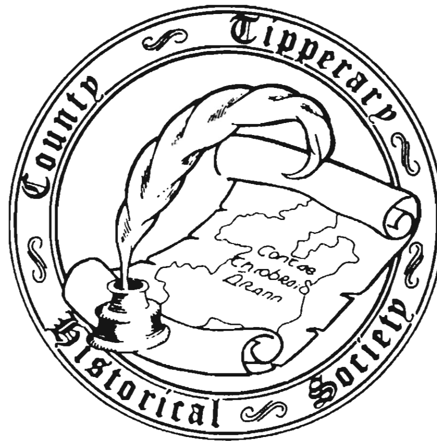

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Tipperary Workhouse Children and the Famine

By Anne Lanigan

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When blight struck the potato crop in the Autumn of 1845, the newly-established workhouses of Ireland were barely beyond their frequently chaotic, opening stages. The Poor Relief (Ireland) Act had become law on 31 July 1838. Its essential feature was the establishment of a workhouse in almost every town of reasonable size in Ireland. Within the workhouse there would be provided the most basic food, clothing and shelter for the destitute, supported by a levy on the rates and supervised by government-appointed Poor Law Commissioners.

The Act of 1838 was a revolutionary piece of social legislation for Ireland, broad in its application to masses of people hitherto beyond any help, and remarkable for its longevity. Though much of it has been repealed and amended, the Act remains on our statute books and social historians would argue that it still forms the basis of our present welfare legislation.[1]

The workhouse was central to the Irish Poor Law system. The concept was imported from England where there had been passed the Poor Law Amendment Act (or New Poor Law) in 1834. The law of 1834 was chiefly concerned with the question of the "able-bodied" poor who, it was believed, had lost the incentive to work. English society was then developing those attitudes of high-minded earnestness which came to characterise the Victorian age.

In an environment devoted to money and business, immersed in the growing Industrial Revolution, work was glorified as the ultimate virtue through which one could attain "the twin goals in life – money and salvation. Hence, parents and preachers, writers and lecturers, proclaimed as with a single voice that man was created to work, that everyone had his appointed calling in which he was to labour for God and man, that idleness was a moral and social sin".[2]

In such an intellectual climate it was unthinkable that anyone capable of work should be allowed to remain idle and easily live on charity. Hence, for those who declared themselves to be destitute, the "workhouse test" came into being. Under this test families were broken up within the institution, the most minimal standards of food, clothing and shelter were provided, there was either enforced idleness or hours of mindless stone or bone breaking, and almost no relief from the monotony of a regimented life enclosed by high walls. The conditions within the workhouse were designed to be such that idlers and layabouts would be discouraged from applying for relief and would instead betake themselves to gainful employment.

It can immediately be seen that the rationale behind the strict workhouse test could not be as easily applied to Ireland as to England. The system was founded on the conviction that the vast majority of the poor were in this condition because they refused to take up work and earn a livelihood. Whatever the merits of this in a rapidly industrialising country like England, any prospect of employment on any such scale was impossible in economically backward Ireland.

The absence of work, combined with an ever-expanding population in the decades before the Famine, rendered an estimated 2,385,000 people utterly destitute for over half each year.[3] Thus sheer weight of numbers made the strict workhouse system impractical in Ireland and the absence of the option of work rendered the workhouse test void.

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By mid-century the harshest elements of the 1834 Act were relaxed in Britain and the majority of those in receipt of relief, even the able-bodied, no longer did so in workhouses. Instead, they were back on the "outdoor" lists where they received help in the form of a dole payment. But under the Irish Poor Law of 1838 the workhouse test was applied in all its rigour and with a determination of purpose that wavered only at the height of the Famine, when outdoor relief was allowed.

Ironically, in a brutal, permanent and Malthusian manner, the calamity of the Famine solved many of the problems which the workhouses were established to alleviate. The population fell dramatically through death and emigration, and it continued to fall over the next century. The million or so who died were the most destitute and those who would have clamoured loudest for workhouse space.

Equally, the pattern of emigration which established itself during and after the Famine emptied the countryside of prospective workhouse candidates. By the time the Famine emergency had finally worked its way through the Poor Law system, the able-bodied as a workhouse class had almost disappeared, leaving the massive buildings the domain of orphaned/abandoned children and the elderly.

Almost as tangible as the reality of death, emigration and the vanished population was the aura which surrounded the workhouses after the Famine was over. The pall of dread and horror associated with the workhouse is one which has scarcely diminished to this day. Yet the fact is that, except for a ten-year period, very few people ever had recourse to the workhouse.

It is thus largely the legacy of the Famine which dominates the folk-memory of the workhouses, when those institutions were almost completely overwhelmed by a situation with which they were never designed to cope. A general famine was the one contingency which George Nicholls, the originator of the Irish Poor Law, had specified was altogether beyond the capacity of the workhouse system[4] – and yet it was on the Poor Law machinery that the government eventually laid all responsibility for relief operations.[5]

Considering the almost total nature of the catastrophe that struck the Poor Law system within a few years of its establishment, the wonder is that it managed to function at all. When the Poor Relief (Ireland) Act was passed in July 1838, the population of Ireland stood at close to 8 million inhabitants, making it one of the most densely populated countries in Europe. The population had been growing with alarming rapidity and an accelerating rate for the past half-century, and this "avalanche of people"[6] depended heavily on the potato for its subsistence.

As a food the potato was highly nutritious and could be grown successfully on poor soil. A small plot of land was sufficient to maintain a family in a precarious balance of existence, a vital consideration at a time when subdivision had reduced the countryside to a patchwork of small holdings. The potato, however, was prone to disease and failure. Within living memory there had been partial failures of the crop, though of limited scale and duration.[7] To some extent, these earlier famines differ from the Great Famine only because they took place in a pre-communication age. Even in good years, there was general dearth in the few months before the new crop was ready for use in the Autumn.

Since the Act of Union the awesome problem of Irish destitution had attracted the attention of the British Parliament and there had sat various Select Committees to hear evidence and consider remedies. A Scottish agriculturalist had reported in 1823 that "a large portion of the peasantry live in a state of misery of which he could have formed no conception, not knowing that any human being could exist in such wretchedness".[8] Seven years later, another Committee heard of a "misery and suffering which no language can possible describe and which it is necessary to witness in order to estimate".[9]

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The ultimate outcome of these parliamentary deliberations was the Poor Law of 1838. In a political world dominated by laissez-faire theories, the Poor Law was a pioneering social experiment, as monumental and far-reaching in its implications as that other great State-driven enterprise of the 1830s, the National School system. Together they laid a basis for modern Ireland.

