hiring places in Limerick which could be adapted as temporary workhouses in the event of overcrowding. This began a process in which three or four auxiliary workhouses were set up and run on a temporary basis. If the main workhouse was sometimes chaotic, the auxiliary workhouses were disastrous indeed. They were inevitably hastily adapted facilities, staffed by officers doing double duty or on loan full-time from the main house and filled up with homogeneously grouped inmates, which lent itself to unrest.

The haste with which the guardians transferred inmates to these newly rented and supposedly adapted facilities sometimes resulted in controversy. A sub-committee which visited the Mount Kennett temporary workhouse in January 1848 brought back a scathing report which angered and embarrassed the chairman. Alderman Thomas Wallnutt said he was appalled at what he had seen there. Dr. Michael Brodie who also wrote a report described the state of the place as ‘horrible’. Some children, dead and dying, were mingled together and there was scarcely a pane of glass on one side of the house. Chairman Devitt, who called their reports too coloured, refused to believe them and a heated exchange ensued:

Chairman – Well if it be so you ought to apply to the Commissioners. If I were not in the chair, I would move as much, and let them send down a person. But I scarcely think that statement can be substantiated.

Dr. Brodie – Mr Walnutt, do you think that overdrawn?

Ald. Walnutt – Decidedly not.

Chairman – How many were all the dead you speak of?

³⁴ Minutes, 13 October 1847.

Dr. Brodie – Four.

Chairman – That is four out of four hundred. Even that should be prevented if possible, but they might have died under the best medical attendance. But your statement is as strong as a description of the slaughter at Waterloo. It is too highly coloured.

Dr. Griffin – That is too bad, Mr. Chairman; the children were found dead, without medicine and drink, without firing, or any other comfort in the place. It does not get over the matter to say that they would die under medical attendance.

Mr. Chairman – Well, write to the Commissioners.³⁵

Devitt's callous disregard for the welfare of the inmates and his challenging of the committee members who had actually witnessed the scene put into sharp focus his personal alignment with those who preferred not to question the law but rather implement it regardless of the impact on the poor. His promotion to paid vice-guardian scarcely one month later would seem to indicate that his opinion in the matter was appreciated by the commissioners and perhaps politically astute as well. He participated adeptly in the prevailing discourse of force and emerged as an administrator who could be counted on by the government to protect its best interests. On this particular occasion Devitt did, however, succumb to the pressure to hire a Roman Catholic chaplain for Mount Kennett and agreed that the Medical Officers should get £1 extra per week "during the continuance of their attendance at the temporary workhouses."³⁶ Regardless of these efforts Mount Kennett continued to be the subject of controversial reporting on the part of the press whether it be for the filthy condition of the place or rioting on the part of the unfortunate inmates.³⁷

Fever and the accommodation of fever patients continued, for a time, to preoccupy the board and the special committee charged with recommending policy and practice. The two city hospitals in time could not or would not take any more fever

³⁵ Ciarán O Murchadha, "Limerick Union Workhouse during the Great Famine," *The Old Limerick Journal* 32 (Winter 1995): 39-43.

³⁶ Minutes, 19 January 1848.

³⁷ *Limerick Reporter*, 9 May 1848; *Limerick Chronicle*, 29 June 1850.

patient referrals from the workhouse. The main house did its best to clear out the aged and infirm by offering them outdoor relief in money, about one shilling six pence per week. This succeeded in reducing the numbers considerably but by autumn of 1847 the numbers of able-bodied inmates in the parent house and the numbers of others in temporary workhouses had increased to the levels of the previous winter. This time, however, the numbers would stay up and remain high for years to come. The treatment of fever patients, in these circumstances, never became a priority as dealing with the numbers of inmates, the precarious finances of the union and the administration of the new system of outdoor relief overwhelmed the guardians. The amended Poor Law shifted the emphasis so that workhouses would become the last resort for the able-bodied. Fever patients were to be treated as much as possible away from the main body of the house. In fact “the treatment of such patients in workhouse infirmaries was disapproved of by the poor law commissioners as dangerous to other patients.”³⁸ This enabled the guardians in Limerick to focus on compliance with the law and not worry too much about matters which were essentially under the purview of the Board of Health. The committee was, in spite of this, able to achieve the fitting up of a fever ward in one of the auxiliary workhouses to handle the periodic outbreaks of fever which continued to recur. The mere fact, however, of isolating fever patients in one place and away from the largest group of inmates who were in the parent workhouse did help to reduce the high rate of mortality which had been experienced in March and April of 1847.³⁹

³⁸ MacArthur, 291.

³⁹ Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, 104.

6.3 The Poor Law amendment acts

Inasmuch as the potato harvest, sparse as it was in 1847, was not blighted, the government was able to persuade itself that the famine was over and that their new measures to deal with Irish poverty were indeed timely and exactly what was called for to renew the Irish economy and eliminate the threat of Ireland's potential to drain the British exchequer. The three acts which had been passed in June and July of 1847 had an immediate impact on the administration of the Limerick workhouse.

The Poor Law Extension Act, passed on 8 June 1847, heralded a major departure in that it finally introduced the principle of outdoor relief. This immediately necessitated the hiring of relieving officers in all of the electoral districts to assist in the administration of relief. They were to begin employment on 11 September, a day before the Soup Kitchen Program ended. This meant a commitment of close to £600 annually in new salaries at a time when the operating account of the union was in a deficit position and rate collectors were not meeting current targets. After the board had decided to hire eighteen relieving officers at a total annual cost of about £900, the commissioners sent down a counter-proposal (and assistant commissioner, Mr. Hancock, to explain it) for eleven officers at an average salary of £55. The total cost was less but each relieving officer had an average of twelve thousand potential paupers to assess. According to the commissioners' proposal, the lone officer for Limerick City was responsible for a population of 52,000.⁴⁰ What seemed, to the commissioners, to be a feasible, as well as frugal, proposition on paper turned out to be quite unsatisfactory in practice. By contrast there were unions in other parts of the country that refused to hire even one relieving

⁴⁰ Minutes, 28 July 1847; 4 August 1847.

officer as they considered it a further burden on ratepayers. Some considered it unnecessary because they had available space in the workhouse. So high a value was placed on conformity to the law that the commissioners pursued legal action against boards which did not hire at least one relieving officer.⁴¹

These officers were intended to receive applications for relief in a central location close to pockets of population. They were to determine if a person were eligible for outdoor relief or was one of the able-bodied destitute who should be given an admission pass to the workhouse. In some cases this process would require a considerable amount of research as it was not always possible to determine a person's level of destitution by having him/her appear in person.

The relieving officers took some time to adjust to their new roles and the guardians were obliged to handle a number of complaints about unfair treatment. As was their wont they were harsh in treating people in their service. Their reaction to a complaint from the Crecora electoral district is an example:

Memorial read of Bridget Cooney an aged widow of Ballyregan division of Crecora – stating that the Relieving Officer Mr. Parsons discontinued giving her relief since 8th February – the son of the widow was called before the Board and an enquiry gone into and the following resolution come to: Resolved that Mr. Parsons for the future be required not to act on statements of any parties but to examine closely himself all applications for relief and on his own examination and not otherwise to create the necessary revisions of persons on outdoor relief.⁴²

Francis Parsons had a population of about eleven thousand people in the districts he was assigned to and in the scramble for survival which was underway it is not likely he had a lot of time in which to make decisions; neither is it likely that he had an adequate amount of funding at his disposal to provide outdoor relief and no doubt some very difficult decisions had to be made in the allocation of meagre resources.

⁴¹ Kinealy, *The Irish Poor Law*, 149-150.

⁴² Minutes, 4 March 1848.

At one point, quite early in the process, the guardians were warned by the authorities that there might be some trouble forthcoming as a result of the inefficiency of the relief system. The following extract from the minutes indicates their concern:

In consequence of an apprehended attack on this Workhouse by persons for outdoor relief from the County Clare districts (notice of which had been given the Authorities in Limerick) Colonel Doyle and Mr. Barrow, R.M. attended the Board and stated that the Military were placed for the purpose near the Workhouse at the strand Barracks. No attack was, however, made, nor was there any appearance.⁴³

There was, in effect, a great deal of difficulty finding relieving officers for some of the County Clare districts. The board had to advertise a second time for Kilfeenaghta, Kilseely and Killeely. The hiring of the relieving officer for Killeely was sanctioned by the commissioners at the end of September. After a delay concerning the eligibility of the candidate for Kilfeenaghta and Kilseely, his hiring was finally sanctioned by the commissioners on the very day of the apprehended attack.⁴⁴ The 7600 potential paupers in the area may have been on the verge of panic, as well as starvation, by then. They were no doubt aware that outdoor relief was being provided in the surrounding area.

In the case of Limerick City the relieving officer was completely overwhelmed. Dennis Donnelly had been hired at £100 per annum and an office had been set up for him to see applicants for relief. A committee of the board went to his workplace to examine his report books and recommended that “twelve able-bodied paupers be sent to protect and preserve order during the hours Mr. Donnelly is attending at his office.” The impossibility of his task was plainly evident to them. They also recommended that an additional relieving officer be hired for Limerick “to visit the homes of all applicants and make his reports.”⁴⁵ In the original plan the guardians had wanted to hire three relieving

⁴³ Minutes, 20 October 1847.

⁴⁴ Minutes, 29 September 1847; 20 October 1847.

⁴⁵ Minutes, 5 January 1848; 12 January 1848.

officers for Limerick City yet the commissioners, even though they were far removed from the problem, pretended to know better what was best for the Limerick Poor Law Union. Worse still, the guardians had accepted the commissioners' counter-proposal without question. Once again the commissioners' decision prevailed. In the end, the city was divided into north and south sections and a new relieving officer, Michael Enright, was hired for the south section at a salary of £55. Donnelly was given the north section and his salary was reduced to £55. Presumably, during the five months in which he laboured alone, he was paid his full salary.

The new law specified that destitute persons disabled by old age or infirmity, and widows with two or more dependent children could be relieved out of the workhouse at the discretion of the guardians. Originally such outdoor relief was to be in food only, on the sealed order of the commissioners and limited to two months. In time the impracticality of outdoor relief in food was made clear to the commissioners by many unions and relief in weekly cash payments was permitted. The intention of the law was to force the able-bodied who sought help to demonstrate their destitution by accepting to go into the workhouse. This 'workhouse test', it was hoped, would eliminate fraudulent claims. To further discourage fraud, as outdoor relief became more general, the commissioners ordered the guardians to publish the names of people receiving this form of relief.⁴⁶ But for the new system to work efficiently, the workhouse had to be cleared of the aged and infirm. The Limerick guardians did their best to accomplish this questionable goal.

The transition committee of thirteen guardians appointed on 25 August had a

⁴⁶ Kinealy, *The Irish Poor Law*, 157; Minutes 26 January 1848.

report ready for the board at its next meeting. They had identified, by enquiring among the inmates, one hundred and fifty men, women and their dependent children who were willing to take a cash allowance to leave the workhouse. At the time this would have reduced the number of inmates from 1324 to 1174. They also made a series of recommendations including the amount of weekly allowance to be paid and methods for ridding the house of fever patients.⁴⁷

The board was poised to make the Limerick workhouse the model for the workhouse test and demonstrate its willingness to wholeheartedly adapt to the new legislation. But many among them knew that there would be only a short delay before they were inundated with demands for admission. And some among them might not have had the stomach for releasing the most helpless inmates to the meagre resources being offered. Three months later though, with the population of the house back up over two thousand, they reluctantly decided to take action. The minutes reveal their ambivalence:

Moved by Mr. Hannan, seconded by Mr. Monsell that the report of the Committee of 31 August last approved by the Board on 1st September be carried out to the extent of 150 persons (those longest in the Workhouse) from next Wednesday. The relief to be given in food instead of money. After a defeat of the amendment, the resolution was carried 11 to 10. And directions were accordingly given to the Clerk to carry out the resolution.⁴⁸

The clerk came the next week with a list of twenty-five widows each with two or more legitimate children depending on them for a total of eighty-nine people. He proposed to allow them one shilling each for themselves and six pence for each child. The total weekly cost would be £2 17s. As these widows were all from the city, the board agreed to have a cheque drawn on the Treasurer in favour of D. Donnelly, City

⁴⁷ Minutes, 1 September 1847.

⁴⁸ Minutes, 17 November 1847.

Relieving Officer. He was instructed to pay them weekly at the workhouse.⁴⁹ The clerk was then instructed to have a similar list ready for the next week. Two weeks later he was able to report to the board that 230 heads of families and persons over fifteen years of age for a total of 450 people had been transferred, of their own accord, to the outdoor relief lists.⁵⁰

Yet scarcely a week after that, with the population of the house over 2500, the clerk had to report not only the overcrowding but also the absolute destitution of the people now being admitted. This prompted a series of resolutions, one of which was directed to the relieving officers and intended to persuade them to do their best to stem the tide.

Resolved that the Relieving Officers be forthwith instructed to issue no more tickets to the Workhouse to the sick, aged and infirm or widows having two or more legitimate children dependent on them but carefully to record their applications and report the particulars to the next Board meeting of the Guardians. The Relieving Officers clearly to understand that this resolution is in no way meant to interfere with their general instructions as to provisional relief.⁵¹

Clearly the relieving officers had been reacting to emergency cases that needed immediate attention in the workhouse or would not continue to survive. For the guardians to ask them to report to the board at its next meeting to explain the severity of the cases was to reveal woeful ignorance of the state of destitution surrounding them, a callous disregard for human life and blind adherence to the principles of the amended Poor Law. Individually, most guardians were compassionate human beings who were well aware of the weekly death statistics in their own union and the state of the country as a whole. The inability of Devitt's board, in its collective decision making, to break out of the trap created by the ideological determination of the British government and

⁴⁹ Minutes, 24 November 1847.

⁵⁰ Minutes, 8 December 1847.

⁵¹ Minutes, 15 December 1847.

Dublin Castle demonstrates the hold which this 'prevailing wisdom' had over them. Doing what was ideologically acceptable (and, by chance, politically astute) completely dominated their thinking to the extent that the possibility of doing the compassionate thing was rendered unlikely, if not impossible.

The guardians persisted in trying to clear the house of inmates who could possibly be transferred to the outdoor relief lists. The guardians allowed themselves to be convinced that an inmate who was offered a shilling and a few pence per week and a chance to leave the workhouse was in a position to make an informed choice. The bitter cold and dampness of November and December in the vicinity of the Shannon estuary did not seem to figure into the analysis. At the meeting which was held just before Christmas, Mr. Garvey, one of the guardians, was asked to visit the men's infirmary ward with the clerk to see how best arrangements might be made to have that building made available for the able-bodied.

After his return [Garvey] reported that all the men there with but few exceptions consented to leave the Workhouse on a scale of about one shilling nine pence each per week. Some few would require to be allowed an old pair of shoes and others an old rug. It was ordered that the several cases who consent be carefully removed from the Workhouse on outdoor relief lists and in the few cases mentioned the Master be authorized to use the few articles of old clothing. And that the building occupied by the aged and infirm men (late Fever Hospital) be used as a dormitory for boys.⁵²

Inevitably some of these paupers found it difficult, for a variety of reasons, to adjust to fending for themselves. In view of the small harvest in Ireland in the fall of 1847 and the lack of food generally on the market as a result of below average harvests in Europe and America in the same year, what food was available was more costly than anticipated.⁵³ Some may not have received the welcome they had anticipated on the

⁵² Minutes, 22 December 1847.

⁵³ Kinealy, *The Irish Poor Law*, 134-135.

outside. Perhaps improvidence on the part of some, who were not used to budgeting for survival, caused them to falter. Perhaps the clerk and the guardians, by calculating the cost of survival on the outside based on the cost of supporting a pauper in the workhouse, set the weekly stipend too low. In any case, too many who could not make a go of it returned to the workhouse within a short delay. At the first meeting of the new year the master was obliged to make a special plea to the guardians “to make an order whereby Paupers leaving the House by their own request could not be admitted for a certain period unless in cases of urgent necessity.” As he expressed it they were “coming in and going out as most suiting themselves.”⁵⁴ The guardians decided on a one month time period before which a pauper could not return. They had a copy of the master’s report and their decision sent to each of the relieving officers and instructed them to inform all applicants accordingly. For some paupers this must have been a death sentence.

Another unanticipated problem caused by removal from the workhouse was the provision of coffins for paupers who died outside. The guardians had to draw to the attention of the commissioners the fact that “persons who die and have been sent out of this Workhouse on our outdoor relief lists...for want of coffins have been for days unburied.” They asked the commissioners to call the attention of Her Majesty’s government to this apparent defect in the law. Apparently other unions complained to the commissioners of the same problem. In time the guardians were notified that a bill to rectify the situation was being introduced into parliament. In July 1848, it became legal for paupers who died on outdoor relief to be provided with coffins at the expense of the union.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Minutes, 5 January 1848.

⁵⁵ Minutes, 26 January 1848; Kinealy, *The Irish Poor Law*, 160.

To give some credit to the board, at the same time that it was trying to comply with the law by transforming the inmate clientele into able-bodied paupers who would eventually quit the workhouse for gainful employment (thus proving the efficacy of the workhouse test), it was scrambling to find additional workhouse space. Before the end of 1847 two agreements had been reached to lease premises, one at Boherbuoy providing 160 additional places at £40 per year and the other at Mount Kennett which would accommodate another 600 for £120 annually. The two had been fitted up as temporary military barracks and were reported to be suitable. They received their first inmates at the start of the new year. By the end of January 1848 the board had leased another building, also at Boherbuoy, from a Mr. Westropp for an annual rent of £145. It provided an additional eight to nine hundred places.

The guardians' intentions might have been honourable but the planning and execution of the transfer of paupers to temporary quarters were flawed. The most elemental fittings were not provided, personnel were not in place on time and serious neglect inevitably ensued. When the commissioners got wind of the first incident at Mount Kennett they wanted to ascertain who was responsible. The guardians side-stepped the issue, noting that due to "the unprecedented pressure made for relief and the necessity of opening that establishment in such haste, we cannot under all circumstances blame any of our officers."⁵⁶ Of course, it would have been difficult to blame officers of the union who had not yet been appointed, because inmates had been transferred before adequate personnel were in place, or who were doing their regular work at the parent house and expected to attend to the auxiliary house in their spare time, as in the case of

⁵⁶ Minutes, 2 February 1848.

the medical officers.

The Limerick Poor Law Union did not adapt well to the amended poor law. In principle the new law demanded too much of a land-based economy which could not support the natural disaster which was underway and persisting. But that having been said, the transition was greatly exacerbated by the way in which the board of guardians focussed on the letter of the law as opposed to the needs of the paupers whom they were serving. Fundamental management practices and even minimal strategic planning were neglected. For this the board of guardians and its chairman, John Thomas Devitt, whose influence was formidable, had the most to answer.

Conclusion

In responding to the Soup Kitchen program the Limerick board reacted swiftly and had its depots operating as soon as possible. The results were tangible. Demands for workhouse admissions were reduced. The board was given a chance to deal more effectively with the fever epidemics and plan for the future. The financing of the program, however, was not handled transparently. The guardians intimated to the commissioners that they were willing to levy the necessary charges while knowing full well that previously assessed poor rates were not being collected efficiently. They continued their harsh, if not abusive, treatment of rate collectors in the hopes of motivating them. Only when they were provoked to the point of frustration did they honestly articulate to the commissioners the desperation they were experiencing.

The board's handling of the fever epidemics was unsympathetic. The guardians moved to protect themselves but were less concerned with the danger to the officers of the union. When officers were afflicted in the line of duty, the board considered it an inconvenience and a drain on the union's finances. The guardians' preoccupation with the financial state of the union caused them to lose perspective when dealing with fever in the workhouse population. Their own inefficiency in planning put inmates in danger. For example, the chairman's refusal to accept responsibility for the inhuman living conditions in an auxiliary workhouse, at least in the eyes of the press, put himself and the board in a very poor light.

The transition to the amended poor law, involving the introduction of outdoor relief and the clearing of widows, the aged and infirm from the workhouse can only be described as a disaster. The timing of the changes to the law could not have been worse. Instead of coming at a time when the peasantry was over the worst of the deprivation and well on its way to recovery, it came when they were barely regaining their health and about to be hit by another insufficient harvest. The Limerick board cannot be blamed for this. What was reprehensible on their part was going along with the changes in the face of evidence that grave harm was being done. The guardians were too compliant. They might, alternatively, have protested vehemently against the abuses perpetrated by the new laws. Instead they did their best to appear supportive of the directives from the commissioners. While other boards resigned in protest or were dissolved for non-

compliance,⁵⁷ the Limerick board was held up as a model for its record of compliance by having two of its members named as vice-guardians to other poor law unions.

During the tenure of Devitt's board there were two negative processes which made the administration of the Poor Law Union more difficult. Within Ireland the cumulative effects of two crop failures and the reduced harvest of 1847 brought the peasant population to the edge of the abyss. In London and in Dublin, the handling of Irish famine relief by the British government went from adequate to totally inept. Instead of building on the success of the Soup Kitchen program, the government retreated behind punitive legislation. In its fear of the economic impact of aid for Ireland on the British treasury, it transferred the cost to the Irish landed interests. In its fear of the moral impact of aid on the Irish peasantry, it pretended that it could not interfere in the market place. In its fear of the threat to its cherished empire posed by the intractable Irish, it accepted death and emigration as a positive outcome. When fear is the principal motivating factor for legislation, the chances of it accomplishing positive results are slim.

During this year fever stalked the countryside. Under such circumstances, the board under Devitt's leadership was called upon to render heroic service. It was given the opportunity to rise to the occasion by exhibiting uncommon bravery and rendering service above and beyond the call of duty. Instead it joined forces with the administration. That it fell short was unfortunate for the paupers of the Limerick Poor

⁵⁷ Christine Kinealy, *The Irish Poor Law*, 155, 179; Ciarán Ó Murchadha, *Sable Wings*, 211; D'Arcy Ryan, "The Poor Law in Gort, County Galway, Ireland, During the Great Famine" (M.A. thesis, Bishop's University, 1997), 76.

Law Union. They paid the price for this failure. Devitt, on the other hand, was rewarded for his performance.

CHAPTER 7

CLARE

The two years (March 25, 1848 – March 25, 1850) in which John Fitzgibbon, second Earl of Clare, was elected chairman of the Board of Guardians of the Limerick Poor Law Union profoundly challenged the commitment of the guardians to implement the Irish Poor Law. Despite some favourable publicity and the union's successful participation in a government sponsored emigration scheme, most of what transpired put a strain on their loyalty to the commissioners. The magnitude of the catastrophe revealed itself more and more each day as the number of inmates in the house inexorably grew, surpassing four thousand for the first time in November 1848 and then five thousand in December. The number of deaths per week reached back up into the sixties in the early months of 1849 as, to make matters worse, cholera ravaged the already debilitated inmates.

With such grim mortality rates facing them, a seemingly insoluble problem which dogged the guardians all year was finding space in which to bury the union's dead. And despite constantly threatening the rate collectors with dismissal, the board saw the deficit in the union treasury plunge to close to £6000. Inmates lashed out in their fear and confusion on several occasions and the guardians, although they showed little compassion or understanding for the suffering of the paupers, turned their own anger and frustration on Dublin Castle.

The law was manifest in its failure. Before the year was out, even the chief Poor Law Commissioner, Edward Twistleton had resigned rather than preside over the

debacle. The last straw which caused his resignation was the Rate-in-Aid bill. It was designed to funnel tax money from the better off unions to the most distressed unions, acknowledging a weakness in the law but not going so far as to recognize the famine as an imperial responsibility. It created great resentment in the less distressed parts of Ireland.¹ It also seemed to demoralize the Limerick board to the extent that it lost focus and began to act as though it could do very little but go through the motions of administration.

Lord Clare was an enigmatic figure. He was, as was his fellow guardian William Monsell, a liberal unionist. He had acceded to the title of his notorious father, the first Earl of Clare and Lord Chancellor of Ireland, upon the latter's untimely death in 1802. The second Earl seemed not to have picked up his father's well-known anti-Catholic prejudices. He voted for Catholic emancipation in 1829 and consistently favoured the easing of Catholic disabilities. But on the subject of the union he understood his father's warning to the landed gentry of Ireland: "And give me leave to tell the country gentlemen of Ireland that the only security by which they hold their property . . . is the connection of the Irish crown with, and its dependence upon, the crown of England . . ."² When, during the famine, the second Earl was called upon to throw his support behind an Irish party to press the government for more relief he made his position abundantly clear:

¹ James Grant, "The Great Famine and the poor law in Ulster: the rate-in-aid issue of 1849," *Irish Historical Studies*, xxvii, no. 105 (May 1990), 44-47.

² Ann Kavanaugh, *John FitzGibbon, Earl of Clare* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1997), 148.

At this awful crisis, we should not I think do anything which can be construed into a distrust of our rulers or of their ability to serve us. The question to be submitted to Par[liamen]t is not purely an Irish question. The interests of England are fully as much concerned in it, as we are inseparably united to the greater and richer country. I am convinced it is the inclination as well as the duty of England to assist us in extricating us from our present difficulties. The evil must be probed to the bottom and by the blessing of providence, the united councils of both countries will save us from the horrors of famine now, and will prevent their recurring in future.³

This quotation from a letter to Lord Farnham was written in 1847. A little more than a year later Clare presided over the near bankruptcy of the Limerick union and endorsed resolutions which were a scathing criticism of government policy. At the same time as he was supporting the government's amendments to the Poor Law in principle, he was witnessing the cost, in lives and livelihoods (including his own) all around him. At his death in 1851, the main asset of his heavily encumbered estate in Limerick consisted of arrears in rent. Less than forty years later his heirs had to sell Mount Shannon, purported to be "one of the finest mansions in the south of Ireland."⁴ Despite his own personal straits he maintained a good relationship with his tenants who remained loyal to him throughout his life. This, no doubt, had to do with his generosity in managing his estate and his liberality on sectarian questions.

Lord Clare was an active chairman of the board of guardians of the Limerick union. During his obligatory absence from Ireland while the House of Lords was in session, the vice-chairman, Thomas Wallnutt, usually presided over board meetings. But when he was in Limerick, which was most of the year, Lord Clare presided over the weekly meetings and took an active role in decision-making. At the end of his first mandate in April 1849 when the newly-elected board was presented, his fellow guardians readily elected him chairman for another year. This chapter will deal with the two year

³ Kavanaugh, 394.

⁴ Samuel Lewis, *A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland*, Volume I (London: S. Lewis & Co., 1837), 269.

period of Lord Clare's chairmanship and address some positive outcomes and the symptoms of collapse represented by the burial crisis, the board's futile attempts to keep managing the rate collectors by force and the reactions of the inmates and guardians to the deepening crisis.

7.1 Some positive outcomes

The first year appeared to start out on a positive note. A couple of items from the visitors' books were ordered inserted in the minutes.

From Deputy Commissioner General Dobree, Dublin, stating he has seen no Workhouse in the twenty-two Unions of the distressed districts give evidence of such admirable management in all its departments, it is most creditable to everyone connected with its superintendence. From Assistant Commissioners General Mr. Routh, Limerick, stating he was much gratified and pleased with the arrangements, cleanliness, and order everywhere discernible.⁵

The Limerick Union, having the third largest population base in the country and the first to be established on 20 December 1838, was always a model union in the minds of the commissioners. The fact that it was in the most distressed part of the country and still managed to survive with a board that consistently strove to conform to the law was something to which Dublin Castle could point with pride. Assistant Commissioner Mr. Hancock, who along with fellow Assistant Commissioner Mr. Hawley had formed the union when the Poor Law was first implemented, was often in attendance at meetings of the board and provided welcome advice. However, in April 1848, the above remarks could only have come from one who had visited the main house and nothing more. At this time the outdoor relief lists were heavily subscribed, many paupers (including the fever patients) had been shifted to temporary workhouses and no doubt spring work had drawn away more than a few able-bodied paupers. Nevertheless, the guardians

⁵ Minutes, 5 April 1848.

welcomed the accolades enough to make sure the commissioners would be aware that some important observers were favourably impressed.

They had little else facing them in the way of consolation. But another of the more positive occurrences in the year in question was the opportunity to participate in a government sponsored emigration program. When the Poor Law was amended the new legislation provided for assistance for emigration which could be drawn from the rates. The guardians wasted little time in letting the commissioners know that they were ready and willing to participate.⁶ The first scheme to get underway was the dispatching of orphan girls to Australia to help regulate the gender balance of population in that distant colony. The plan called for 4,000 girls between the ages of fourteen and eighteen to be sent out from Ireland. The Limerick guardians saw an opportunity to rid themselves of the annual maintenance cost of a group that had little hope of freeing itself from the need for workhouse relief. The only cost to the union would be to outfit the girls and pay their passage to Plymouth. In the first year of the plan 2,170 orphan girls were sent from Ireland and 74 of those were selected from the Limerick union. Fifty girls set sail from Plymouth on 10 January 1849 and, when the guardians complained of the small number allotted to them, another 24 were selected and sailed in February.⁷ Although the scheme was renewed the following year and another 1900 orphan girls were sent out, Limerick refused to participate on the grounds that they had received complaints for which they had failed to obtain any satisfaction.⁸ As terrifying as it must have been for these young people to be sent half way around the world, they probably ended up better off than they

⁶ Minutes, 29 March 1848.

⁷ Minutes, 3 & 10 January, 7 February 1849.

⁸ Chris O'Mahony, "Emigration from the Limerick Workhouse 1848-1860," *The Old Limerick Journal* (Spring 1982): 24.

might have been had they stayed in Ireland. Their prospects for work and marriage were certainly better in Australia. From the union's vantage point the initial outlay was well worth the savings in continuing maintenance costs. By setting sail early in 1849 those 74 young women were spared contact with the cholera epidemic which was first mentioned in Limerick board meeting minutes in March 1849.

7.2 The burial crisis

Although cholera greatly exacerbated the death rate in the union, death rates had been high since the famine began and the issue of where to bury the dead had become a growing problem. Towards the end of the previous year the guardians had begun burying the dead in a section of the workhouse grounds which they had had consecrated for the purpose. This became an impossible situation when the decision was taken to build additional wooden buildings within the grounds to house the excess numbers of inmates. The building contractor immediately demanded access to the land in question.

The guardians canvassed local landowners to see if a small acreage could be had for a burial ground and received no response. A Mr. Cullen who was half a mile away had offered an acre but the commissioners refused to sanction a lease on his property. The guardians then settled on an option which had very unfortunate consequences and ended up delaying a final solution and almost resulted in the censure of the vice-chairman Thomas Wallnutt. The piece of land in question was owned by a Mr. Leahy Arthur and leased by Mr. Wallnutt. Mr. Arthur agreed to give up his interest in the land for £240 and it remained for Mr. Wallnutt to agree on an amount in order to relinquish his own interest. He would not take less than £210 even though he and the guardians had

agreed on £375 in total. Time was of the essence as inmate mortality continued apace. The commissioners, cautious as ever, had sent the documentation for the sale of this piece of land to their solicitors for perusal and had promised an answer within a week. The guardians, no doubt faced with a mounting number of deceased paupers awaiting interment, then made a very hasty and regrettable decision.

Ordered that the Master get possession of the piece of ground intended for the cemetery from Mr. Wallnutt forthwith, to have it consecrated and used as a burial ground and no more paupers be buried on the Workhouse premises, as the contractor for the new buildings represents that he cannot proceed with the works unless he get possession of the present cemetery.⁹

The order was, no doubt, about to be complied with in anticipation of the approval of the commissioners who were unaware of any potential disagreement. But Mr Wallnutt would not give access to the land until he had been paid the £210 which he insisted was his due. What transpired next was reported in detail at the subsequent meeting of the board. At a special meeting, which was attended by only four guardians, those present had the clerk produce a cheque for the £210 which he was, understandably, reluctant to sign. The guardians overruled the clerk and the cheque was signed and handed to Mr Wallnutt who then gave the Master access to the land. It was duly consecrated and burials began immediately. The commissioners, of course, demanded an explanation to which the guardians responded as follows:

Resolved that it be explained to the Poor Law Commissioners that Mr. Wallnutt's first tender of £375 for one acre of land was accepted it being then understood he was to pay the yearly rent to Mr. Arthur of about £8 per year to which Mr. Arthur's agent objected and claimed 30 years purchase £240 releasing Mr. Wallnutt from the yearly rent. The guardians could not induce Mr. Arthur to reduce his offer and which was proposed to be deducted from £375 to which balance Mr. Wallnutt objected and would not consent to a lesser sum than £210 as per resolution of 24 May last.

This sum of money it appears was paid at a special meeting held on Friday 2 June, that day not being any of our board days and the meeting four members having assembled for another purpose. The above are the only facts and information we can afford the Poor Law Commissioners on this subject.¹⁰

⁹ Minutes, 31 May 1848.

¹⁰ Minutes, 28 June 1848.