The majority of the Irish MPs opposed the Poor Relief Bill in its passage through Parliament. This is hardly surprising. As property holders they would be responsible for financing it. Reasons for their opposition were many and varied – the poor rate would bankrupt the country, relief should not be allowed to the able-bodied, old ties of charity would be ruptured, state assistance was an avoidable evil.

More seriously, the Government for the first time extended its influence into the most remote areas of the country. Most fundamental of all was that the Poor Law called into question hitherto immutable ideas of property and poverty which were regarded as inflexible as the laws of nature, if not indeed as inflexible as the laws of God.

Following the enactment of the Poor Relief (Ireland) Act 1838 events moved swiftly. Four English Poor Law Commissioners arrived in Ireland and travelled the country dividing the entire area into Unions. Eventually 130 Unions were declared (more would be declared during the Famine) with a workhouse at each centre.[10] An Oxford architect, George Wilkinson, who had experience of workhouse construction in Wales, was chosen to superintend the construction of all the Irish buildings.[11] Wilkinson designed a series of plans for institutions of various sizes, holding from 300-1300 people.[12]

A building programme of monumental proportions was launched. Enterprising builders secured several commissions. In county Tipperary, Denis Leahy, brother of the future Archbishop, constructed the workhouses at Thurles, Tipperary and Nenagh.[13] The eight original co. Tipperary unions were declared between January and May 1839. Three years later they had admitted their first inmates.

Ownership of the workhouses was vested in the Poor Law Commissioners, with Boards of Guardians in possession only of a right of occupancy. The Boards of Guardians were to supervise the orderly working of each Union, under the directions and close scrutiny of the Commissioners. Two-thirds of the Guardians would be elected by the ratepayers, i.e. the property holders, and the rest would be the county magistrates, titled the ex-officio Guardians. Unlike England, no clergyman might be a Guardian.[14]

TABLE 1

Opening of Co. Tipperary Workhouses

Union	Union Declared	Inmates Admitted	Area of Site	Accommodation provided
Carrick	25.5.1839	8. 7.1842	6.2.12	500
Cashel	6.2.1839	25. 1.1842	2.2.26	700
Clogheen	12.2.1839	29. 6.1842	6.0.31	500
Clonmel	25.3.1839	1. 1.1842	No land	1000
Nenagh	14.2.1839	28. 4.1842	7.0.0	700
Roscrea	25.5.1839	7. 5.1842	6.0.0	700
Thurles	5.4.1839	7.11.1842	6.2.0	700
Tipperary	7.2.1839	3. 7.1841	6.0.0	700

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The cost of purchasing the site and erecting the workhouse was defrayed from the Imperial Exchequer and made repayable from the rate of the various Unions by equal instalments spread over twenty years. Very few instalments were ever paid. From the beginning the Guardians were embroiled in difficulties with the collection of the rate; and then the Famine struck. By the time it had ended, Famine debts amounted to £3,722,355 and building loans had soared to £1,321,366, an amount utterly beyond the capacity of the Guardians to repay. In 1853 the Government remitted the entire amount.[15]

All the workhouses designed by George Wilkinson were built to a common plan. It is possible to travel any part of Ireland today and immediately recognise a former workhouse. The Poor Law world was intensely private, surrounded as it was by an intimidating wall 9-12 feet high. The wall was broken only by a high wooden gate, maintained by the porter, who entered the name and business of each person in the Porter's book, with time of arrival and departure. Once through the gate one faced the front building, the smallest of those within the compound.

On the ground floor of the front building was a large hall where applicants for relief awaited the assessment of the Guardians, a room for the porter who had charge of them on admission and facilities to have them washed and clothed in workhouse dress. Here too were the male and female probationary wards where paupers could be kept in semi-quarantine if the Medical Officer so ordered, until admitted to the main body of the house.

On the second floor were the Clerk's office and Board Room, where meetings were held weekly – in the most comfortable room in the establishment. During the Famine most front buildings had extensions added to either side to provide additional accommodation for the throngs who sought assistance.

The main building was fifty yards beyond this, approached along a gravelled pathway through what was called the "master's garden". To proceed beyond this point one needed to be accompanied by either master or matron, who had charge of the day-to-day running of the establishment, for the yards were enclosed by dividing walls and the doors kept under lock and key. Master and matron had apartments in the centre of the main building. Men and boys had accommodation to the right, women and girls to the left.[16]

The schoolrooms, nursery, workrooms and apartments for the aged were all situated on the ground floor. Overhead were the dormitories. Yards at the front of the building belonged to the children and those at the back to the adults. High walls divided the yards from each other and communication between the classes was forbidden, within and without the building. The sexes were strictly segregated.[17]

The furthest structure on the workhouse site was the Infirmary, consisting of the hospital and apartments for "idiots, epileptics and lunatics". These again had their own separate yards at the back of the building. Initially the infirmary was but a single storey; but under Famine pressure it was often raised another floor. The hospital was under the charge of the medical officer and routine care of the patients was undertaken by pauper nurses.

Joining the middle building to the infirmary was the dining hall, a long narrow room filled with tables and benches where the various classes had their meals in strict isolation from the other groups. Until chapels began to be built in the 1860s, the dining hall served as the centre for Mass on Sundays.[18] The few Protestants in the county Tipperary workhouses either attended worship at the local parish church or in the board room.[19]

Attached to the dining hall were the kitchen, washhouse and laundry. Between the walls of the exercise yards and the boundary wall of the site was an extensive area of ground for cultivation by the inmates. There were stalls for the guardians' horses, sheds for turf, coal, wool, flax and, later, for accommodation for increased numbers and for extensive industrial activity.