Poor Law Inspector, Mr. Hancock, was at the next meeting to conduct an investigation into the matter. The documents and minutes were examined and much discussion ensued. Finally, Mr. Wallnutt, who had been thrown into a very poor light by what had transpired, decided to return the £210 to the treasury because it “had been paid to him before the legal documents transferring his interest to the Board in the grounds in question had been executed.”¹¹

The consequences of this for the board were embarrassing to say the least. It invited the commissioners to take legal action against the four guardians who had forced the clerk’s hand and caused the payment of £210 to be made in the first place. There was an attempt to unseat Thomas Wallnutt as vice-chairman of the board which was narrowly defeated by a vote of 13 to 9 with three abstentions. Wallnutt read a formal letter to the board refusing the use of the land as a burial ground. The board responded by ordering the Master to bury the corpses there regardless.¹² Three months passed before an apparent resolution to the impasse emerged.

Local magistrate, philanthropist and land owner, Matthew Barrington, informed the board on 13 September that there was a possibility that two or three acres of land on King’s Island could be had from the Commissioners of Woods and Forests for as little as £100 per acre. Over the next several months, a committee of the board inspected the site and agreed on a suitable location and an offer was made. The board settled for 2 Irish acres at £120 15s. each and the approval of the Poor Law commissioners was received and read at the meeting of 21 February 1849.¹³ During this long delay Wallnutt

¹¹ Minutes, 5 July 1848.

¹² Minutes, 12 and 19 July 1848.

¹³ An Irish acre is close to 70,000 sq. ft. as opposed to an English acre of 43,264 sq. ft. Minutes, 13 September 1848; 21 February 1849.

threatened to bar access to his field on more than one occasion but showed considerable forbearance of which the guardians took liberal advantage. At the end of May 1849 the board finally agreed to pay him £67 10s. for his trouble.

This unseemly spectacle took place over a period of time in which 1370 inmates, or an average of 26 per week, died in the care of the Limerick guardians. At no time in their deliberations is there any indication of concern for the respectful observance of the final rites of passage. One ex-officio guardian actually did resign “complaining of proceedings of the guardians in reference to the Burial Ground” but the clerk was ordered to “inform Mr. Wilson that the Guardians have no power to accept his resignation.”¹⁴ There was also an indignant letter from time to time in the local press by a citizen who was scandalized by the casual way in which the dead were treated.¹⁵ Yet at best the burial of paupers seemed to have been considered a business expense and at worst an inconvenience.

7.3 Management by force

As had been the case with the previous board, the new board began to experience a marked resistance by proprietors to paying the poor rate. Devitt’s board had instituted some measures which were intended to keep a short rein on rate collectors and pressure on rate-payers. A committee had been established to meet with the collectors every Saturday morning to examine their accounts. Every Wednesday the collectors had to furnish the clerk with a list of the outstanding amounts due of the twelve highest rate-

¹⁴ Minutes, 21 October 1848.

¹⁵ *Limerick Reporter*, 11 May 1847.

payers in each of their electoral districts.¹⁶ A special rate had been levied in September 1847 and the new measures seemed to produce results as the balance in the treasury gradually mounted to the point that by the beginning of April 1848 it was above £9500.

However, there never was any positive reinforcement of rate collectors for the rates they did collect. The closest thing to congratulations was directed to the city collector John Hackett when, in the same sentence in which the guardians expressed their “marked displeasure of the large arrears still due in all the Collectors’ districts”, they added parenthetically “(save Mr. Hackett’s).”¹⁷ In fact, in the same week in which the balance in the treasury was £7268.0s.6d., the new board passed the following resolution:

That we cannot but mark our displeasure against Messrs Barry, Shea, O’Connor for the small amount of monies lodged by them this week and against Shea for not having any lodged and the large balances still outstanding in their districts, and which if not more speedily collected, it will be our duty to consider the propriety of recommending the commissioners to cause the dismissal of the said Messrs Barry, O’Connor and Shea.¹⁸

James Barry was the former guardian who had resigned his post the previous year to undertake the collection in the south east districts of the union. His former colleagues afforded him little sympathy or understanding in his new role. Nor is it apparent that they sought his counsel on the real hardships being experienced at the grassroots level. The same harsh treatment was, of course, meted out to defaulting rate-payers. The guardians had already begun naming prominent defaulters, including some of their fellow guardians. To this they added the practice of posting the list of defaulters and the amount each owed at the police station in the individual electoral districts. Then they furnished each relieving officer in each electoral district with the same lists and ordered them to

¹⁶ Minutes, 2 February 1848.

¹⁷ Minutes, 2 February 1848.

¹⁸ Minutes, 19 April 1848.

call on the defaulting rate payers to ascertain if the report was accurate.¹⁹ Whether or not all the guardians thought such pressure tactics would cause defaulters to repent of their waywardness and pay their taxes is arguable. It might just as well have driven rate-payers to recalcitrance for being bullied. In any case it was consistent with their habitual use of force to achieve results. Even when the outcome was bound to put the union in worse straits, such as in forcing the incarceration of some defaulting rate-payers making it less likely that they would be able to pay the rates, or in losing the services of an experienced rate collector when it was very difficult to find a replacement, the guardians seemed unable to change the tenor of the discourse.

To make matters worse for the guardians, their refusal to replace the valuator Piers Creaghe had resulted in some confusion as to the correct valuation of certain properties. This gave rate payers an excuse to contest their assessments. This was particularly true of the County Clare electoral districts where Creaghe had not completed a recent valuation. At first the guardians attempted to see if the Griffith valuation of the Clare parts of the union could be accelerated and then they appealed to the commissioners for help. It became evident that they would have to hire a valuator and the one bid they received in response to their advertisement for the valuation of the Clare districts alone was in excess of the late valuator's annual salary. They postponed a decision. Finally they asked the commissioners' opinion on whether or not to hire a valuator to re-valuate the whole union. This process took several months.²⁰ In the end a letter to Lord Clare from Richard Griffith himself, indicating he would do his utmost to

¹⁹ Minutes, 6 & 13 September 1848.

²⁰ Minutes, 5 April; 3, 24, 31 May; 17, 28 June 1848.

complete the valuation as soon as possible, put an end to the discussion.²¹ It is quite clear that so many people had given up their holdings, died or emigrated that valuations completed only a few years before would not have been accurate. But this did not seem, in the eyes of the guardians, to mitigate the blame which they imputed to rate collectors.

The first collector to be dismissed by this board was Jeremiah O'Grady who collected the districts of Patrickswell, Crecora, Fedamore and Ballybricken. He had the misfortune of being struck by fever in the spring of 1848 and had sent an assistant to the board to explain his absence. Just as directed, O'Grady's assistant furnished a list to the board of the twelve highest defaulting ratepayers in each of the four districts along with the rates owed. The names and amounts were duly recorded in the minutes. The board's reaction to this information was to pass a resolution

That the Collector of Patrickswell, Crecora, Fedamore and Ballybricken be directed to collect within fourteen days the rates from those defaulting Ratepayers of those divisions and in disobedience of this order the Board will proceed to punish such collector as the law directs.²²

Illness or no illness, defaulting rate-payers or not, the board wanted results and fast. O'Grady was unable to produce the results but did get permission from the board to delegate his brother Michael to assume the collections. Six weeks later, with the surplus in the treasury fast diminishing the guardians tried another threatening tactic:

Resolved that the following Poor Rate Collectors be ordered to lodge by this day fortnight the sums affixed to their names and in the event of their neglecting to obey this order the Poor Law Commissioners will be applied to for his or their removal from office, viz., James H. Barry - £300, Jeremiah O'Grady - £400, James Shea - £40 and John O'Connor - £300.²³

The board was aware of a sum of about £300 of rates which Jeremiah O'Grady had in his possession but had not turned over to the clerk. Whether his illness prevented

²¹ See Appendix V.

²² Minutes, 7 June 1848.

²³ Minutes, 15 July 1848.

him from doing so, or he was not prepared to entrust that large a sum to another to hand over is unclear. Then Michael O'Grady ran into difficulty when "he was rescued of cattle distrained for Poor Rates" and had to ask the board to help him get the assistance of the constabulary. In other words he was incurring a great deal of expense for questionable gain. The guardians moved quickly to cut their losses and unanimously resolved:

. . . that inasmuch as Mr. Michael O'Grady temporary Collector has failed to use due diligence in the collection of the arrear of Rates left due by his brother Jeremiah O'Grady he is in our opinion unfit for the office and he be accordingly suspended – and inasmuch as Jeremiah O'Grady the Collector has retained in his possession for over two months a sum nearly £300 – we consider him unfit for the office and he be accordingly suspended and we request the Poor Law Commissioners to issue the necessary orders for their dismissal.²⁴

Four days later the order of the commissioners was received by the board. A week after that the guardian Joseph Hannan resigned his post to apply for the collector's position and was chosen over another candidate by a vote of 22 to 21.²⁵ The terms of his engagement were very stringent. He was to receive 8d. in the pound for rates collected in the first four months from the date of receipt of his warrant, 4d. for the next two months and he had to pay one shilling in the pound for recoverable rates outstanding after six months. It is actually surprising that there were two candidates for such a position. So desperate must some men have been that they were ready to risk life and limb to support their families. Or, perhaps some potential collectors shared the British conviction that Irish landlords were skilful hoarders of wealth who were holding out to see if the British Treasury would make a significant contribution to relieve Ireland.

James Shea was the next rate collector to be dismissed. He appeared to have been set up by one of the guardians representing the Castleconnell district of which Shea was

²⁴ Minutes, 12 August 1848.

²⁵ Minutes, 23 August 1848.

the collector. The guardian in question produced a list of defaulting rate-payers in that district who, he stated, were well able to pay a sum amounting to over £150. Then the guardians passed a motion that Shea be directed to pay “within two weeks from this date to the Treasurer of the Union the sum of £150 and in case of his disobedience to this order, application be made to the Poor Law Commissioners for his dismissal.”²⁶ It appeared that Shea had taken some land in lieu of payment for poor rate and had not reported the rate as having been paid. During the two week period he managed to deposit only £33. The order for his dismissal was received by the board on 20 September.

Dennis Donnelly, one of the Relieving Officers for Limerick City, was named to replace Shea as collector for Castleconnell. The terms of his employment were somewhat better in that he was allowed one shilling in the pound for the first four months and 6d. for the next two. The usual penalty for recoverable rates applied after six months. Donnelly received his warrant to collect on 18 October 1848, but his career as a rate collector was not to last six months. His death, no doubt due to the cholera epidemic which was raging in the Castleconnell area at the time, was announced in March 1849. Three months later, the death of city collector John O’Connor was announced.²⁷ This was the worst time in the history of the union to be without the services of rate collectors.

The positive balance in the union’s operating account which had greeted Clare’s board was depleted by September 1848 and, even though the union rarely had a positive balance for the rest of his two mandates, the guardians were obliged to reconsider their hitherto counter-productive approach to the rate collectors. They had decided, for

²⁶ Minutes, 23 August 1848.

²⁷ Minutes, 27 September, 18 October 1848; 21 March, 27 June 1849.

example, upon viewing the financial report calculating the payments owed to collectors, to extend the lesser amount paid for the fifth and sixth months to the expiration of the collectors' warrants. They then, at the expiration of the warrant, charged the one shilling penalty for recoverable rates not collected. It may have occurred to them, of course, that if they had not made this adjustment, there would have been no incentive at all for a collector to work after six months because there was no payment for collections and the penalty would have applied regardless. Whoever had come up with this scheme in the first place had not thought it through. It represented a show of force and so it was implemented by the board. The fact that it did not make sense and that it was, in fact, obviously counter-productive was only considered when the time came to actually calculate the effect of such an abusive policy. By being so caught up in its management style, designed to imitate and impress the commissioners, the board was blinded to its responsibility to manage the union judiciously.

The guardians even allowed a premium of £50 to be paid to O'Grady and Brennan for the exceptionally high expenses which they had incurred due to the heavy opposition encountered in their districts.²⁸ Whether or not they had undergone an epiphany or just come to their senses is difficult to judge. But frequently when it was made obvious to them that their decisions were reprehensible, they tried to balance the outcome as in the payment of the premiums noted above. However, on more than one occasion a humane decision they had made was overruled by the commissioners.²⁹ During this period of strained relations and untimely deaths involving rate collectors, the

²⁸ Minutes, 18 October 1848.

²⁹ See case of Catherine McNerny and her four children, Minutes 12 and 26 July 1848.

guardians were also dealing with increasingly unruly paupers and growing exasperation with the commissioners.

7.4 The inmates react

The guardians had experimented from time to time, always with the collusion of the medical officers, with the amount of food apportioned to each inmate. As the numbers rose, considerable savings would be realized if the union could reduce costs by as little as a half-pence per day per inmate. Early in the mandate of Clare's board a committee went to work in response to complaints from female inmates that they were not being sufficiently nourished. The Committee's report came a little too late to avoid a confrontation.

Your [Dietary] Committee met as directed by your Board on Thursday, June 1; the Medical Officers, the Master, the Matron and Assistant Master were in attendance. Your committee beg to very respectfully report that on a very minute and anxious enquiry are of the opinion that the present dietary is not sufficient and that many of the classes of the House appear to suffer from the present Dietary.³⁰

Its recommendation to increase the amount of food being given to each inmate was implemented on 2 June by the board. On the first day of the new regime the Master, having received some hint that there might be trouble, had taken the precaution of inviting four policemen from the nearby Thomondgate station to be on hand. A local newspaper described the debacle in detail.

the male paupers who were first summoned to the hall, partook of the fare placed before them (the addition being made) with satisfaction, appearing well pleased with the quantity supplied. After dinner they retired to their several apartments, when the females, married and single, replaced them at the dinner table, and were also served out with additional rations. The majority appeared satisfied at supper, but three or four expressed discontent, saying, "They had not been as well treated as the men." Upon hearing this, the master, knowing them to be ringleaders, called in the Police, and had them arrested. This was the signal for a general *melee*, for no sooner had the

³⁰ Minutes, 31 May, 7 June 1848.

constables laid hands on the refractories, than the entire assemblage, to the number of 800, rose *en masse*, and prepared to rescue their leaders.³¹

The ensuing riot was a disaster for the union. Although it was quite evident that an overreaction on the part of an officer of the union had caused the outbreak, neither the police nor the officers could back down from the position they had taken. To do so would have meant to lose face and weaken their ability to threaten the use of force in future. The dining area of the house was subjected to extensive damage and the police and officers had to retreat and seek assistance. After the second arrests, the women broke out of the main gate and rescued the ringleaders once again, threatening the authorities with physical violence. Once the scene had spilled out onto the street some of the men and boys joined the crowd but only a few of the boys actually participated in the fracas by hurling stones. Several local clergymen and some of the guardians had to be summoned to quell the disturbance. The reporter from the *Limerick Chronicle* could not pass up the opportunity to editorialize. He ended his report by offering the opinion that, "The appearance of the females did not denote they were either badly fed or housed, as all looked well, in rude health, strong, fat and rosy."³²

The main house was normally not the scene of pauper discontent. Some of the auxiliary workhouses were so hastily fitted up and understaffed that their inmates had much more reason to complain. There were, in fact, periodic outbreaks reported at auxiliary workhouses. The record shows, for example, that there were riots on 31 January 1849 at Mount Kennett and on 11 April 1849 at the William Street facility, but these were not caused by poor living conditions.³³ The complaints in these two cases

³¹ *Limerick Chronicle*, 3 June 1848.

³² *Ibid.*, 3 June 1848.

³³ *Limerick Reporter*, 2 February 1849; 13 April 1849.

were the same – lack of sufficient food. In fact some of the guardians were ready to admit that the inmates were undernourished. The *Limerick Chronicle*, in reporting on one of the board's weekly meetings, entered this direct quote from guardian Michael McCarthy:

In acting upon the miserable scale of dietary set down in the sealed order of the Commissioners, the officers of this house were in error. That order does not bind the Guardians to a fixed scale of dietary, but lays down a scale *less* than which cannot be given to the classes specified. The dietary was reduced without an order from this board, and I am one for increasing the allowance.³⁴

Both the board and the officers of the union were concerned with costs and not even several riots were sufficient to cause them to put the inmates' welfare ahead of monetary concerns. On the occasion of the committee's report concerning the diet of the main workhouse, the board did vote to increase the inmates' rations (too late, as it turned out). But it took several other disturbances by inmates and a histrionic performance by one of the guardians, as elaborated in the newspaper article mentioned, to induce the board to take the necessary decisions to respond to the needs of all of the Limerick union's inmates.

It is worth noting that there is a marked contrast between the reporting of workhouse disturbances by the *Limerick Chronicle* and that of the *Limerick Reporter*. The former continued to depict female rioters as over-fed amazons while the latter tried to get to the bottom of the causes for their discontent.³⁵ They both appeared to agree on the failure of the Irish Poor Law but the former depicted the rate payers as the victims while the latter clearly identified paupers as suffering the consequences of its inadequacy.

³⁴ *Limerick Chronicle*, 28 April 1849.

³⁵ Appendix VI contains the two contrasting reports which illustrate these differences of opinion.

There is obviously a gender related issue at play here. The guardians were worried about the negative influence of women of questionable character on the other inmates of the house. The officers immediately suspected that women inmates were about to cause trouble when a few complained about comparatively poor treatment. And then the journalist from the *Limerick Chronicle* took a remarkably contrary view of their behaviour, referring to women on the brink of starvation as 'amazons'. The nineteenth century discourse about the opposite sex would seem to have caused many men to come to a hasty and simplistic determination about women's motivation. Instead of looking more thoroughly into what caused women to behave the way they did, many men were content to buy into the contemporary discourse and assume the worst. Had it not been for others who were prepared to inquire more deeply into cause and effect, and women who were not prepared to be treated as insentient beings, women's road to acceptance as persons and the mitigation of gender stereotyping might have been considerably longer. Fortunately, in this case, subsequent research on the part of the *Limerick Reporter* journalist indicated that the reporter from the *Limerick Chronicle* had come to an unreasonable conclusion.

When journalism was in its infancy, it may not have been so obvious to reporters that they had an opportunity to change the tenor of the prevailing discourse. The potential power of the medium at their disposal may not have been fully grasped by some. While, on the one hand, attracting readers might be easily accomplished by humour, hyperbole or otherwise entertaining prose, on the other hand, the journalist had to maintain credibility and earn the respect of his readership. There was a tendency to

sensationalism in some of the reporting which appeared in the *Limerick Chronicle*. To describe workhouse inmates during the famine as strong, robust and full of vigorous health contrasted sharply with the more common description of them contained in the reports of travellers in Ireland. But even if they were adequately fed, which seemed not to be the case, something adverse provoked them to such desperate measures. An investigation into the matter might have uncovered the real reason for such outbreaks.

The *Limerick Reporter* journalist chose to do some further research, as he put it, “notwithstanding that some guardians publicly announced that wantonness and listless idleness produced the tumult and riots.”³⁶ He looked into the actual weight of the loaves of bread being purchased by the union in relation to the stated weight in the contracts with suppliers. He found that it was often two or three ounces short. He also found that the board had recently made a decision to reduce the amount of bread from 14 oz. to 12 oz. per adult. He asked rhetorically if some humane officials of the poor-law establishment would admit that there is no effect without a cause. He wondered about the sense of the punishment which he understood was to be meted out in the case: “We can scarcely credit such a monstrous account – 300 female paupers sent adrift on the blighted soil of Ireland.”³⁷ This was not surprising, even though incredible, as the board’s common practice was to expel ‘refractory’ inmates from the house.

The accounts of the ‘punishment book’ reports, in the minutes of the board meetings, are replete with such cases. For less severe conduct inmates’ rations were reduced for a specified period of time. The guardians and officers had obviously not made the connection between starvation and violence. The reporter concluded that the

³⁶ *Limerick Reporter*, 13 April 1849.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

inmates were goaded to madness by being kept on the brink of starvation. His lengthy treatment of the subject, had it been read by enough influential people such as the guardians, for example, might very well have begun to change the guardians' apparently insensitive attitude. There were too few guardians of the ilk of Michael McCarthy who showed genuine empathy for the inmates and too many who wanted to show that the Poor Law could be implemented to the commissioners' satisfaction.

7.5 The guardians react

But even with this board's record of compliance, there were times when the guardians could do nothing but express their dismay at the utterly unreasonable strictures of the amended Poor Law. The time came, for example, when the British Treasury wanted another reimbursement for the advances made during the Soup Kitchen program. Just as the funds in the union treasury were depleting and it became necessary to strike a new rate, several unfortunate circumstances coincided. It had been a year since the previous board had levied its special rate in September 1847 and coffers were running low. It was now clear that the 1848 potato crop would be a complete failure. Despite outdoor relief, the demands for workhouse admissions were unprecedented. The temporary workhouses which had been hastily arranged throughout the city were proving to be a nightmare to administer.³⁸ The rate collectors were meeting with escalating resistance to the payment of rates. And the British Treasury needed, the government

³⁸ The absolute worst disaster involving an auxiliary workhouse of the Limerick Union occurred on January 29, 1850, at the Clare Street facility. It housed 670 women and, after they had retired for the evening, one woman called out a fire alarm. In the rush to descend from the second floor in the pitch blackness, the stairway collapsed and 27 women were crushed to death. See *Limerick Chronicle*, 30 January 1850.

insisted, to be reimbursed for advances made under the Temporary Relief Act. The guardians received advanced notice early in August that a new rate had to be levied.

And the Clerk having mentioned it would be necessary to strike a new rate about the 1st of September as the amount in the Treasurer's hands by the end of this week would be reduced to about £500 or £600. Ordered that the Clerk prepare for this day fortnight Estimate of New Rate and notice the Guardians for that day to resolve on the amount.³⁹

The process of deciding on a new rate per electoral district always attracted the attention of the guardians and this time was no exception. Thirty-five were present on the prescribed date and Mr. Hancock was there to represent the commissioners. Lord Clare was in the chair. As had occurred in the previous year, the guardians were obliged to include in the new rate an amount sufficient to continue repaying the amounts borrowed to run the soup kitchen program. They attempted to do what many other boards had tried but failed to accomplish.⁴⁰ Their resolution merely put off the inevitable for two weeks.

Resolved that the guardians through the Right Honourable the Earl of Clare make a respectful but urgent application to the Lords of the Treasury that the amount required by the Lords and due by this union should be postponed for one year. We ground this application on the well grounded apprehension that exists of the frightful failure of the crops and general depression consequent thereon.⁴¹

Every union which had made such a request, and there were many which were poorer off than Limerick, had been turned down. The amended law gave the commissioners the power to dissolve a board of guardians and replace it with paid vice-guardians. One of the principal reasons for dissolving a board was its refusal to repay Temporary Relief Act advances. There was no chance that the Limerick board was going to put itself in such an embarrassing and untenable position. Nevertheless, when the time came to finally make the decision, the guardians had strong feelings about the situation and let the

³⁹ Minutes, 2 August 1848.

⁴⁰ Kinealy, *The Irish Poor Law*, 138-147.

⁴¹ Minutes, 16 August 1848.

commissioners know in no uncertain terms. Never before had they expressed to Dublin Castle such eloquent opposition, bordering on hostility. After deploring the refusal of the Lords of the Treasury to grant their request to delay repayment of the next instalment of the 'soup kitchen' loan, they resolved:

... that we now strike the following poundage rate (rates listed by electoral district) including the instalment referred to – under however a solemn protest we strike it on compulsion. We strike it though fully satisfied it can never be paid by a great majority of the small holders – we strike it to save the Union from having its affairs administered by Vice Guardians. We strike it though satisfied it must have the effect (constituted as the law now is) of causing many a resident proprietor either to curtail or altogether abandon the giving of employment on works of improvement. We strike it though convinced it will have the effect of crushing many an honest and hard working land holder who notwithstanding the afflictions of Providence and the profuse demoralizing and mischievous measures adopted to meet those afflictions, had hitherto successfully struggled to keep their families without the walls of the workhouse – We strike it though for these reasons it must be the means of adding to the pauperism of the ensuing year – but as before stated we strike under protest – we strike it on compulsion.⁴²

At this meeting thirty-one guardians had assembled and although the resolution reads like a powerful statement of opinion it barely passed by a vote of 18 to 13. Lord Clare, as chairman, did not have to vote on the matter. It appeared, therefore, that despite some strong feelings on the part of many guardians, there was to be no radical departure or revolutionary backlash from Limerick.

It took another month for the rate books to be prepared by the clerk. Starting on 27 September 1848, the collectors began receiving their rate books and having their warrants to collect signed, a process which took until the end of October. A week later, with the full compliment of rate-collectors now at work, the deficit in the union treasury was £4,075. The total rate for the union was £34,881 which was a little less than the special rate struck the previous year.⁴³ In fact the amount of arrears included in the total rate was only 13% while in the previous year the amount of arrears in the rate had been

⁴² Rates were struck on the basis of need rather than annually. Minutes, 30 August 1848.

⁴³ See Appendix IV.

21%. It could be said, therefore, that the collectors had improved their performance over the previous year.

The guardians' preoccupation, however, was not the improved performance of the collectors but the mounting burden on rate payers. They were only too aware, as rate payers themselves, that the poor law was pushing land owners and substantial lease holders beyond their financial limits. The first instalment on the 'soup kitchen' advances was hard enough to bear, but under the circumstances this additional demand must have horrified most of the guardians. They were very much aware, as a result of the rioting, that their efforts on behalf of the inmates were considered inadequate. Now their other constituents, the rate payers, were likely to be up in arms themselves. The commissioners, to whom they had been deferent to a fault, were the first recipients of their anger and consternation.

Another of their outbursts was triggered by a circular from the Poor Law Boundary Commissioners received by the board at one of the regular Saturday meetings at which relieving officers' reports were examined. The circular proposed an alteration which would have diminished the territory of the Limerick Union by ceding the electoral divisions of Crecora and Fedamore in the southwest to the newly proposed Croom Poor Law Union.⁴⁴ Their immediate response was, "we are unanimously of opinion against the alterations suggested and will communicate further with the Poor Law Boundary Commissioners."⁴⁵ They had the clerk notify all the guardians to be ready to give a formal response a week from the following Wednesday at the regular board meeting. On

⁴⁴ Chris O'Mahony, "The Poor Law Records of Counties Limerick, Clare and Tipperary", in *North Munster Antiquarian Journal: Supplement*, Vol. XXI (1979).

⁴⁵ Minutes, 4 November 1848.

the appointed day, there were twenty-six board members in attendance including Clare who presided. Richard M. Lynch, Poor Law Inspector, was there to observe and represent the commissioners.⁴⁶ Evidently the guardians had given their response some thought and called upon their most prominent members to lead the attack. The resolution was proposed by Augustus Stafford, M.P. and seconded by William Monsell, M.P. and resolved unanimously. They first wanted to know who was going to pay for the new union workhouse and how the commissioners proposed to adjust 'the liabilities of the present electoral districts and the proposed new Union in reference to the present act'. In other words, the guardians had been anticipating revenue in the neighbourhood of £3000 from Crecora and Fedamore and had incurred expenses in relation thereto. How would the Limerick Union be compensated?

The board then described what it saw as the key flaw in the system of Poor Law taxation. As if echoing the negative view of the Prime Minister himself, they focussed their wrath on wealthy absentee landlords. They suggested that by including wealthy estate owners, lesser landlords and smaller leaseholders in the same electoral divisions which were then uniformly rated, the wealthiest were benefiting from having the tax burden shared equally by the less wealthy.

⁴⁶ William John Hancock, the much esteemed Poor Law Inspector who had been the commissioners' eyes and ears in the Limerick Union from the beginning had died suddenly at the end of August 1848. His replacement was Richard Lynch. Lynch's appointment was announced in the minutes, 27 September 1848.

We are mostly strongly of opinion that until the area of taxation be so narrowed as generally recognize the obligation of each property to maintain its own poor, no modification of the Law – no exercise of central authority – no exercise of local energy and benevolence can prevent the present system working the total destruction of property and the pauperising of this whole island. Such a change as we recommend, come when it may must come too late to rescue many who formerly possessed property (the fruits of their own industry) from absolute destitution – too late to encourage to exertion and agricultural improvement with many whose energies have been depressed and whose means are exhausted under the operations of the present fatal system, but still in time to force upon the unimproving Landlord the impossibility of looking to his industrious neighbours to shield him any longer from the consequences of his own neglect and cruelty.⁴⁷

They considered themselves to be responsible landlords who looked after the poor on their own estates and, to give them credit, they were there doing their duty by administering the Poor Law Union. But so narrow was their focus that they could not see beyond the commonly accepted view that exploitive estate owners, who squandered their wealth outside the country, were the problem.

And then they drew on their trump card as the model union of Ireland which consistently adhered to the directives of the commissioners and applied the law to the letter.

We feel that the position we occupy among the Unions of Ireland entitles all our suggestions to grave consideration and we think our conduct as a Board of Guardians may permit us to expect that the Boundary Commissioners will not pass lightly over our solemn warning to them with which we hereby conclude. We warn them that while we shall continue to administer the present law to the best of our ability we do so in the conviction, increased by every week's experience, that the present Poor Law in Ireland is rapidly tending to the discouragement of industry, to the subversion of agriculture and to that national convulsion which ever attends the destruction of national property.⁴⁸

Their analysis of the roots of the problem and their suggested remedy were unlikely to get much attention from the commissioners and even less from the British government. As they saw it individual responsibility on the part of landowners was the key to supporting the poor. The focus of their wrath was exploitive landlords who sloughed off their responsibility onto others by clearing their estates. As landowners

⁴⁷ Minutes, 15 November 1848.

⁴⁸ Minutes, 15 November 1848.

themselves they could not imagine that the land tenure system itself, which put most of the productive land in Ireland in the hands of too few, was the problem. It had been five years since Matthew Barrington had written to Sir Robert Peel proposing peasant proprietorship and there is no doubt his fellow Limerick landlords knew of his proposal.⁴⁹ Yet it is not in the nature of ‘haves’ to agree to share with ‘have-nots’ and it is not surprising that the Limerick guardians as a board were less clear-sighted than one individual. Matthew Barrington’s solution took more than another half century to pass into law in a series of half measures culminating in the Wyndham Act of 1903.

The government’s inclination, inasmuch as assuming responsibility for feeding the Irish population was out of the question, was to turn to the better off unions to assist the most distressed. The proposed ‘Rate-in-Aid’ bill appalled the Limerick guardians even further. Immediately after re-electing the Earl of Clare chairman for a second year they set to work on a response. This time, however, they broadened their scope to suggest that income from other sources than rent be included in the wealth taxed to support the poor. They did not believe that private property alone could continue to bear the burden of poverty caused by this crisis. They expressed the opinion that, “for any rate-in-aid to be levied upon [real] property is not only a palpable contradiction in terms but also a most grievous injustice.”⁵⁰ They scoffed at the assurance that the bill would not exceed 2½% or last more than two years and reminded the government that as the inevitable bankruptcies occurred in one union after another through such fatal legislation, it would have to be repealed “in consequence of the too sure recurrence of those unhappy

⁴⁹ Matthew Barrington, *Letter of Sir Matthew Barrington, Bart. To The Right Hon. Sir Robert Peel, Bart, 28 October 1844.*, (Dublin: Browne, Printer, Nassau Street), 25-32.

⁵⁰ Minutes, 11 April 1849.

scenes which some few years since compelled the abandonment of an intolerable impost".⁵¹ Then, just in case Dublin Castle missed the reference to Britain's handling of its more distant colonies, the guardians continued:

That if the *Imperial* legislature should see fit in their wisdom to refuse all further succour to Ireland it is in the opinion of this meeting far more just to invoke all the resources of this Island in aid of the Common emergency rather than to tax merely a fraction of those resources ...that without pledging ourselves to the details of the present English Income Tax we are of opinion that a tax upon property and Income from what source soever derived would be less unjust and impolitic than an additional tax upon rateable property and we therefore pray your Honourable House to modify the Rate-in-Aid Bill now before you so as to embrace all property and income.⁵²

To consider seeking a broader tax base and then to mention it to an agency of the government were signs of the guardians' desperation in the face of this additional burden on property. They had just finished reminding the government that taxes, once introduced, had a tendency to become permanent. Yet their agitation was such that they were prepared to recommend the unthinkable – income tax, a British government measure which did not apply to Ireland.

Ever mindful of the financial embarrassment of the union and the deplorable state of the auxiliary workhouses and the sometimes adverse publicity appearing in the local newspapers, the guardians seized the opportunity which presented itself on 24 June 1849, when the workhouse received a fleeting visit from the well known traveller and critic, the Reverend Sydney Godolphin Osborne. The regular reports of his findings at workhouses all over Ireland during the famine were widely read in the *Times* of London. His language was evocative and he described in painstaking detail the scenes he witnessed. His favourable impression, therefore, was not about to be hidden from view by the guardians. At their next meeting they included the following in the minutes:

⁵¹ Minutes, 11 April 1849.

⁵² Minutes, 11 April 1849.