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Inside the workhouse, except for the board room, infirmary and some officers' quarters, walls and ceilings were left unplastered.[20] Instead Wilkinson ordered repeated coats of whitewash to cover the walls up to one inch thick, thus giving a "comfortable and cheerful appearance".[21] Entrance halls, passages, staircases, kitchen and washhouse were flagged.[22] Upper floors were boarded, but initially the ground floors consisted of compounded earth or mortar, being up to one-third cheaper than stone or wood.[23] Gradually, however, ground floors were ordered boarded as a matter of Poor Law policy, much resisted by the guardians because of the expense involved.[24]

The breaking up of families within the workhouse was the bedrock of Poor Law rationale, designed to render the workhouse test as difficult as possible and to discourage all but the most desperate from applying for relief. It was a system which had a calamitous effect on children, wrenched from the security of the family circle, however impoverished, to the "friendless indifference" of the workhouse wards.[25]

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Upon admission to the house, paupers were registered, examined by the medical officer, clothed in regulation dress and removed to that part of the building assigned to their particular class.[26] There were five classifications in the workhouse:

1. Males above the age of 15 years
2. Females above the age of 15 years
3. Boys over 2 years but under 15 years
4. Girls over 2 years but under 15 years
5. Children under 2 years[26]

There was generally no communication between the classes; but there were a few exceptions. Adult females attended to household, nursery and sick duties. Should there be only one teacher, boys and girls might attend the same school; this happened rarely. Children under 2 years remained with their mothers, and mothers had access to their children under 7 "at all reasonable times". At any time parents could request an interview with their children and be granted this in a room set aside for this purpose.[27]

Except for orphans and deserted children who, in the workhouse, became the "adopted children of the State",[29] entire families had to enter and leave together,[30] returning the Union clothing as they departed. In many instances their own clothing had simply disintegrated or rotted away in the damp conditions of the clothing store and they had to be provided with the wherewithal to leave, usually from the bundles of deceased paupers' clothing.[31] Dr. Evans, the medical officer in Tipperary, deplored the exit of such families leaving "in a state of almost total nudity, who an hour before were warmly clothed and fed, hot-house plants to perish in the cold".[32]

The workhouse world was one of inordinate accountability, operating within a closely monitored system where almost every individual was answerable to a higher authority. This began at the lowest within the workhouse itself where the various officers (master, matron, schoolmaster, schoolmistress, porter) kept a close, often a viciously petty, watch on one another and ended in the offices of the Poor Law Commissioners themselves.

The principal medium of accountability was the Minute Book, entered weekly by the Clerk of the Union. In county Tipperary, the Carrick-on-Suir minute books are untraced and the Borrisokane (a Famine Union) records are fragmentary; but the minute books of the remaining

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houses are almost totally extant. They record a remarkable account of the everyday occurrences and concerns in a Poor Law establishment, both trivial and momentous.

Contrary to what might be expected, the minute books are notably open and unvarnished in their narrative; they contain comments, criticisms, descriptions and remarks from a broad variety of sources – Poor Law and National School inspectors, chaplains, Visiting Committee members, assorted officers of the house (especially the master) and a wide variety of sundry visitors who took it upon themselves to arrive and inspect the house. The contents of the minute books eventually underwent the scrutiny of the clerks of the Poor Law Commission. The evidence is that there was little that was too trivial for their attention. Time and again the officers, and sometimes the guardians, were called to account for themselves. If satisfaction was not forthcoming, a Poor Law Inspector would be dispatched to attend to the problem in person.

The Famine emergency lasted in the workhouses for a full decade and numbers only peaked in the workhouses after the official famine had ended. In the early 1850s the workhouses took on the aspect of independent communities, with vast numbers dependent on them. For example, in March 1851 4,651 persons were registered in the Tipperary institution. At every level of officialdom the period was marked by a distinct lack of co-ordinated planning or policy, and the government had "no clear cut plan for dealing with the famine except perhaps to hope that it would go away, as eventually it did".[33]

The potato disease travelled across the Atlantic from America, where it had ravaged the crop in the Autumn of 1844.[34] Over the next few years partial and total failures of vegetable and grain crops were a feature of agricultural life throughout Europe;[35] but only in Ireland was the disaster complete.

As the Government vacillated and awaited non-existent private entrepreneurs to adopt remedial and profitable measures,[36] the Poor Law Commissioners stoically contemplated the "impending calamity",[37] never dreaming that the Poor Law was about to be placed in "the first line of defence against the Famine".[38] A vast system of public works having proved inadequate to the disaster,[39] Lord John Russell's administration resolved to expand the workhouse system in the form of greatly increased indoor accommodation and the introduction of hitherto outlawed outdoor relief.[40]

In the Autumn of 1845 with disease rapidly spreading, the Tipperary markets were overstocked with potatoes as dealers sought to get rid of them.[40A] Up to now a healthy combination of potatoes, milk and bread had formed the dietary of the workhouses. Despite the problems, potatoes were not finally eliminated from the Tipperary workhouses until the late spring of 1846.[41]

They were not resumed again until the late 1850s,[42] by which time they were regarded, in the words of the Clogheen guardians, as a "decided luxury".[43] The dietary of the intervening years, consisting of indian meal stirabout, bread, milk and soup, was never as nourishing.[44] Children, in particular, suffered in their health because of the inferior fare.[45]

It was only as the second year of failure of the crop began that the impact of seriously increased destitution began to be felt in the workhouses. As people exhausted their meagre resources, they began to turn to the workhouses for relief. The Tipperary houses were soon full to capacity. The early winter of 1846 was one of abnormal severity.[46] Although their houses were full, the Boards of Cashel, Thurles and Roscrea fed hundreds of people on workhouse premises who were not inmates.[47]

This was in defiance of the Commissioners' strict instructions to cease, such outdoor relief being "quite contrary to the intention and spirit of the Poor Relief Act",[48] as it was also open to "great abuse and confusion", involved a real danger to the public peace, and was likely to

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impoverish the Union.[49] Reluctantly the Boards discontinued the practice, but only in the case of Cashel after printing and posting the Commissioners' admonishment throughout the town.[50]

Tipperary is probably regarded as a county little affected by the worst ravages of famine, situated mid-way between the relatively unscathed East and the devastated West. However, contemporary accounts unfold their own story. The newspapers of the day are filled with descriptions from all over the county of families of "wretched famishing skeletons ... clamouring for food ... the image of death stamped indelibly on their cadaverous countenances ... crawling from door to door", denied entry to the workhouse because accommodation there was full.[51]

Their plight did not arouse universal sympathy. In March 1849 an irate letter appeared in the *Tipperary Vindicator* from a Nenagh inhabitant:

> "There is no town in the south of Ireland so lamentably circumstanced as Nenagh at this moment. Hordes of the most wretched creatures infest the streets from morning till night, many of them keeping up an endless cry and lamentation, and terrifying the nervous with their death-like appearance. Why not send them to gaol or the Poor House? Why not represent the state of the town to the government?"[52]

The many starvation inquests around the county caused the editor of the same paper to crow sarcastically that the "surplus population is being gloriously thinned".[53] One such inquest concerned a youth named Power. He was found dead in a field adjoining Thurles workhouse. The previous day he had been seen plucking the feathers off a seagull and preparing to eat it.[54]