I have seen with great pleasure the whole arrangements of this House; they appear to me to be most creditable to all concerned. I was much struck with the Infirmary department. I have seen none in which the patients seem more carefully treated. The ventilation and general cleanliness of the wards are worthy of all praise. (signed) S.G. Osborne.⁵³

He had actually spent from 1 to 4 p.m. touring the main house and left his impressions with the officer who had conducted the visit and reported favourably, if briefly, in the media. Yet, despite trying to keep a brave face in this instance, the Rate-in-Aid bill had really been the last straw for the Limerick guardians as well. They seemed to lose heart altogether as Osborne's next report on Limerick revealed.

A year later he returned to conduct a more thorough investigation of the Limerick Union in all its facilities. This time his findings were less flattering and reflected more closely the impression today's reader of the minute books obtains of the overall state of the union towards the end of Lord Clare's second year as Chairman. Osborne's column from the *Times* was quoted verbatim in the 29 June 1850 issue of the *Limerick Chronicle*. Sections of it bear close scrutiny, not so much to indict the Limerick board as to show how misguided were the framers of the 'Poor' Law which these guardians tried their best to implement. With all the good will and pride of effort put forth by the Limerick guardians to comply with the directives of Dublin Castle in respect to the regulations of that law, here is what it came down to.

I have now to tell a very different tale. It [the Limerick Union] is generally in a condition that is disgraceful to all concerned in its government. . . I will now give some facts from a mass of disgusting detail, as to the condition of a large proportion of the inmates of the houses of this union. There were about 8,000 in the houses the day I visited them. In two large wards. . . there was an assemblage of many hundreds young children of both sexes in the most piteous condition. They were dirty in the extreme; their clothes for the most part were rags, evidently infested with vermin; a very large number of them were infected with ophthalmia in its different painful and worst stages. It was attempted to be impressed upon me that they were regularly washed. I took steps at once to prove this was false, and I now avow my belief that these wretched creatures have for many weeks been left uncleaned, in the selfsame rags in which they entered the building. The condition of the yards was such that no kennelman would keep his place another day whose hounds were found on floors in such a state.⁵⁴

⁵³ Minutes, 27 June 1849.

⁵⁴ *Limerick Chronicle*, 29 June 1850.

And this was the main house to which he was referring in describing the children. He next turned his attention to the auxiliary workhouse which just a few months earlier had experienced the accident which took the lives of twenty-seven women.

And now, sir, go with me to the Clare St. auxiliary house. There were in it 830 women, 115 of whom were reported as sick, some suffering from epilepsy. For one fortnight they had been allowed no candles, for one month no linen, &c., had been washed, for three weeks they had been utterly without soap, for months the matron had been without brushes and the usual means of cleansing the wards – so crowded are they, that they have to lie three weeks without beds or any covering. I have no language with which I can convey to you the appearance of these women; crammed into the day wards, their noise, violent demeanor, language and gestures, showed an amount of savage depraved spirit quite appalling; it was as much as the wardsmen could do, by main force, to shut the doors on them when we quitted them. . .in addition to the inmates living in filth, dirt and darkness, the building in which they live is not only far too confined for the numbers in it, but so decayed as to the timbers supporting the floors, the walls, &c., that it is not safe.⁵⁵

Then, as if to add insult to injury, Osborne ended his column with a note to his readers that he would next write about the Kilrush Union which he described as “in a condition of the country far more appalling than anything to which the Limerick board are exposed.” He assured his readers that he would prove that “active superintendence and judicious arrangement [could] sustain a very different state of things.”⁵⁶

To have the management of the Limerick Union compared unfavourably with that of Kilrush must have been a bitter and humiliating pill for the guardians to swallow. They had clearly articulated their abhorrence of the possibility of having their board replaced by vice-guardians. The Kilrush board had been dissolved for incompetence.⁵⁷ The only explanation for the Limerick guardians to have let their union come to this unfortunate pass was that, in despair, they had given up the hope of managing it under the burden of so odious and ill-conceived a law as the amended Poor Law Ireland Act.

⁵⁵ *Limerick Chronicle*, 29 June 1850.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Murphy, Ignatius, *A People Starved: Life and Death in West Clare 1845-51* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1996), 64-65; Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, 176-177; Ó Murchadha, *Sable Wings*, 196.

Population of Limerick Workhouse

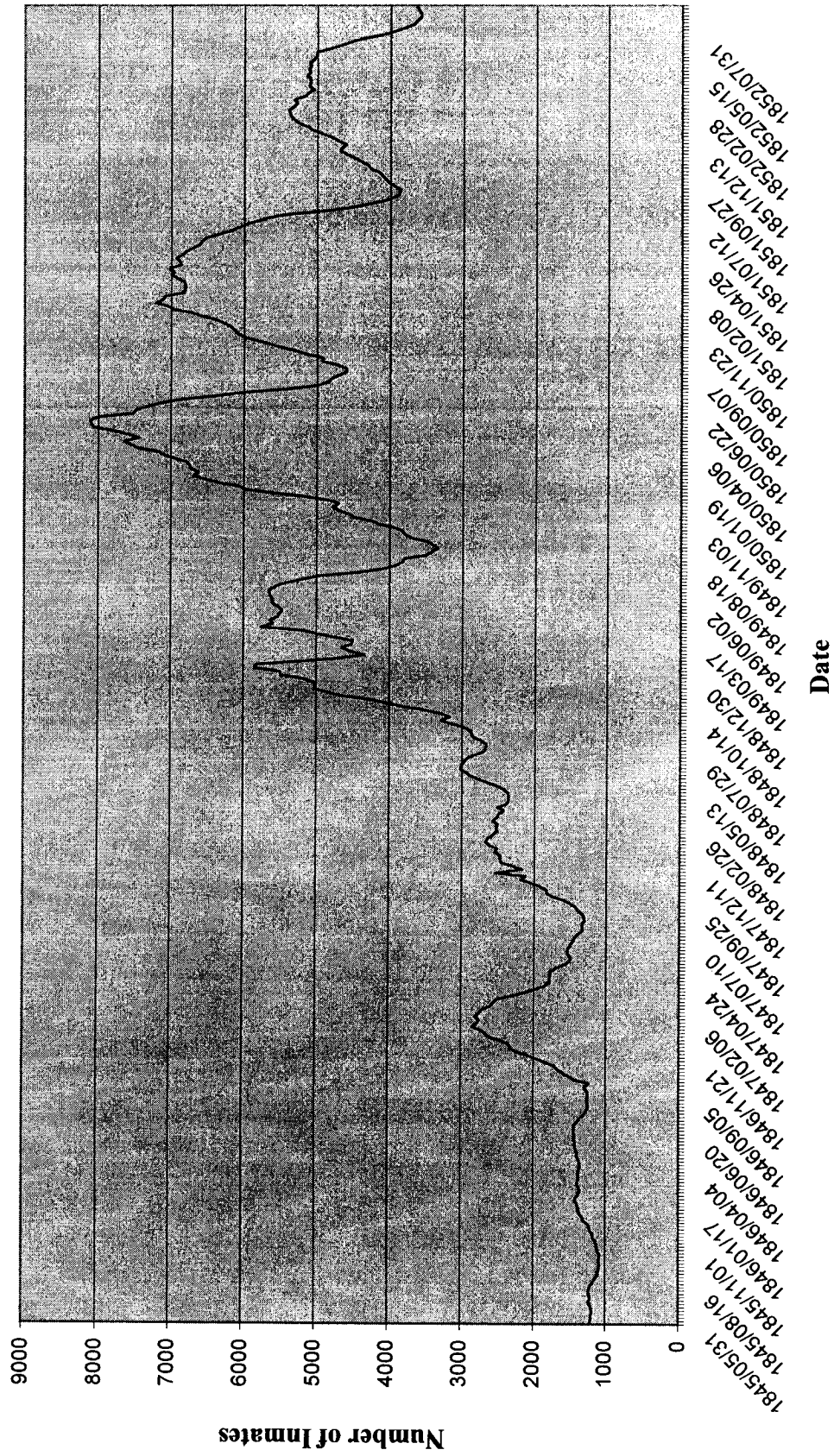


Figure 5. Chart of the weekly population rate in the Limerick workhouse (incl. auxiliaries) during the Famine years.

With the possible exception of the period of 1847 before the Temporary Relief Act was passed, this period represented the worst of times for the Limerick Poor Law Union during the famine. Before Clare's second year as chairman was over, the population of the workhouse and auxiliaries was approaching 7000 on its way to an all-time high of 8111 in June of 1850.⁵⁸ During his second year the union treasury did not once achieve a positive balance and another rate had to be levied in May 1849. If this were not enough, inmate discontent re-erupted in violence. There were 206 more deaths during that second year bringing the total to 1576 but the average weekly population was considerably higher and so the deaths per capita actually declined. Thankfully, potato blight in the 1849 harvest was only partial and subsided gradually in subsequent years. After June 1850 the population of the house began to decline with lesser peaks occurring in the winter months. With such statistics in mind it is not difficult to understand how Clare and his fellow guardians, despite their earlier expressed pride of accomplishment, might have concluded that their task was utterly futile.

Conclusion

Lord Clare's two year term of office was troublesome and although the board took every opportunity to make itself look good to the commissioners, it could not hide from the fact that it was losing control of the management of the union. Neither Lord Clare nor the guardians who served with him could be blamed for the unfortunate circumstances which converged on their administration. Many of these were utterly beyond their control. They were about to be hit, in the autumn of 1848, with the fourth

⁵⁸ Minutes, 28 March 1849 to 22 June 1850. See Chart "Population of Limerick Workhouse" on page 229.

straight blighted potato harvest and the second complete destruction of the crop in three years. Despite outdoor relief which had been introduced by amendment to the Poor Law, demands for admission to the workhouse escalated dramatically. Auxiliary workhouse accommodation had to be hastily arranged and finances never allowed for leased premises to be properly fitted up or adequately staffed. Fever in its various forms continued to plague the inmates and their health was again put in jeopardy by a brief but deadly cholera epidemic. In other words, circumstances did not favour a positive outcome of Clare's stewardship.

Nevertheless, well into its second year, the board and the officers did manage to keep the main house clean and orderly. It received high praise from some prominent visitors and the guardians took full advantage of the favourable publicity. The board successfully participated in an emigration program which saw 74 of its orphan girls given the opportunity of a new start in Australia. But the growing magnitude of the crisis and the government's insistence on non-intervention combined to overwhelm the union and its board of guardians.

The board had inherited a burial crisis from its predecessors who had embarked on a temporary solution of interring deceased paupers within the grounds of the workhouse. Clare's board did not anticipate the coming need very well and handled the burial problem in what could only be described as a lackadaisical fashion. What should have been a relatively minor problem of logistics became a long drawn-out and embarrassing fiasco which revealed a telling lack of management skills. The use of force to motivate rate collectors really began to fail as a tactic when rate-payers, reeling under the increasing burden of the law, turned to legal challenges to the valuation of their

property or violent confrontation of collectors. The guardians attempted periodically to reduce costs by adjusting the dietary of the house only to be challenged by riotous behaviour on the part of the inmates. Outbreaks of bad behaviour to express their fear or anger or resentment seemed to grow in number as conditions worsened and the local media took full advantage of the guardians' embarrassment.

Finally, as the Rate-in Aid bill was approved by parliament and it was clear that the government's intention was to put the whole burden of poverty on property, the guardians, most of whom were property owners, appeared to despair of ever successfully managing the workhouse. They, therefore, abandoned the very people whom they were charged to protect. It was as if they had been buried by an avalanche of unfortunate circumstances which caused them to abandon hope and relinquish their responsibilities. The paupers were left to fend for themselves and their riotous behaviour reflected the degradation to which they had been subjected. The leader or leaders which this catastrophe called for to revolutionize relief for the poor (in a society which could certainly have afforded it) were simply not there to rise to the occasion. They were not present in sufficient numbers in Russell's cabinet to support more radical legislation; they were not present at Dublin Castle where the commissioners seemed beholden only to the Treasury; and certainly not there in Limerick where the guardians measured their success in terms of compliance with the law rather than the state of health and well-being of the inmates.

In the neighbouring union of Ennis, where similar outcomes were experienced, the author who studied the famine years entitled his conclusion on the performance of the guardians, "Ineptitude, Indifference, Negligence: the Ennis Guardians." Although we

would not come to such a harsh conclusion about the Limerick guardians, we have described a certain amount of ineptitude on their part in the handling of routine management problems. Their apparent despair by the end of Clare's second year of office was certainly leading them in the direction of indifference. We have pointed out their negligence, for example, in too hastily transferring inmates to unfit auxiliary workhouses. And yet we would rather take the view, based on the evidence in the Minute Books, that the Limerick guardians were trying to do their best to soldier on in impossibly difficult circumstances, desperately trying to fulfill the obligations to service to which they were called. The framework within which they were operating was so constrained by the ideological predisposition of the government and Poor Law administrators that success was unlikely. And the deadly results, which the guardians had to witness on a weekly basis, were accepted by the government and its officials as a necessary outcome.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Ciarán Ó Murchadha, *Sable Wings*, 209-212.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

In the early nineteenth century it was very difficult for British free-traders to overcome the stranglehold the landed aristocracy had on the protectionist measures which kept their estates earning the highest possible returns. But the visionaries who pioneered the dismantling of protectionist legislation saw Britain's prosperity in trading with the whole world. For trade to accelerate and the nation to prosper, it had to be unencumbered by government. The market could only function effectively if it was left on its own. 'Laissez-faire' economic policy became sacrosanct. Among these visionaries Robert Peel, for example, sacrificed a great deal to promote his vision of a freer market. In 1846 the repeal of the Corn Laws, which had kept the price of British grain artificially high, split his Tory party and blocked it from obtaining a majority in the House of Commons for the better part of three decades. But posterity has judged Peel kindly for putting the nation's interests ahead of his own, despite the cost to himself and his party.¹

In spite of the prosperity which followed the repeal of the Corn Laws, the manpower that would make industrial Britain into the economic power it became had to fight every step of the way to be allotted its share of the wealth which its labour created. Along the way many labourers suffered terrible poverty. The British government took a long and tortuous route to determining what was an appropriate response to this suffering. In the case of its nearby colony, Ireland, peopled by aliens and not

¹ Eric Evans, *The Forging of the Modern State: Early Industrial Britain 1783-1870* (London: Longmans, 1996), 264-267.

industrialized, its response was wholly inappropriate. The Poor Laws passed for Britain in 1834 and Ireland in 1838 were based on a flawed perception of the nature of man and what motivates him to work.

Faced with a crisis in Ireland, Peel reacted quickly with extraordinary measures to deal directly with the consequences of potato blight – public works to provide income, food to keep market prices in check. His focus was on the needs of the people and he used means other than the Poor Law to respond. But the angry protectionists who resented the repeal of the Corn Laws had their revenge to exact and Peel's government fell early in the crisis. Lord John Russell's Whig government took over in June 1846 and was in power for the duration of what went from a crisis to a full-blown famine. The extraordinary measures his government tried were qualified by their animus toward Irish landlords and the Irish people in general.

Russell's Whig cabinet was ideologically driven but not united. His ministers' degrees of liberalism varied from radical to quite moderate with 'moralists' in significant numbers. It is safe to say that their interest in freedom tended to be more concerned with a free market, unencumbered by government restrictions, rather than with individual liberties. Some ministers were still quite suspicious of democracy. The moderates and the moralists in his cabinet overwhelmed their more 'liberal' colleagues. Russell's plans for turning Ireland into a peaceable kingdom did not receive a warm welcome. As for the Irish, in his cabinet's view, they were even less ready to assume the responsibilities of democracy than 'Anglo-Saxon' Britons. And so in their decision-making during the famine, they were less disposed to favour the plight of individual Irish paupers than the economic welfare of the nation.

Liberal thinking had evolved but, during the age of reform in the 1830s and 40s, as Peter Mandler has argued, reverted to a more whiggish emphasis on the aristocracy's moral responsibility to respond to the needs of the lower orders.² This tended to mean being sensitive to the external pressure being expressed by the lower orders and deciding what was best for them rather than extending power to them to act in their own behalf.

In the Whigs' view, 'soft-hearted men of good intentions' might have spent less on schemes to prevent the poor Irish from defrauding the systems put in place to provide work. What it cost to measure piece work during Russell's public works program might, therefore, have been saved and channelled into feeding the starving. But that would have been a humanitarian gesture, too parochial and unsuitable for national policy. Natural law reformers had provided a rationale for why men work. It was basically to use the fruits of their labour to stave off starvation and provide shelter for their families. But workers had a natural tendency to over-procreate and threatened the ability of the nation to provide for all its citizens. Natural law reformers had the support of influential clergymen who backed up their findings with theological approbation. To provide labourers relief from the necessity to work by augmenting their wages or giving them free food was to deprive them of the incentive they needed to work and survive. As these reformers saw it, the poor laws would have to be abolished to eliminate this evil. Radical reformers knew better. They argued that men only act to promote the greatest happiness for themselves, good governments act to provide the greatest happiness for the majority of their citizens. It would be necessary, therefore, to establish houses of 'correction' for citizens whose poor choices threatened their own survival. But by being less congenial

² Mandler, *Aristocratic Government*, 2-9.

than the homes of poor, honest labourers, these workhouses would teach paupers that work was preferable. In choosing to overcome the need for assistance and quitting the workhouse for gainful employment, paupers would prove the 'utilitarian principle' by acting in their own best interests. The Poor Laws of both Britain and Ireland reflected this evolution in thinking.

The prevailing wisdom, therefore, when an ecological disaster hit Ireland, with one third of its people living in poverty, did not favour a humanitarian response based on the needs of individual citizens. The structures in place, the Poor Law with its workhouse system, modified somewhat to meet the crisis, would have to do to provide relief. It was a local problem which would have to be dealt with locally. Ireland's full membership in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland notwithstanding, the famine was never considered to be an imperial responsibility. On the contrary, for the Whigs, Britain's responsibility was to change Ireland into a successful economic entity. If this had to involve reducing the size of the population and transferring estate ownership to a more entrepreneurial breed of landlord, then so be it.

Governments do not make decisions in a vacuum and sooner or later the consequences of their policy initiatives are delivered in the form of services. But to get a proper appreciation for the consequences of their decisions, it has been helpful to examine the delivery of services on the ground, so to speak. By virtue of the structure which the Irish Poor Law created, with Poor Law unions and boards of guardians meeting weekly to administer these unions, we have been able to observe the delivery process at close hand. The fact that the Limerick Regional Archives still preserves the minute books of the board of guardians of the Limerick Union written in longhand,

weekly, during the famine enables us to see at first hand the board's decision-making process, the officers' coping mechanisms and the inmates' reactions, sometimes passive, as if resigned to their fate, sometimes more energetic, as if outraged. In this way the Irish Potato Famine, understood for years to be the cataclysmic turning point of nineteenth century Irish history, takes on a human face. The response of the government, in the circumstances, although ideologically justifiable in a hypothetically ideal situation, looks cruel, heartless, ill-conceived and even murderous in practice.

Of course, paupers rarely get the opportunity to write history, but the clerk of the union was charged with the responsibility of recording it. We have been able, therefore, to observe what directives the Poor Law commissioners gave the guardians, the decisions the guardians took in consequence of these orders, the reactions of the officers of the union and the consequences for the paupers. In this light we have been given significant insights into the Irish potato famine.

The structure that was put in place by the passing of the Irish Poor Law might have afforded the Limerick board of guardians an opportunity to make a difference in the impact of the potato blight on the paupers of the union. They might have been able to feed the starving, comfort or even heal the sick, take care of the orphans and prepare them for a productive life. But that would have necessitated sharing the power of the commissioners. In passing the law, the Whig government of 1838, and in amending it, Russell's Whig government of 1846-52 envisioned a very centralized system with little or no sharing of power. The real authority to administer the law was in the hands of the commissioners and when the law was amended even some of that authority was taken away and transferred to the Treasury. It appeared that from the government's perspective

the commissioners were the agents of enforcement and nothing more. Similarly, it appeared that from the commissioners' perspective the guardians were agents of enforcement and nothing more. The power to act, therefore, on the part of the guardians was very limited. They were not offered the opportunity to bring whatever good will and energy they might have been able to muster to administer the union. They were restricted to the use of coercion to implement the law. It would have taken an exceptional cast of characters, prepared to risk all and wrest power from the government and its agents, to adequately feed the hungry, heal the sick and provide for the orphans in the Limerick Union. Of the four leaders observed during the famine years, none were likely to have been able to win over and direct such a team of visionaries. Nor would any union have had the right to expect such local leadership. The Poor Law unions did, however, have a right to expect leadership from their government. Had the Whigs been willing to trust the implementation of the law to the commissioners by giving them the power to act and had the commissioners been willing to trust the local authorities by listening to particular cases and giving financial assistance where needed, much death and dislocation would have been avoided. The means to deliver relief were always at the government's disposal. Its record of spending on other crises of the period demonstrates this beyond a doubt.³

The case we have studied, in terms of wealth, was a middle-of-the-road union. If one were to take the total valuation of the Limerick Union in 1841 (£206,862) and divide it by the population at that time (132,067), the product (£1.566) would indicate the

³ Famine historians have compared the £8.3m spent on Irish Famine relief to the £20m used to compensate slave owners in the Caribbean when slavery was abolished there in 1833 and the £69m expended on the Crimean War of 1854-56. See Peter Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, 333.

potential rental income value per capita available to support the poor of the union. If the wealth of the country had been fairly evenly distributed, the range between the richest and the poorest unions would not have been very great. In fact the potential rental income per capita in the richest union, Dunshaughlin in Co. Meath, was £5.646, while in the poorest union, Glenties in Co. Donegal, it was £0.375. Limerick was 57th out of 130 in potential rental income per capita.⁴ If the premise on which the Poor Law was based had made any sense at all then the property of Limerick would have had an average chance of supporting its paupers during the famine. As we have seen, the consequences of the law for Limerick were financially disastrous.⁵ If the property of the Limerick Union could not support the poverty therein, how much worse must it have been for the 73 unions which were poorer than Limerick? One can see that the law was ill-conceived in that the ratio of valuation to population put the poorer unions at a terrible disadvantage. It was inevitable that there would be parts of the country where there would be scant resources to provide poor relief. But even in the wealthier unions, as Seamus O'Brien has shown in his study of the Mullingar union in Co. Westmeath, excess deaths occurred among able-bodied labourers because they "were the unwitting victims of the presumption that the union's undoubted relative wealth was evenly distributed."⁶

⁴ The figures per capita work out as follows: Limerick £1. 11s. 4d.; Dunshaughlin £5. 12s. 11d; Glenties 7s. 6d. To help the reader understand these comparisons, Appendix VII lists the twelve richest and the twelve poorest unions by potential rental income value, from which the poor rate was levied.

⁵ The belated attempt by the government to redistribute wealth from richer to poorer unions, by passing the Rate-in-Aid bill, required all to levy an additional tax to create a fund from which aid would be supplied where needed. It served, first and foremost to create resentment in the wealthier unions and deepen divisions within Ireland. See James Grant, "The Great Famine and the poor law in Ulster: the rate-in-aid issue of 1849," *Irish Historical Studies* XXVII, No. 105 (May 1990): 30-47.

⁶ Seamus O'Brien, *Famine and Community in Mullingar Poor Law Union, 1845-49* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999), 58.

To break down further the responsibility of property to support poverty into electoral districts within the union, which would have to be taxed at different rates to support the pauper population within each district, exacerbated the situation even further. This set guardians within the union at odds with one another forcing them to compete in order to try to limit the tax impact on the districts which they represented. The Limerick Union provided the commissioners with a perfect example of this anomaly within the law and yet they were unable to recommend a satisfactory solution for Limerick let alone realize that the problem within one average union was a microcosm of what Ireland as a whole would face. Instead of allowing that the wealth of the whole nation would have to be redistributed to relieve poverty where it occurred, they insisted that local property had to pay for local poverty. Instead of allowing that the wealth of the United Kingdom would have to be redistributed to relieve the poverty in Ireland, its poorest kingdom, it insisted that Irish property would have to pay for Irish poverty. And by the time the belated Rate-in-Aid bill had been passed, acknowledging this anomaly in the law, hundreds of thousands had already died.

In fact the situation in the Limerick Union went from bad to worse during those crucial five years because the guardians adopted the same strategy as the commissioners and the government. Even though the guardians analysed the situation as it deteriorated and expressed their misgivings about the law to the commissioners in lengthy and emotive resolutions, they could not proceed to the next step of undertaking corrective measures on their own. They were forced, therefore, to witness the consequences at first hand, while being powerless to act. They had to hold to the ideological position maintained by the government because it was the only safe position to take. To do

otherwise would have meant to abdicate their responsibility to vice-guardians who would have no knowledge of the union and less sympathy for its paupers. As responsible persons, the guardians stood their ground and took the consequences, described in all their gory details by a travelling journalist in the local newspaper. Embarrassing as this must have been for the guardians of the union, there were no grounds on which to indict them as their actions were ideologically in perfect harmony with the directives of the commissioners and the policy of the government.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources:

Manuscript Sources

Limerick Poor Law Union Minute Books. 11 Volumes, 1845-52. Michael St., Limerick: Limerick Regional Archives.

Printed Primary Sources

Alcock, Major T. St. Leger. *Observations on the Poor Relief Bill for Ireland.* London: James Ridgeway, 1847.

Annual Reports of the Poor Law Commissioners with Appendices. Volumes 5, 8, 9, 11. London: W. Clowes and Sons, 1839, 1842, 1843, 1845.

Barrington, Sir Matthew. *Letter of Sir Matthew Barrington, Bart. To the Right Hon. Sir Robert Peel, Bart.* Dublin: Browne, Printers, 1844.

Census of Ireland for the years 1841 and 1851.

Hansard's Parliamentary Debates. Volumes 85, 87, 95, 96, 97. March 1846 – April 1848.

Parliamentary Papers: Famine (Ireland). 8 Volumes. Shannon: Irish University Press, 1968.

Peel, Sir Robert. *Correspondence relating to Irish Policy 1844-45 (Ministerial Crisis – 1845).* Wakefield: Microform Academic Publishers. Microfilm # 95709-5.

Peel, Sir Robert. *Correspondence relating to Irish Policy 1846.* Wakefield: Microform Academic Publishers. Microfilm # 95709-6.

Peel, Sir Robert. *Prime Minister's Correspondence 1844-46.* Wakefield: Microform Academic Publishers. Microfilm # 95709-3.

Report from HM Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of the Law and Practices in Respect to the Occupation of Land in Ireland. Vol. 2, Witnesses 613-623, 625, 632, 652. 26 August, 1844.

Newspapers

Limerick and Clare Examiner, 1846-1855.

Limerick Chronicle, 1844-1852.

Limerick Reporter, 1844-1852.

Munster News and Clare Advocate, 1894.

Secondary Sources:

Akenson, Donald Harman. *The Irish Diaspora*. Toronto: P. D. Meany Company, Inc., 1993.

Attridge, Derek, Geoff Bennington and Robert Young, eds. *Post-structuralism and the question of history*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Barthes, Roland. "Historical Discourse," in *Introduction to Structuralism*, ed. Michael Lane, 145-155. New York: BASIC BOOKS Inc., 1970.

Bernstein, George L. "Liberals, the Irish Famine and the Role of the State." *Irish Historical Studies* Volume XXIX, No. 116 (November 1995): 513-536.

Black, R.D.C. *Economic Thought and the Irish Question*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960.

Boyce, D. George. *Nineteenth Century Ireland: The Search for Stability*. Maryland: Barnes & Noble, 1991.

Boyce, D. George and Alan O'Day. *The Making of Modern Irish History: Revisionism and the Revisionist Controversy*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Boylan, Thomas A., and Timothy P. Foley. *Political Economy and Colonial Ireland*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Brady, Ciaran, ed. *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1994.

Butterfield, H. *The Whig Interpretation of History*. London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1951.

- Carroll, Clare and Patricia King, eds. *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory*. Cork: Cork University Press, 2003.
- Conway, Thomas G. "The Approach to an Irish Poor Law 1828-33." *Eire-Ireland*, 6:1(Spring 1971): 65-81.
- Cooke, Colman M. "Sir William Gregory: Politician, Colonial Governor, Patron of the Arts, 1817-1892." *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, Volume 37(1979/80): 35-53.
- Cowherd, G. Raymond. *Political Economists and the English Poor Laws*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1977.
- _____. *The Politics of English Dissent: the religious aspects of liberal and humanitarian reform movements from 1815-1848*. New York: New York University Press, 1956.
- Crossman, Virginia. *Emergency Legislation and agrarian disorder in Ireland, 1821-41*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1996.
- Curtis, L.P., Jr. "Incumbered Wealth: Landed Indebtedness in Post-Famine Ireland." *American Historical Review* Volume 85 (1980): 332-367.
- Daly, Mary E. *The Famine in Ireland*. Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1986.
- Davis, Richard. *The Young Ireland Movement*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987.
- Donnelly, James S., Jr. *The Great Irish Potato Famine*. Gloucestershire GL5 2BU: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2001.
- _____. *The Land and the People of Nineteenth Century Cork*. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975.
- Dunkley, Peter. "Paternalism, the Magistracy and Poor Relief in England, 1795-1834." *International Review of Social History* Volume 24 (1979): 371-397.
- Edsall, Nicholas C. *The Anti-Poor Law Movement: 1834-44*. New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield. Inc., 1971.
- Edwards, R. Dudley, and T. Desmond Williams, eds. *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History 1845-52*. Dublin: Browne and Nolan Limited, 1962.
- Ellis, Eilish. *Emigrants from Ireland, 1847-1852*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., Ltd., 1977.

- Evans, Eric J. *The Forging of the Modern State: Early Industrial Britain, 1783-1870*. London: Longmans, 1996.
- Foley, Tadhg and Seán Ryder, eds. *Ideology and Ireland in the Nineteenth Century*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998.
- Foley, Timothy P. *Political Economy and Colonial Ireland*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Fox, R. Barclay. *Distress in Ireland: Narrative of R. Barclay Fox's Visit to Some Parts of the West of Ireland*. London: 1847.
- Grant, James. "The Great Famine and the poor law in Ulster: the rate-in-aid issue of 1849." *Irish Historical Studies* Volume XXVII, No.105 (May 1990): 30-47.
- Gray, Peter. *Famine, Land and Politics: British Government and Irish Society 1843-50*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999.
- _____. "Punch and the Great Famine." *History Ireland* Volume 1, No. 2 (Summer 1993): 26-33
- _____. "'Shovelling out your Paupers': The British State and Irish Famine Migration 1846-50." *Pattern of Prejudice* Vol. 33, No. 4 (1999), 47-65.
- Griffiths, A.R.G. "The Irish Board of Works in the Famine Years." *The Historical Journal* XIII, 4 (1970): 634-652.
- Harris, David. *Justifying State Welfare: The New Right versus The Old Left*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987.
- Hawkins, David R. *Power vs. Force: The Hidden Determinants of Human Behavior*. Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, Inc., 2002.
- Hayes, Alan and Diane Urquhart, eds. *The Irish Women's History Reader*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Hernon, Joseph M. Jr. "A Victorian Cromwell: Sir Charles Trevelyan, the Famine and the Age of Improvement." *Eire-Ireland* 23:3 (Fall 1987): 15-29.
- Himmelfarb, Gertrude. *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984.
- Hill, Michael, J. *The Welfare State in Britain: A Political History since 1945*. Aldershot, England: Edward Elgar, 1993.

- Jay, Elizabeth. *The Evangelical and Oxford Movements*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Jenkins, Brian. *Era of Emancipation: British Government of Ireland, 1812-1830*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988.
- _____. *Henry Goulburn, 1784-1856: A Political Biography*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996.
- _____. *Sir William Gregory of Coole: The Biography of an Anglo-Irishman*. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Limited, 1986.
- Kavanaugh, Ann C. *John FitzGibbon: Earl of Clare*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1997.
- Kelleher, Margaret and James Murphy, eds. *Gender Perspectives in Nineteenth Century Ireland: public and private spheres*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1997.
- Kennedy, Liam. "Bastardy and the Great Famine: Ireland, 1845-50." In *Famine, Land and Culture in Ireland*, ed. Carla King. Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2000.
- Kerr, Donal A. *'A Nation of Beggars?': Priests, People and Politics in Famine Ireland, 1846-52*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.
- Kiberd, Declan. *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Killen, John, ed. *The Famine Decade: Contemporary Accounts, 1841-1851*. Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1995.
- Kinealy, Christine. *A Death-Dealing Famine: The Great Hunger in Ireland*. London: Pluto Press, 1997.
- _____. *The Great Irish Famine: Impact, Ideology and Rebellion*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002.
- _____. *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845-52*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan Ltd., 1994.
- King, Carla, ed. *Famine Land and Culture in Ireland*. Dublin: UCD Press, 2000.