Life was almost equally grim within the workhouse walls for those who had managed to obtain a coveted place there. In the enormously overcrowded houses famine diseases struck with appalling severity. In Cashel, for example, in the opening months of 1847, fever and dysentery were endemic, with patients lying five and six to a bed and Dr. Heffernan warning of the workhouse becoming "one continued hospital".[55] In Nenagh over 500 people died of fever in the first six months of 1847, causing the guardians to abandon the house entirely as their place of meeting,[56] so "dangerous and objectionable" was it to attend the "crowded and infectious workhouse".[57]

Death rates in the Tipperary workhouses frequently reached charnel-house proportions. A direct comparison is not possible in all cases as some of the weekly statistics in the minute books were not completed – indicative of the chaos, confusion and turmoil that all but caused the disintegration of the relief system during the Famine. Nenagh would appear to have suffered the highest casualties during the central years 1847-1851, where 5,014 inmates succumbed to disease, dirt and malnutrition. The dead included 2,747 children under 15 years.

The complete figures from Clonmel and Clogheen for the same five years reveal that 2,108 and 1,881 respectively died. In Thurles, where the books are almost complete, 3,149 persons died. Of the more fragmentary accounts, Tipperary lost 1,234 inmates in 1850 alone, 741 children among them. In the first six months of 1849 in Roscrea 607 died, including 549 children, or 90% of the total, an aberration on all the other statistics, where child death rates accounted for just over half.

The Cashel weekly death rates are of so incomplete a nature as to be almost useless, with only one entire six-month period filled in, when 297 inmates died in the latter half of 1850. The single worst week in any Tipperary workhouse occurred in Nenagh beginning on 14 April 1849, when 101 paupers died, 54 of them children.

The guardians of the various unions faced acute practical problems in the disposal of their dead. The difficulties faced by the Nenagh board mirrored those encountered elsewhere. From

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the opening of the workhouse they had interred unclaimed inmates in the neighbouring Tyone Abbey churchyard, despite local objections.[58] With the spread of dreaded fever in 1847 the funerals here were reported to be "conducted in a disorderly and un-Christian manner, with disrespect for the dead and injury to the living", with the graves made "so shallow that the quantity of earth is scarcely enough to cover the coffin".[59]

With unceasing objections to the use of Tyone, a portion of workhouse ground was consecrated in February 1847;[60] but, with continuing nightmare mortality rates, the Master reported in May that "the entire workhouse land would, in the course of a short time, be taken up as a graveyard".[61] Despite the Commissioners' protests that it was "very objectionable from a sanitary point of view" to have burials on workhouse land,[62] this practice was adopted, by necessity, in all the workhouses.

In Thurles the medical officer had to warn of the dangers of continuing to open graves around the site, when many bodies were a mere two feet below the surface.[63] With local landowners prejudiced against selling land for pauper burial, the eventual solution was to acquire an additional plot to the rear of the infirmary yards,[64] a distance of little significance in terms of the surviving paupers' health.

Throughout 1847, as throngs gathered at the gates "in so desperate a state of destitution that they expressed their wish to come into the workhouse and die of the contagion prevalent there than to perish with hunger outside",[65] the various boards of guardians looked to the provision of additional accommodation for the inmates. This was provided first by the erection of timber sheds within the workhouse grounds and, far more significantly, by the hiring of a wide variety of buildings in both town and countryside.

George Wilkinson, back in Ireland to superintend the second phase of workhouse building, explained the assorted nature of the auxiliary houses taken:

> "Buildings of all kinds, including store houses, old factories and distilleries, mansions and farm buildings and long rows of dwelling houses in streets of towns, in addition to the extensive erection of shed buildings and buildings of a permanent character which have been raised as additions to the original workhouses."[66]

The auxiliary workhouses of county Tipperary encompassed all of the above. Typically, the auxiliaries were hired from the guardians themselves or from the guardians' connections. Cashel, Clonmel, Nenagh and Tipperary moved extensively into town buildings as well as into accommodation out in the countryside. Clogheen, Thurles and Roscrea concentrated largely on auxiliaries out of the towns.

Clonmel was the only town in the county not to have gained a new workhouse in the early 1840s. Instead the workhouse was established in the town's existing House of Industry. During the Famine auxiliary buildings were hired within the town but, early in 1854, the inmates moved to an entirely new workhouse, the site of the present county hospital.

The auxiliaries became very largely the domain of the children, divided into their various classes. The auxiliaries were virtually independent establishments, with their own master, matron, schoolteachers, tradesmen, etc. However, there was constant communication with and movement between the various subsidiaries and the main house. Groups of paupers, often in great numbers, were continually on the move between the branches of the workhouse, and the arrival and departure of people and provisions must have become a noticeable feature of Tipperary life in the years 1847-1854.

The numbers involved were considerable. For example, 700 boys were in residence in Castlelake,[67] and these walked the four miles to the main house in Cashel every Sunday for

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TABLE 2

Locations of Auxiliary Houses

Cashel	Canopy Street, Main Street, Blind Street, Lowergate, John Street, Ladyswell Street, Richmond House, Old Police Barracks, Castlelake*
Clogheen	Tincurry*
Clonmel	North Gate Brewery, Morton Street, Banfield's Store, Morton Street, Malcomson's Store, the Quay, Green's Store, Irishtown
Nenagh	Barrack Street cornstore Brewery, Dublin Road Smithville*
Roscrea	Dunkerrin, Charter School* Moneygall, Military Barracks* Brewery
Thurles	Standhouse, Racecourse* Beakstown* Cranagh* Fever Hospital
Tipperary	Nelson Street, Jail Lane, Main Street, Spittal, Meeting House Lane, Cappaghwhite,* Greenane,* Golden,* Cluin,* Castlelloyd*

* indicates an auxiliary in the country

Mass.[68] In 1849 Thomas Carlyle described an encounter with such massed youth as "continents of young women".[69] Carlyle was first horrified and then disgusted by all that he witnessed in Ireland during his visit. He returned to England with relief: "the sight of fenced fields, weeded crops, and human creatures with whole clothes on their backs, it was as if one had got into spring water out of dunghill puddles".[70]

Depending upon the auxiliary building taken, conditions varied widely. Children cooped up in unsuitable town buildings suffered most acutely. In Clonmel a store belonging to Mr Cantwell in New Street was approved by the medical officer, Dr Scully, but never actually rented. It is typical of an auxiliary workhouse in an industrial townscape – five lofts high, exclusive of the ground floor, all rooms measuring 54 feet long by 24 feet wide, with an average height of only 7 feet.[71]

The girls in Nenagh moved to the Brewery auxiliary on the Dublin Road in January 1849. The conditions that prevailed here in the first few months were appalling. One horrified reporter summed up what he had seen in the words, "it is a grave".[72] A week later he returned to this abode of "emaciated children". In a ward thick with smoke he beheld "some of the miserable occupants in this dingy room were stretched on beds – on a bed also was a coffin with the lid on; it contained the body of a child that had died the day before, and we were told no person came to bury it".[73]

On the other hand, the more fortunate children spent the years of acute pressure in the more healthy environs of the country, where space and air were not such rare commodities, even if conditions could never be less than extremely difficult. Thus Dr. William Wilde, the eye specialist and father of Oscar Wilde, who visited the Tipperary girls at Greenane, found the place to be a "most healthful establishment".[74]

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The education of the children nominally continued throughout the emergency years. At the outbreak of Famine the National Education system had barely been established, just like the workhouses themselves. Through the years following the Union, in the amount of inquiry mounted and the volumes of material printed, education had occupied as much of the attention of the British Parliament as had the problem of the Irish poor. The fundamental aim of the National System was to unite the children of all religious persuasions in an integrated form of non-sectarian, non-denominational schooling, thus reversing the policy of nearly three centuries of State-sponsored proselytism in Irish education.

The workhouses had very early connected their schools with the National Board. The advantages gained by the guardians by being so connected were a free initial stock of books (thereafter at half price), a regular and systematic inspection and occasional gratuities for teachers.[75] The guardians were also relieved of a great deal of decision-making and accountability.

The workhouse schools then became open to a multiplicity of official inspectors. The Poor Law Inspector visited at least twice yearly[76] as part of his general tour of the house, to examine the academic attainments and industrial attainments of the children, as well as their physical condition. National Board Inspectors appeared at least three times a year.

Only one inspection was at a stated time known to the teacher.[77] A Head Inspector could materialise at any time.[78] Furthermore, the schools were open at any time, and without notice, to a visit from the master, matron, chaplain of either persuasion, Visiting Committee of the guardians, and any person of any status who chose to exercise a civic duty by calling.

In practical terms, in the famine auxiliaries, with disease and death rampant, and given the vast numbers of children, the inadequate numbers of staff and the extreme difficulty of the conditions, the academic education of the children in the emergency years can have been merely perfunctory. A National Schools Inspector who came to Nenagh in the Autumn of 1847 admitted in a cautious understatement that "owing to the prevalence of fever I did not examine the classes very closely", to which he added the almost ludicrous rider, "I found everything in a very satisfactory state".[79]

A few months later in January 1848 the same gentleman displayed more caution by not entering the schools at all, as he was "informed by the medical officer that he could not do so without peril".[80] In August 1849 the girls were left strictly alone, due to an outbreak of cholera, but the boys were examined.[81]

Far more than academic education, the proper provision for the industrial training of workhouse juveniles was a major concern of both the Poor Law and Education Commissioners, especially as it was a deep conviction that the "greatest evil of the Poor Law and one that will operate in a mischievous manner for the future is the accumulation of children in the workhouses".[82] The Poor Law Commissioners recommended serious industrial training from "strong considerations of humanity and policy".[83] Their counterparts in the Education Office believed that "any system of mere literary instruction . . . would, in itself, be incomplete in the case of pauper children".[84]

It was the fate of the vast majority of National School children that they should earn their living by manual or domestic labour. This was even more true of workhouse children. In the Poor Law schools, the ultimate goal of producing an employable child was of paramount importance, and it was a cause of concern that any child might pass from the school into the adult class and become a permanent burden on the Union and the rates. The ideal of industrial

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training was especially important in the case of orphaned or deserted children (typical famine children). It was their only means of acquiring a livelihood and "thus becoming respectable members of the community".[85]

There was more concentration on the industrial training of boys than of girls. In each workhouse fortunate youths were chosen to be taught some specific trade. Tailoring and shoemaking predominated, but the boys were also initiated into the craft of the baker, weaver, tinsmith, carpenter and cooper. Such trades flourished when the population of the workhouse was high and a demand existed within the house itself for the articles produced. In the Famine years the workhouses were largely self-sufficient and resembled small towns of a pre-industrial era, when little had to be brought in from outside, especially as there was no market for luxury goods.

The operation of industrial activity in Thurles may be taken as an example. An energetic Industrial Committee supervised and directed operations here. In 1853 James Kavanagh, Head National Schools Inspector, noted that the Thurles and Limerick Unions had the greatest variety of trades available for their boys – "the manufactured products in the stores of the former surprised me, both as to their amount and from their very superior finish".

The tailor and shoemaker boys' work especially impressed him. The shoes were "extremely neat and quite equal to the better class work to be had in the towns". He learned that private orders were also taken in the tailoring department and, together with Belfast, the Thurles boys "exhibited the best general excellence in this trade".[86]

The Thurles guardians, like their fellows in other Unions, adopted a mercenary approach to the disposal of articles not needed within the house. In May 1853 they defended their position before the Poor Law Commissioners. "What is our feeble competition compared with the machinery of England, with its steam, its power looms and its spinning jennies?"

The guardians argued that their aim was "to teach the boys to earn an honest livelihood", to banish "foul idleness", leaving no time for "discontent, for immorality for or other crimes". Furthermore, by selling the end products, they hoped to make the workhouse a "self-supporting institution", which was "better than breaking stones or other useless labour".[87]

Industrial employment or training for girls was never as wide-ranging. All of the workhouses initiated the girls into flax, cotton and woollen spinning; the cloth was then made up by the boys. The girls in Thurles, Tipperary, Roscrea and Clogheen were also trained in weaving, normally considered a boy's undertaking especially in view of the heavy wooden looms in operation.[88] The weaving enterprise enjoyed its successes.

One of the Thurles girls, Catherine Patterson, was sent as a teacher of weaving to Grangegorman Prison in Dublin. She is one of the few workhouse inmates to have left a record of herself. In September 1852, she wrote to the Master, Thomas Ryan:

> "I never thought I would be so happy, all owing to your kindness. It was a happy day for me the day the Mistress sent me to the weaving. You have done a great deal for me. I have 10/– a week and the same rations as any of the Matrons. Miss Hayes took a respectable lodging for me convenient to the prison. I hope I shall go on well. We have but one loom at the moment. My love to Mrs Moylan and all the girls."[89]

All of the Tipperary workhouses, with the exception of Clonmel, eventually settled on fancy needlework as the most widespread industrial activity to be taken up by the girls. Elaborate crochet, embroidery and sewed muslin work were all taught and executed with commercial success in view. The merits of needlework were obvious; it was a quiet, time-consuming, absorbing, individual occupation. There was no limit to the number who could be employed and it cultivated concentration, order and discipline.