- Kissane, Noel. *The Irish Famine: A Documentary History*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995.
- Lane, Padraig G. "The Encumbered Estates Court, Ireland, 1848-1849." *The Economic and Social Review* Vol. 3, No. 3 (April 1972): 413-453.
- Lee, Joseph, ed. *Irish Historiography: 1970-1979*. Cork: Cork University Press, 1981.
- Lewis, Samuel, ed. *A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland*. 2 Volumes. London: S. Lewis & Co., 1837.
- Luddy, Maria. "'Abandoned Women and Bad Characters': Prostitution in Nineteenth Century Ireland." In *The Irish Women's History Reader*, eds. Alan Hayes and Diane Urquhart, 87-94.
- MacDonagh, Oliver. *The Emancipist: Daniel O'Connell, 1830-47*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989.
- MacDonald, Brian. *A Time of Desolation: Clones Poor Law Union 1845-50*. The Diamond, Monaghan: Clogher Historical Society, 2001.
- Mandler, Peter. *Aristocratic Government in the Age of Reform: Whigs and Liberals, 1830-1852*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.
- Mitchel, John. *An Apology for the British Government in Ireland*. Dublin: O'Donoghue and Company, 1905.
- _____. *An Ulsterman for Ireland: Being Letters to the Protestant Farmers, Labourers and Artisans of the North of Ireland*. Dublin: The Candle Press, 1917.
- _____. *Jail Journal*. Dublin: M. H. Gill & Son, Ltd., 1854.
- Mokyr, Joel. *Why Ireland Starved: A Quantitative and Analytical History of the Irish Economy, 1800-1850*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983.
- Mokyr, Joel and Cormac Ó Gráda. *Famine Disease and Famine Mortality: Lessons from the Irish Experience, 1845-1850*. Dublin: Department of Economics, UCD, WP99/12, 1999.
- Moody, T.W., ed. *Irish Historiography: 1936-1970*. Dublin: Dublin University Press Ltd., 1971.
- Morash, Christopher and Richard Hayes, eds. *Fearful Realities: New Perspectives on the Famine*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1996.
- Morash, Christopher. *Writing the Irish Famine*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.

Munsell, F. Darrell. "Charles Edward Trevelyan and Peelite Irish Famine Policy, 1845-1846." *Societas* Vol. I (July 1971): 299-315.

Nicholls, Sir George. *A History of the Irish Poor Law*. New York: Augustus M. Kelly, 1967.

Nowlan, Kevin B. "Famine and the Failure of Parliament." In *The Irish Parliamentary Tradition*, ed. Brian Farrell, 170-180. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1973.

_____. *The Politics of Repeal*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965.

O'Brien, Gerard. "The Establishment of Poor Law Unions in Ireland, 1838-43." *Irish Historical Studies* Vol. XXIII, No. 90 (Nov. 1982): 97-120.

_____. "Workhouse Management in Pre-Famine Ireland." *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* Vol. 86, Section C (1986): 113-134.

O'Brien, Seamus. *Famine and Community in Mullingar Poor Law Union, 1845-1849: Mud Huts and Fat Bullocks*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999.

Ó Cathaoir, Brendan. *Famine Diary*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999.

O'Connor, John. *The Workhouses of Ireland: The Fate of Ireland's Poor*. Dublin: Anvil Books, 1995.

O'Faolain, Sean. *King of the Beggars: A Life of Daniel O'Connell*. Dublin: Poolbeg Press, 1995.

O'Gorman, Michael. *A Pride of Paper Tigers: A History of the Great Hunger in the Scariff Union Workhouse from 1839 to 1853*. Tuamgraney, Co. Clare: East Clare Heritage, 1994.

Ó Gráda, Cormac. *Black '47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine in History, Economy, and Memory*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999.

_____. *Ireland before and after the Famine: Explorations in Economic History, 1800-1925*. Manchester, 1988.

_____. "Making Irish Famine History in 1995." *History Workshop Journal* Issue 42, (1996), 87-104.

_____. *The Great Irish Famine*. London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1989.

- O'Mahony, Chris. "Emigration from the Limerick Workhouse 1848-1860." *The Old Limerick Journal* (Spring 1982): 23-26.
- _____. "The Poor Law Comes to Limerick." *The Old Limerick Journal* Vol. 6 (Spring 1981): 19-21.
- _____. "The Poor Law Records of Counties Limerick, Clare and Tipperary." *Supplement to the North Munster Antiquarian Journal* Vol. XXI (1979).
- O Murchadha, Ciarán. "Limerick Union Workhouse during the Great Famine." *The Old Limerick Journal* 32 (Winter 1995): 39-43.
- _____. *Sable Wings over the Land: Ennis County Clare, and its Wider Community during the Great Famine*. Ennis: Clasp Press, 1998.
- O'Neill, Kevin. Review of *A New History of Ireland, V: Ireland Under the Union I: 1801-1870*, by W.E Vaughan, ed. *Irish Literary Supplement* 10, 2 (Fall 1991): 9-10.
- Osborne, Lord Sydney Godolphin. *Gleanings in the West of Ireland*. London: T. & W. Boone, 1850.
- Póirtéir, Cathal. *Famine Echoes*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1995.
- _____, ed. *The Great Irish Famine*. RTÉ/Mercier Press, 1995.
- Potter, Matthew. *The Life and Times of William Monsell, First Baron Emly of Tervoe (1812-1894)*. Limerick: Treaty Press, 1995.
- Poynter, J.R. *Society and Pauperism: English Ideas on Poor Relief, 1795-1834*. Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1969.
- Prest, John. *Lord John Russell*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1972.
- Ranelagh, John O'Beirne. *A Short History of Ireland*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Rimlinger, Gaston V. *Welfare Policy and Industrialization in Europe, America and Russia*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1971.
- Scally, Robert James. *The End of Hidden Ireland: Rebellion, Famine and Emigration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Seavoy, Ronald E. *Famine in Peasant Societies*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1986.

- Sen, Amartya. *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlements and Deprivation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986.
- Shklar, Judith. *The Faces of Injustice*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.
- Smith, Adam. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. New York: The Modern Library, 1937.
- Snell, K.M.D. *Letters from Ireland during the Famine of 1847 by Alexander Somerville*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1994.
- Solow, Barbara Lewis. *The Land Question and the Irish Economy, 1870-1903*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971.
- Tierney, Mark, O.S.B. *Glenstal Abbey: A Historical Guide*. Co. Limerick: Glenstal Abbey Publications, 1995.
- Tóibín, Colm and Diarmaid Ferriter. *The Irish Famine, a documentary*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2001.
- Trevelyan, Charles Edward. "The Irish Crisis." *Edinburgh Review* No. CLXXV (January 1848): 229-320.
- Vaughan, W.E., ed. *A New History of Ireland V, Ireland Under the Union, 1801-1870*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.
- Vincent, Joan. "A Political Orchestration of the Irish Famine: County Fermanagh, May 1847." In *Approaching the Past: Historical Anthropology through Irish Case Studies*, eds. Marilyn Silverman and P.H. Gulliver, 75-98. New York: Columbus University Press, 1992.
- Walsh, Peter, et al. *An Gorta Mór: Famine in the Swinford Union*. Co. Mayo: Swinford Historical Society, undated.
- Walsh, Victor A. "The Great Famine and its Consequences." *Eire-Ireland*, 23:4 (Winter 1988): 3-31.
- Whelan, Kevin. "Pre and Post-Famine Landscape Change." In *The Great Irish Famine*, ed. Cathal Póirtéir, 19-33. Dublin: Mercier Press, 1995.
- _____. "The Revisionist Debate in Ireland." *Boundary 2* 31:1 (2004): 179-205.
- Woodham-Smith, Cecil. *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1849*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1962.

Theses:

Fogarty, John B. "The Impossible Burden: Thurles Poor Law Union 1847-1848." M.A. thesis, University College Cork, 1999.

Foley, Keiran. "Kerry during the Great Famine, 1845-52." Ph.D. thesis, University College Dublin, 1997.

Kinealy, Christine. "The Irish Poor Law, 1838-62." Ph.D. thesis, Trinity College, Dublin, 1984.

Ryan, D'Arcy. "The Poor Law in Gort, County Galway, Ireland, during the Great Famine: A Case Study." M.A. thesis, Bishop's University, 1997.

APPENDIX I

What follows is the evidence contained in the depositions of 10 paupers of the Limerick Poor Law Union, selected promiscuously and given, on oath, to an inquiry into the chargeability of paupers to the Union at large. It was sent to the Guardians of the Union as an attachment to a letter of 10 February, 1842 to John Ryan, Clerk of the Limerick Union, by Arthur Moore, Chief Clerk for the Commissioners. The names of the paupers thus examined, with their numbers in the register, are as follows:

1. Catherine Fitzpatrick.....246
2. Mary Fitzgerald.....2331
3. Timothy Gleeson.....2091
4. Mary Sullivan.....2074
5. George Brown.....1970
6. Lawrence Gallagher.....1951
7. Thomas Lambert.....1954
8. Mary Halloran.....1935
9. Mary M'Inerny.....1930
10. Ellen Butler.....1931

Evidence taken in an inquiry into the circumstances of certain paupers in the Limerick workhouse, charged to the Union at large, by order of the Poor Law Commissioners, before me, W. H. T. Hawley, Esq., Assistant Poor Law Commissioner, this 27th day of January, 1842.

CATHERINE FITZPATRICK. I am a single woman, and was admitted into the workhouse on the 12th of January instant. I have a father alive, who lives in Mary-street, Limerick. He has lived there upwards of 20 years. I have lived there with him ever since I was born, up to the time when I was admitted into the workhouse. I was formerly an inmate of the mendicity institution. The way in which I have supported myself lately is by knitting socks and selling them, but I could not make enough by that employment to support myself, and I have been obliged to pawn my clothes and subsist by begging. I used to beg in the country round Limerick, but always returned into Limerick to sleep. The neighbours always gave me a bed, and I never on any occasion slept out of Limerick.

Sworn before me,
W.H.T. HAWLEY.

The mark of
x
CATHERINE FITZPATRICK.

MARY FITZGERALD. I am a widow, and was admitted into the workhouse on the 12th of January instant. My husband has been dead upwards of four years; he lived in Thomond-gate, in the Limerick electoral division. I have two children, who are now with me in the house. I have lived in Limerick all my life; I was living in Crag-lane, in the English Town, for four or five years before I came into the house; I was lodging at the house of Edward Hartigan, a cobbler; I was a weekly lodger, and paid 3*d.* a week for a part of a room and bed. I have lodged at his house four years and upwards. For the last two or three years I have subsisted by begging; I only begged once in the country about five months since; I have begged constantly at other times in the city of Limerick.

Sworn before me,
W.H.T. HAWLEY.

The mark of
x
MARY FITZGERALD.

TIMOTHY GLEESON. I am about 32 years of age, and am a single man. I was admitted into the workhouse on the 15th December, 1841. I have always lived in the city of Limerick, except for half-a-year at Ballybrood, eight miles from Limerick, about three years since; when I left that I returned to Limerick, where I have lived ever since. I was lodging at Mrs. Dwyer's, in the neighbourhood of William-street, for about three weeks before I came into the house; but I used to sleep at many other places-sometimes, stables, sometimes in lofts. I have frequently slept out in the country at different farmers' houses. I got my living entirely by begging. I begged in the country quite as much as in Limerick. I lodged by the night with Mrs. Dwyer, and paid her 3*d.* per week.

Sworn before me,
W.H.T. HAWLEY.

The mark of
x
TIMOTHY GLEESON.

MARY SULLIVAN. I am a widow; my husband has been dead nine years. I have one child, but he is not with me in the workhouse; I came into the workhouse on the 8th December, 1840. I lived with Mrs. Shannon in Catherine-street, Limerick, one year and a half before I came into the workhouse; I lived with her as servant; I left her three weeks before I came into the workhouse; for those three weeks I was living in lodgings in the Henry-street, Limerick, kept by Thomas Burke; I was a weekly lodger, and paid him 3*d.* per week; I lived in the same house for four years before I went to live with Mrs. Shannon, on the same terms. I have lived four years in Limerick without going out of it before I came into the workhouse. I lived in Cork previously, and was married there. The reason I came to Limerick was, I had a brother there, and intended to get my son bound to his trade. He was a cabinet-maker; but I found he was gone, and, my clothes being stolen, I was obliged to remain in Limerick, otherwise I should have returned to Cork. I have never begged.

Sworn before me,
W.H.T. HAWLEY.

The mark of
x
MARY SULLIVAN.

GEORGE BROWN. I am 76 years of age, and a widower; my children are all married. I was admitted into the workhouse on the 24th November, 1841. For the last 10 years I have resided constantly in Limerick; I was living with one of my sons. I paid him no rent. I used to get my living by begging. I never begged in the city of Limerick, but always in the neighbourhood amongst people who knew me. I begged sometimes in Cahimarry, about three miles from Limerick, in the Limerick electoral division, and when I begged there I used sometimes to sleep there. I used to sleep at Ballysheedy, about two miles from Limerick, when I begged there. I never slept anywhere else, but always returned to Limerick to sleep.

Sworn before me,
W.H.T. HAWLEY.

The mark of
x
GEORGE BROWN.

LAWRENCE GALLAGHER. I am 66 years of age. I am a married man, but my wife is not in the workhouse. I was admitted into the workhouse on the 17th November, 1841. I am a weaver by trade. I was born in Limerick, but I have been working at my trade in different places, England and elsewhere, and came to Limerick from Dublin, and remained there three or four days, when I made an application to be admitted into the workhouse; I was refused admission then, as there was no room for me, and I then went into the country to look for work, where I remained in different places looking for work, and returned at the end of three weeks, and made another application for relief, and was then admitted into the workhouse. I had only been staying six days in Limerick when I made my second application. I lodged in Barrackstreet, and paid 6*d.* per week for my lodging.

Sworn before me,
W.H.T. HAWLEY.

The mark of
x
LAWRENCE GALLAGHER.

THOMAS LAMBERT. I am about 45 years of age; by trade a silk-dyer. I am a married man; my wife is in service in Limerick. I was admitted into the workhouse on the 17th November, 1841. I worked for 25 years in Limerick, but trade getting bad I removed to Dublin about two years since, and worked at my trade there for two years. I returned to Limerick about two or three days before I was admitted into the workhouse, viz. on the 15th November. I was lodging at my brother-in-law's those two days; I paid him no rent. I have never begged. I was born in Bandon. I came into Limerick when I was 19 years of age.

Sworn before me,
W.H.T. HAWLEY.

THOMAS LAMBERT.

MARY HALLORAN. I am 50 years of age, and am a widow. My husband, James Halloran, was a labouring man. I have six children; three are in the workhouse. My husband has been dead four years. I was admitted into the workhouse on the 17th of November, 1841. Before I came into the house I was living at Meelik, in the electoral division of Killeely; I had been living there with my aunt for one year. I never slept in any other place for one whole year before I came into the workhouse. I did not pay my aunt for living with her; I worked for her in return for what she gave me. I never begged. I lived in Cahirdavirm before I went to live with my aunt; this is in the Limerick electoral division. I lived there 30 years. I was born in Meelik at my aunt's house. My father and grandfather both lived at Meelik.

Sworn before me,
W.H.T. HAWLEY.

The mark of
x
MARY HALLORAN.

MARY M'ENERNY. I am 55 years of age. I am a widow; my husband has been dead 30 years; he was a tailor by trade. I have no children in the house. I entered the house on the 17th of November, 1841. Since my last application, up to the time of my entering the workhouse, I lived in Boherbuoy, in the Limerick electoral division, in the suburbs of Limerick, for eight years; before that I lived in Williamstreet, Limerick. I was in lodgings at Boherbuoy, but I paid nothing for them; the woman who let me live there was an acquaintance of mine. When I lived in Williamstreet I lived at the widow Halpin's; I was a servant there. I was born in Shanagolden, in the Rathkeale Union, but I came into Limerick soon after I was born, and have mostly resided there ever since. I never begged in my life.

Sworn before me,
W.H.T. HAWLEY.

The mark of
x
MARY M'ENERNY

ELLEN BUTLER. I am 56 years of age. I am a widow; my husband has been dead nearly two years; he was a smith by trade. I have four children, two of which are in the workhouse. I was admitted into the workhouse for the last time on the 17th of November, 1841; I had previously been admitted on the 26th of May, 1841, and remained till the 5th of July, when I was discharged. I had been in the Mendicity institution before I came into the house on the first occasion; previously to that I had been living in Mungret-lane, in Limerick; I had lived there more than 12 years, and in the same parish 14 or 15 years. When I left the workhouse I went to Nenagh to see a daughter of mine who was married there. I was there a week; I did not go there with any intention of remaining there; I only went to see my daughter, and returned immediately to Limerick; on my return I lived again in Mungret-lane; after that I went to see a son of mine at Doneraile, and stayed four or five weeks, and returned again to Mungret-lane, in Limerick, where I remained till I came into the workhouse the second time. I did not pay rent for my lodgings; a friend allowed me to live there free. I worked a little at washing and needle-work to support myself, and used to beg a few potatoes in the country when I was travelling to see my son and daughter, but I never begged whilst I was living in Mungret-lane.