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Work of such specialised intricacy was constantly condemned by the Poor Law and Education Commissioners. The destiny of workhouse children lay in low domestic service and therefore "rough household duties should occupy the first rank" in their industrial training – washing down the floors, stairs and dormitories, laundry and kitchen work, care of infants in the nursery, and the plainest sewing, mending and darning."[90] It was unlikely that the average Tipperary farmer, seeking a milk-maid or general domestic, would be impressed by her ability to "work a collar exquisitely or embroider a coronet for a duchess".[91]

Another reason for the Commissioners' disapproval was that the aim was to sell the finished product on the open market, thus interfering with the sacrosanct rights of private enterprise.[92] In addition to this, the finished articles of the embroidery girls, unlike those of the apprentice shoemakers, tailors, weavers or bakers, could never be utilised in the workhouse.

Nevertheless, the guardians went their own way in the matter of the fancy needlework until the mid-1850s, when the dramatic and permanent decline in pauper numbers ensured that extensive industrial occupation need never be a serious concern again. As an example of the intensity with which this needlework was pursued during the years of pressure, the sewing girls in Clogheen had in June 1853 to be limited to three hours' sewing per day because of the strain it was causing their eyes.[93] The sewing was attended to in addition to their hours in the classroom at their literary education.

Just as intensive embroidery work proved to be the solution to idleness among the throngs of female children, farm work was correspondingly useful among the boys. Work in the outdoors served the double purpose of imparting utilitarian skills and providing time-consuming and physically exhausting toil for large numbers of potentially difficult and unmanageable youths.

The Poor Law of 1838 had allowed 12 acres of land only to be held with each workhouse[94] and, ever anxious to keep costs down, most guardians purchased sites of considerably less extent (see Table 1). As numbers mushroomed in the Famine, provision was made whereby up to 25 acres might be taken for the agricultural instruction of boys under sixteen years of age.[95] Such farms had to be held in connection with buildings detached from the main house and this coincided with removal of the children to auxiliary houses, often in the country.[96]

Adult paupers might not be employed on the farms, in case the open air and exercise rendered life in the workhouse less irksome and confining.[97] An agriculturalist was generally employed in the years of huge numbers for the instruction of the children in the practical operation of the farm work; this was rounded off by theory and book study in the classroom. Most workhouses connected themselves with the Agricultural Department of the National Board, whereby they were open to yet another twice-yearly inspection.

Farm operations did not usually include livestock, but concentrated on grain and green crops.[98] Because the hands available for work were so numerous in the early 1850s, spade labour alone sufficed, to the exclusion of either draft animals or agricultural implements.[99] Both then and in later years the boys (and girls) went early to service as farm hands. However, the hiring out of young children was open to serious abuse and exploitation, for they were certainly cheaper than adult labour and inured to hard work and privation; and the guardians, anxious always to reduce numbers and save the rates, gladly co-operated with the hiring farmers.

The Poor Law Commissioners sought to protect the children and reminded the guardians that they had no power to hire them out, that a child leaving the workhouse to go to employment did so as a free agent.[100] They cautioned the guardians against allowing children to go to farmers for limited periods, as at harvest, on the understanding that they could return to the workhouse when work was completed.[101]

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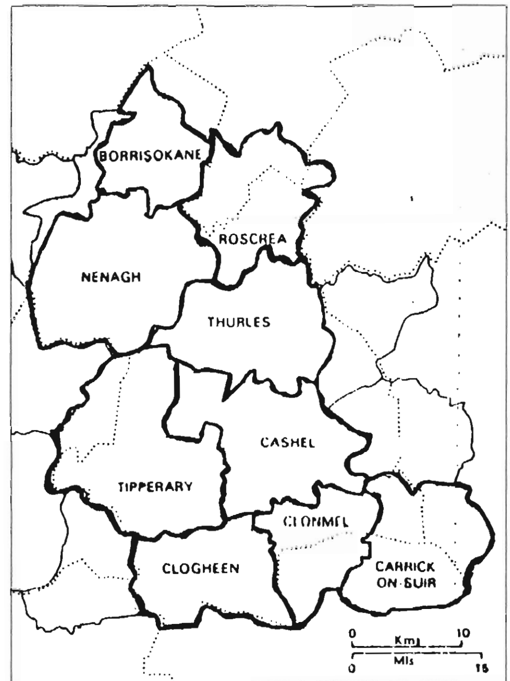
The good intentions of the Commissioners were not always honoured by the guardians and children were still allowed out "at very tender ages, long before they are able to do much in any way".[102] They were frequently dismissed from the house for refusing to take employment,[103] and workhouses sometimes served the function of hiring fairs, where farmers were invited to come and "inspect the paupers" with a view to taking them out.[104]

In August 1846 in Nenagh, with the workhouse fast reaching its quota, the Board of Guardians sought to reduce numbers by circulating 200 handbills stating that "the Board have in the workhouse a number of boys and girls, in good health and well brought up, and of an age to be useful in domestic or farming employments, and who would be assigned to persons of proper character upon application to the Master".[105] The 94 children who left the workhouse in August of that year can have made little difference to the growing problem of overcrowding in the house, but their case illustrates the urgency with which the guardians disposed of the children at every opportunity.



A map of the Poor Law Union areas of Tipperary.

Extensive farm operations during the Famine period were undertaken by the Tipperary boys at Castlelloyd, by the Cashel boys at Castlelake, the Thurles boys at Cranagh, at Tincurry by the Clogheen boys, at Smithville by the Nenagh boys, and at the new workhouse by the Clonmel boys. The Roscrea boys were alone in having no agricultural pursuits at their auxiliary at Dunkerrin, but farm work began at the main house when they returned there permanently in July 1850.[106]

The seriousness with which the farm business was approached may be judged by the events in Clogheen. In December 1847 the guardians had rented a dwelling-house, outlying buildings, disused woollen factory and twelve acres of land from Mr John Walpole at Tincurry, five miles north of Clogheen,[107] in bleak and desolate countryside. Here were removed the boys and girls of from nine to fifteen years old[108] – the only auxiliary in the country to cater for them together. However, classification, that fundamental Poor Law tenet, was preserved, with the girls occupying the top floor and the boys the lower,[109] and new walls dividing their playground "to strictly enforce separation of the sexes".[110]

Conditions in Tincurry were never good. In November 1849 Master Michael O'Brien asserted that seventy children, returned from Tincurry as being too young, "literally swarmed with vermin".[111] In March 1852 the children were described as being in such a want of clothing that they were "all but naked",[112] the "rags" sent out from Clogheen for them no longer fit to be mended.[113] The physical miseries of the children were compounded by the lack of shoes and stockings, which had large numbers of them under medical care in the hospital with chilblains and sore feet.[114] Yet it was thus inadequately clad and shod that the children of Tincurry brought about what must be seen as an agricultural miracle.

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The first task undertaken by the children was the reclamation of the land. This was a formidable challenge, and considered by Mr Phelan, the Poor Law Inspector, as totally beyond the abilities of children;[115] children, moreover, who were compelled to toil in bare feet, in clothes that were a "disgrace to the Union", in the most inclement weather that successive winters could produce,[116] often nourished on what was "quite unfit for human use".[117]

In the vivid words of the Visiting Committee, the agriculturalist, James Keane, got the land "in the wildest and most uncultivated state a side of a mountain could produce".[118] This "perfect swamp", "inapplicable to any agricultural purpose",[119] Keane tackled by setting the boys to subsoiling and draining immediately after he took over in April 1848.[120]

This was an extremely demanding and strenuous physical activity. Around three acres might be cleared at a time. Parallel drains were dug, twenty-four feet apart and forty inches deep, then filled with broken stones and topped with sods of green sward. Other boys working in threes attended to the soil itself. One dug and turned over the surface earth, another dug deep into the subsoil, a third followed with a light pickaxe to remove stones and bring them to another group of workers for breaking and filling in the drains. All this was preliminary to the sowing of barley, oats and assorted vegetables that took place that first season.[121]

The boys worked in two divisions, attending school in the forenoon and the farm in the afternoon, changing about on alternate weeks. Throughout the Summer and Autumn of 1848 an average of 114 boys worked on the farm each day. For their labours they were granted an additional four ounces of bread at supper; this was found a "great inducement to industry".[122] The Poor Law Commissioners soon forbade the extra rations, but the guardians insisted that the amount of bread now allowed was "totally insufficient for working boys and girls".[123]

Girls were included in this because they were called out to help with the harvest, the only workhouse in the county where they gave assistance on the land. While the strongest boys laboured with reaping hooks, the bigger girls and smaller boys bound the sheaves and built the stooks, leaving the smallest of both sexes to engage in gleaning.[124]

Tending such a farm was never less than difficult, especially in the light of the guardians' stricture that the men could never be called upon for assistance.[125] Thus in the Spring of 1851 school work was suspended for two whole months while the boys were engaged in digging and sowing,[126] in a totally exaggerated implementation of the ideal of wholesome and useful occupation. The results of the enterprise pleased the Agricultural Inspector, Mr Brogan:

> "I was much pleased with the cultivation of the model farm, which affords one of the best specimens of improved and successful cultivation that I have found connected with any workhouse that I have visited. Nothing can surpass the promising and beautiful appearance of the carrots, parsnips, turnips and mangels. I was also much pleased with the careful and efficient manner the boys performed their work and the excellent industrial training they are receiving. The cows appear to be very carefully attended to and the yards and offices are in a very clean and tidy order."[127]

The cows referred to were three animals acquired in 1851 to eat the turnips.[128] All over the country in that winter of 1851-2 many people had just managed to avoid starvation by existing on that same vegetable,[129] as often as not plundered from the tempting gardens of the workhouses, which the guardians protected by putting in pauper watchmen.[130] The vegetables generally became the basis of the soup produced by the workhouse kitchens.[131]

The efforts of the workhouse boys at Tincurry and elsewhere were not universally lauded. The pauper boys of Clonmel were put to work on the land surrounding the new workhouse, still under construction in the opening years of the 1850s. They were marched out to the site from the town auxiliaries by the schoolmasters.[132] There they cleared the ground of stones in preparation

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for the sowing of green crops. This was performed amid considerable curiosity from the local populace, for the land was open and had become a "great thoroughfare" for people trespassing on the grounds, the sight of the ragged boys the cause of mirth and comment.[133]

Not all the boys appreciated either the benefits of the air or exercise or being the objects of such public attention. Those who refused to work were whipped, deprived of milk, sent to break stones, confined, or actually prosecuted and imprisoned, proving both the determination of the guardians to accomplish the task and the range of sanctions that could be utilised to maintain conformity and obedience.[134]

Farm business on a large scale ceased in the mid-1850s as the country auxiliary houses were surrendered with the rapid decline in pauper numbers. Thereafter cultivation was confined to the few acres within the workhouse walls when both adults and children participated when required.

While the juvenile classes were thus occupied to a considerable degree between their educational and industrial activities, the vast majority of the adult classes who survived the disease, dirt and privation whiled away the famine years in almost complete idleness. This state of perceived indolence was greatly resented by those who supported the workhouses through the rates. There was a widespread popular prejudice, which came to the fore once the worst of the crisis was over, that masses of "well-fed, well-clothed, turbulent paupers" lived a life of disorganised leisure by exploiting the "squalid wretchedness" of the "impoverished rate-payers".[135]

One of the few efforts to combat adult idleness involved stone-breaking. Breaking stones was always a favourite choice of the authorities, as it was rated a "less eligible" task, dull, laborious, essentially useless, fully in keeping with the principles of the "workhouse test". In Clonmel, for example, the inmates were sent out to hack stones from the nearby quarry, barrow them back to the old workhouse yard and break them there.[136] Though forced to resort to stone-breaking as an activity to be demanded of recipients of both indoor and outdoor relief, many boards of guardians would have agreed with Nenagh in seeing folly, foolishness and danger "in compelling a people worn out by famine and sickness, in the depth of winter, broken-hearted and very nearly in a state of nudity, to sit in the open air for eight hours a day, breaking stones".[137]

However, in the interests of practicality and integration, the same Nenagh authorities set the women and girls to the plaiting of hats and mats on an extensive scale – the hats to be used by the stone-breakers to shelter them from the Summer sun and the mats to be used to protect them from the cold ground in winter. As much as three tons of straw was ordered at one time for the girls to work on.[138]

As an alternative to stone-breaking, another device adopted by many boards of guardians during the Famine years was the capstan mill. Designed by Richard Perrott of Cork and based upon a ship's capstan, it was used for the grinding of corn for the workhouse and powered by pauper labour. On the larger mills, up to one hundred adults could be employed simultaneously. It was primarily intended to provide tiring irksome employment for adult male inmates and to render them more amenable to authority.[139] It also allowed them opportunities to participate in the practical Victorian virtue of literally earning their own bread!