Sworn before me,
W.H.T. HAWLEY.

The mark of
x
ELLEN BUTLER.

APPENDIX II

PETITION OF THE CITIZENS OF RICHMOND PLACE WARD

Limerick, 4 March 1847. Resolution unanimously adopted at an influential meeting held at St. Michael's parish rooms this day at three o'clock. William Roche, Esq., in the chair. No.1 That this meeting most respectfully requests the Guardians of the Limerick Union to postpone striking a rate for the arrears of 1846 and 1847 and the new rate of 1847 and 1848 until the fate of the amendment bill at present introduced by Lord John Russell into Parliament be made known and that a deputation consisting of the Chairman, George Bruce, George Dartnell, Captain Gavin and John Authawk, Esqs., do wait on the Guardians at their meeting on Saturday next. No. 2 That the government be most earnestly implored not to press at this awful crisis the repayment of the balance £3746 due to the Loan Commissioners for building the Workhouse, as it will, if enforced, add to the pauperism and wretchedness of an already cruelly taxed union. No. 3 That the deputation from the meeting be requested to urge the Board of Guardians to have the amount of arrears collected by all the legal means at their disposal and if found inefficient that the Poor Law Commissioners be requested to exercise the powers at their command and that the National Bank be requested to allow the amount due them to stand out for the present while the interest is paid. No. 4 That the best acknowledgements of this meeting be given to Dr. Brodie and William Gabbett of the Richmond Place Ward for the zealous and constant attention to the duties of the office confined to them affording as it does a happy and necessary example to the other Guardians. No. 5 That the best thanks of this meeting be given to William Roche, Esq., Chairman, for the zeal and anxiety always evinced by him for the interest and welfare of his fellow citizens. Signed, J.W. Mahoney (act. sec.)

PETITION OF THE CITIZENS OF ST. JOHN'S WARD

Proposed by Reverend Elmes, seconded by Reverend Richard Raleigh and resolved that the meeting most respectfully request of the Board of Guardians of the Limerick Union to postpone the striking of any rate on them for the arrears or a new rate till the fate of the Amendment Bill introduced by Lord John Russell into Parliament be ascertained and that a deputation from this meeting be nominated to wait on the Board of Guardians at their meeting tomorrow to represent our feelings. Resolved that the following gentlemen be requested to act as such deputation – Reverend Quin, Reverend Elmes, Alderman O'Hara to whom it be an instruction to request of the Guardians to exercise all the legal means at their disposal to have the balance of the last rate still due collected and that should it seem to the Guardians necessary that they be requested to apply to government to adopt the most efficient means to collect the arrears.

APPENDIX III

Limerick Poor Law Union
Rate Books
25 March 1847 - 25 March 1848
(Approved 31 March 1847)

Electoral Division	Net Annual Value			Rate	Amt. of Rate			Amt. of Arrears			Total		
	£	s.	d.		£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.
Limerick E.D.													
Thomond Bridge	8,633	0	0	36	1,294	19	0						
John St.	6,944	0	0	36	1,041	12	0						
Patrick St.	7,770	10	0	36	1,165	11	6						
William St.	12,786	0	0	36	1,917	18	0						
Richmond Pl.	20,742	0	0	36	3,111	6	0						
Borough	56,875	10	0	36	8,531	6	6	860	12	9	9391	19	3
South Liberties	5,670	0	0	36	850	10	0	150	0	10	1000	10	10
North Liberties	4,698	0	0	36	704	14	0	116	19	11	821	13	11
Total - Limerick	67,243	10	0	36	10,086	10	6	1,127	13	6	11,214	4	0
Derrygalvin	13,900	10	0	15	868	15	7	141	16	10	1010	12	5
Mungret	10,732	0	0	12	536	12	0	154	9	3	691	1	3
Patrickswell	14,744	10	0	12	737	4	6	41	5	1	778	9	7
Crecora	9,192	0	0	12	459	12	0	70	4	6	529	16	6
Fedamore	8,850	0	0	12	442	10	0	71	4	4	513	14	4
Ballybricken	11,473	0	0	12	573	13	0	100	8	2	674	1	2
Kilmurry	7,513	10	0	12	375	13	6	206	16	11	582	10	5
Caherconlish	8,617	10	0	12	430	17	6	210	15	5	641	12	11
Cappamore	4,355	10	0	24	435	11	0	105	14	6	541	5	6
Doon	920	0	0	12	46	0	0	26	10	4	72	10	4
Abington	7,956	0	0	12	397	16	0	241	2	7	638	18	7
Murroe	4,131	10	0	15	258	4	4	118	14	5	376	18	9
Castleconnell	3,922	10	0	24	392	5	0	196	13	8	588	18	8
Kiltenanlea	9,392	0	0	15	587	0	0	372	16	11	959	16	11
Kilokennedy	5,363	10	0	15	335	4	4	217	15	1	552	19	5
Kilseely	3,704	0	0	12	185	4	0	158	6	8	343	10	8
Kilfeenaghta	2,700	10	0	14	157	10	7	82	19	10	240	10	5
Kileely	7,953	0	0	15	497	1	3	322	12	5	819	13	8
TOTALS	202,665	0	0		17,803	5	1	3,968	0	5	21,771	5	6

APPENDIX IV

Limerick Poor Law Union
Rate Books
Special Rate struck 29 September 1847
(re. Temporary Relief Act)

Electoral Division	Net Annual Value			Rate	Amt. of Rate			Amt. of Arrears			Total		
	£	s.	d.		d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.
Limerick E.D.													
Thomond Bridge	8,633	0	0	36	1,294	19	0						
John St.	6,944	0	0	36	1,041	12	0						
Patrick St.	7,770	10	0	36	1,165	11	6						
William St.	12,786	0	0	36	1,917	18	0						
Richmond Pl.	20,742	0	0	36	3,111	6	0						
Borough	56,875	10	0	36	8,573	7	0	958	9	0	9,531	16	0
South Liberties	5,670	0	0	36	850	10	0	297	7	10	1,147	17	10
North Liberties	4,698	0	0	36	704	11	0	312	0	3	1,016	11	3
Total - Limerick	67,243	10	0	36	10,128	8	0	1,567	17	1	11,696	5	1
Derrygalvin	13,900	10	0	36	2,062	11	6	350	0	1	2,412	11	7
Mungret	10,732	0	0	36	1,609	16	0	362	8	7	1,972	4	7
Patrickswell	14,744	10	0	36	2,211	13	6	572	6	2	2,783	19	8
Crecora	9,192	0	0	36	1,378	16	0	485	15	9	1,864	11	9
Fedamore	8,850	0	0	36	1,327	10	0	398	12	3	1,726	2	3
Ballybricken	11,473	0	0	36	1,720	19	0	454	15	6	2,175	14	6
Kilmurry	7,513	10	0	36	1,127	0	6	322	0	0	1,449	0	6
Caherconlish	8,617	10	0	36	1,292	12	6	378	0	0	1,670	12	6
Cappamore	4,355	10	0	36	653	6	6	341	0	0	994	6	6
Doon	920	0	0	36	138	0	0	45	0	0	183	0	0
Abington	7,956	0	0	36	1,193	8	0	538	0	0	1,731	8	0
Murroe	4,131	10	0	36	619	14	6	311	0	0	930	14	6
Castleconnell	3,922	10	0	36	588	4	6	243	18	10	832	3	4
Kiltenanlea	9,392	0	0	36	1,408	16	0	433	1	0	1,841	17	10
Kilokennedy	5,363	10	0	36	804	10	6	378	11	3	1,183	1	9
Kilseely	3,704	0	0	36	555	12	0	247	10	8	803	2	8
Kilfeenaghta	2,700	10	0	36	405	1	6	211	10	1	616	11	7
Kileely	7,953	0	0	36	1,192	19	0	521	11	5	1,714	10	5
TOTALS	202,665	0	0		30,418	18	0	8,162	18	8	38,581	18	0

APPENDIX V

General Valuation Office, Dublin
September 4, 1848

My Lord,

I have made arrangements to employ two additional valuers in the Union of Limerick, in the County of the City of Limerick, and I shall use every exertion to have the valuation completed as rapidly as possible. But a tenement valuation is, I find by experience, a very difficult and tedious operation where endeavours are made to preserve a relative proportion between the different holdings according to their respective value, and at the same time to preserve a fair scale of rent value, so as to do justice to landlord and tenant.

To effect this object, after the primary valuation has been completed, much investigation and comparison of different tenements with each other is required, a duty which must be performed for the most part by one hand, so as to ensure a uniform scale and system, and this most indispensable investigation necessarily causes considerable delay, but surely it is better to devote a few months to such an investigation than to hurry the printing of the Books before matters have been carefully adjusted.

However, your Lordship may be assured that not a moment shall be lost that can be avoided.

I am, my lord,
faithfully yours

Lord Clare

Richard Griffith

APPENDIX VI

Limerick Chronicle, June 1, 1850

The vast mob of women that broke loose from the union workhouses on Wednesday, and traversed the streets in wild Bacchanalian fashion, gave the city rate-payers for once a striking exhibition of Poor law legislation, its social and moral influences. As these Amazons careered along the streets, with menacing attitude, and screams of exulting defiance, the humble poor that slowly paced the pathways offered a never to be forgotten contrast. All the paupers looked, without exception, strong, robust, full of vigorous health, and abounding in animal spirits, the broad muscular proportions of the women resembling more those of the other sex in height of masculine development. There, indeed, they were, with unmistakable evidence of well fed, well housed, fittingly clothed, but most ill-bred, disorderly paupers, indulging their own notion of a "free and easy" life, at the public expense! The poor labourer or distressed mechanic walked along quietly, beholding in surprise the pampered paupers, and then thinking, with a bitter pang, of the emaciated, half naked, destitute family group he left in their wretched home, "to beg ashamed," and hopeless of relief. Who can look upon this picture and upon that" without exclaiming against the radical defects of the Poor law administration in Ireland, and all its in-door and out-door abuses?

This day the same tumultuous manifestation was renewed, and the entire of the paupers located in the central workhouse broke out, despite the exertion of the officers. The females, who are in rude health, cleanly dressed, plump and rosy-cheeked damsels, paraded the streets in great force, and it is feared the guardians will be attacked at their meeting, which is to be held at the office, Thomas-st. The troops are all under arms at their respective quarters, and the Police are stationed at Wellesley and Thomond-bridges. The mayor and the Magistrates are on the alert in every quarter.

Limerick Reporter, Friday Evening, April 13, 1849.

Our readers are already aware through the medium of these columns, that an outbreak of a formidable character had taken place in the Workhouse, on Monday last. We before detailed the proceedings in the *Reporter* of Tuesday, which took place at the Police-office, before the Magistrates, when eight female paupers were charged with being the principals in the riot, and even of these the Master of the Workhouse considered four not deserving of punishment, it being their first offence, and not being prepared to prove their participation in the row which took place. On Wednesday morning another outbreak occurred at the Auxiliary Workhouse, William-street, which, also, as well as the other at the parent house, required the presence of the Magistrates and police. Though suppressed, some other instances of refractory conduct also took place during this week, all tending to prove that some strange event must have happened to compel the unfortunate inmates of these houses to enter on so reckless a career. The above circumstances striking us as an anomaly in the hitherto quiet demeanour of the paupers of the Limerick Union, we consider it necessary to inquire into what might have been the cause of such desperation; notwithstanding that some guardians publicly announced that wantonness and listless idleness produced the tumult and riots.

Upon a minute enquiry into the circumstances we must say that the conduct of the paupers is not altogether of that complexion which some of the guardians would make appear. It is not either the result of being too well off or unemployed; but it is, as far as our enquiries led us, the result of insufficiency of food, and this fact we will undertake to prove. - Heretofore each

full grown pauper was allowed 14 ozs. of bread at each meal, which means of course, but 11 or 12 ounces, as invariably the bread is found to be short of weight, though supplied by weight by the several contractors. This allowance though little enough and too little for some, has been recently reduced to 12 ozs. which means according to the above calculation $9\frac{1}{2}$ or 10 ozs. And hence the cause of the riots in the Workhouse.

The unfortunate paupers, jailed in and writhing under insufficiency of food, were goaded to madness by this latter reduction in their rations. Yes, we assert goaded to madness, otherwise it is not in human nature under such circumstances as the inmates of a Workhouse are placed to be impelled by mere wantonness to break windows and doors, tins and forms and everything else that could obstruct their fury. - Probably the humane Officials of the poor-law establishment will admit that there is no effect without a cause; this being once conceded by such dignitaries and renowned philosophers, we come to the proper reasoning on the subject.

The cause of the outbreak of the paupers was in our humble judgement insufficiency of food in quantity: as to the quality, they seldom object to the most coarse and uneatable, if we may use the expression. This being the fact, how, we ask, is it possible to seek to punish with severity where an intolerable evil exists, calculated not alone to produce tumult and confusion, but madness. The female paupers were on these occasions almost the only aggressors. This is another part of the subject which we assert strengthens our argument; for we are bold to say, that they would be the last (unless some great *little* wise men of our day prove the contrary) to reverse *en masse* the order of nature and assume the bulldog propensity, which exists in the opposite sex, without great cause. The male paupers were too shrewd to take part in the affray; they even sought to check it. They well knew that it was better be half starved in a Workhouse than wholly lost outside. But woman's nature, not so suggestive of remote conclusions, at once became altered and *hardened*. All softness gone, they strove to vindicate themselves; but they have failed, and are, we understand to be expelled, to the number of 300 from the Workhouse; so at least the report of the Committee of enquiry is said to counsel. We can scarcely credit such a monstrous account - 300 female paupers sent adrift on the blighted soil of Ireland. It is impossible - Nicholas of Russia is said to authorise the levy of numbers of prostitutes for his army. How are prostitutes created? - how is human nature degraded? We will not answer ourselves this question.

For the present we shall forbear to pursue the subject further; but we promise any man, no matter who he may be, or body of men who dare to venture on such deeds, that they will find themselves much mistaken if they hope to escape universal scorn and indignation. We know not which of the Commissioners recommended the reduction of food; otherwise it would be our duty to hold his name up to the public view. We have seen the bread weighed, and it is light coming from the contractor. We speak on good authority when we say that the two pound loaf is often light four ounces; the pauper is supposed to get his due portion, but it is far otherwise. How long this practice is going on we don't know. Could not proper persons attend during meals, and cut as much bread as each would eat? This, we believe, would be a saving, as many of the junior class don't eat their portion. But to have it said in any land where Christianity is acknowledged as of divine announcement, that human beings, the creatures of the Lord, are not to get as much as they choose to eat each meal of the bare necessities of life, appears to us a still further means of evoking judgement and wrath on the entire people. We hope to have no occasion to resume this subject; but if duty compels, the real characters who figure must be content to enter the lists, with the public as their antagonists.

APPENDIX VII

Richest Irish Poor Law Unions (Val./Pop.)

Name of Union (County)	Val./Pop.
1. Dunshaughlin (Meath)	5.646
2. Celbridge (Kildare)	5.181
3. Rathdown (Dublin)	4.276
4. Balrothery (Dublin)	3.362
5. Dublin South (Dublin)	3.189
6. Dublin North (Dublin)	3.024
7. Trim (Meath)	2.924
8. Edenderry (King's)	2.844
9. Navan (Meath)	2.834
10. Kells (Meath)	2.724
11. Rathdrum (Wicklow)	2.702
12. Belfast (Antrim)	2.692
57. Limerick (Limerick)	1.566

Poorest Irish Poor Law Unions (Val./Pop.)

Name of Union (County)	Val./Pop.
57. Limerick (Limerick)	1.566
119. Ballina (Mayo)	0.793
120. Cahirciveen (Kerry)	0.789
121. Bantry (Cork)	0.745
122. Kenmare (Kerry)	0.734
123. Kilrush (Clare)	0.722
124. Clifden (Galway)	0.670
125. Donegal (Donegal)	0.668
126. Swineford (Mayo)	0.625
127. Tullamore (King's)	0.605
128. Dunfanaghy (Donegal)	0.565
129. Westport (Mayo)	0.449
130. Genties (Donegal)	0.375