With the exception of Clogheen, all of the Tipperary workhouses had a capstan mill erected within months of one another. The Nenagh mill came by rail from Cork in November 1849, accompanied by a millwright to install it in the specially built shed.[140] It was against Poor Law policy that women or children should be made work the mill;[141] but in Nenagh, Cashel and Roscrea, children were put to the mill, despite the Commissioners' objections.[142] In August 1851,

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the time of maximum pressure in Nenagh, batches of fifty boys were sent from Smithville to the main house to grind the corn.[143] More usually, strong girls were similarly employed a year later, the only Tipperary house where this occurred.[144]

The operation of the mill required absolutely no skill. The paupers trudged monotonously round and round, pushing the lateral arms of the capstan, which set the millstones below in motion. It was a typical workhouse task, stupifying in its dullness and mindlessness.[145] The service of the capstan mills was short-lived, and by the middle of the 1850s they were redundant. The Nenagh mill ceased as early as August 1853 and the miller was dispensed with.[146] The guardians then faced the difficult task of selling the various component parts.[147]

Sixty years later, with the demise of the workhouses in the air, the *Tipperary Star* reminded its readers how emaciated half-starved inmates "were harnessed like horses to the shaft of the corn mill and forced by a man carrying a long-lashed whip to tramp round and round in a circle, turning the mill and grinding the corn".[148] In hindsight, the use of the mill must be regarded as a Famine expedient, introduced to provide easily-superintended work for the masses of idle adult inmates, which was never deemed "the most desirable description of employment" by the Poor Law Commissioners[149] and which was wholly unsuited to the capacities or status of children.

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Expediency as an answer to the long-term implications of the Famine also lay behind the various emigration schemes of the period, designed to rid the workhouses of excessive juvenile numbers. In the immediate Famine and post-Famine years the Poor Law Commissioners had to face the problem of the vast amount of children under fifteen and females under twenty-one left dependent upon the workhouse system.[150] It was the oft-repeated greatest fear of officaldom that these would be left a permanent burden on the rates, with Unions forced to support them indefinitely.[151] In 1851 there were no less than 104,000 in the children's class.[152]

For a small portion of these, there was implemented a drastic, permanent and total solution; they were emigrated to the British colonies of Australia and, later, Canada. Australia, a land of opportunity just emerging from its convict years, was in need of labourers and artisans "suited to the harsh demanding life of a pioneering community almost entirely pastoral in character"; but, above all, Australia needed women.[153] In March 1848 the Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners offered free passages to South Australia to willing workhouse girls,[154] and the Poor Law Commissioners were glad to comply. The scheme operated for only two years but, between May 1848 and April 1850, twenty ships arrived in Australia carrying 4,174 Irish female orphans from 118 Unions,[155] all the Tipperary Unions among them. Eligible girls were first pre-selected by the officers of their workhouse, who could guarantee that they were of "unblemished moral character",[156] who could become "active and useful members of a society which is in a healthy state of progress"[157] and who had to be between fourteen and eighteen years of age.[158]

The final decision on the girls rested with a Lieutenant John Henry of the Royal Navy, who visited the workhouses in turn and personally examined and questioned the candidates.[159] For each girl selected the medical officer of the workhouse had to provide a medical certificate "testifying to the perfect soundness and constitution of each" and proof that she either had had smallpox or had been vaccinated against it.[160]

The boards of guardians had to equip each orphan emigrant with an extensive and practical wardrobe, suited to two extremes of climate, and packed in a sturdy wooden trunk.[161] This, and

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the cost of transport to the port of embarcation, had to be funded from the rates.[162] The ships containing the orphans sailed from Plymouth, where the Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners had a special depot in what was an old French prison, last used in the year of Waterloo.[163] Here the girls underwent a second inspection in surroundings not unfamiliar to them – the depot was completely isolated and enclosed by an eight-foot wall.[164]

Their one-hundred day voyage terminated in either Sydney or Port Philip, where they remained in government centres until they had been placed in situations.[165] On these voyages to Australia death rates were almost negligible, for strict standards of hygiene, food, safety at sea and discipline were laid down and rigidly enforced on these government-sponsored ships.[166] This was in grim and stark contrast with the "coffin ships" of some private and unscrupulous speculators that plied the Atlantic to North America in these same panic-stricken years.[167]

Opposition and prejudice in Australia to the scheme were the chief reasons for its brief operation.[168] Besides, enormous though its consequences were for the four thousand girls who found themselves at a new, if lonesome, beginning, it could not solve the problem of all the Irish orphans left in the workhouses. In 1852 there were still 68,402 children dependent on the Poor Law, 22,771 of them without parents.[169]

In their Report for that year the Poor Law Commissioners were reasonably sanguine about the prospects for these children, noting that the trend was for a "great decrease in pauperism"[170] and that the problem was going to work itself out. However, the boards of guardians were not as clear-sighted or as prepared to wait on events. Throughout the 1850s they sent groups of young women to Canada, deeming it cheaper to bear the entire cost of the emigration on the rates than to maintain them, perhaps for years, in the workhouse.

Canada, only forty-three sea-days' journey from Ireland, was a far more economical proposition than Australia and the "demand for labour, both skilled and unskilled, as well as for farm servants and female domestics" was "very great".[171] Just as all the Tipperary Unions participated in the Australian venture, so too did they organise female orphan parties to Canada, as well as women of slightly more mature years.

Now they sailed to Quebec in the vessels of private shipowners, intent on making their fortune in the mass exodus to the Americas from Ireland. Fortunately for the emigrants, once in Canada, they came under the jurisdiction of the Chief Government Emigration Agent there, Mr A.C. Buchanan,[172] who organised their money, transport and employment, as well as communicating promptly with the Guardians to inform them of the safe arrival and disposal into employment of their people.

While the Canadian scheme was largely a feature of the later 1850s and the early 1860s, participation in the Australian enterprise was a true Famine venture, carried out at the very height of the crisis. The guardians were responsible for every aspect of the preparations, from the selection of the girls to their departure by steamer from the North Wall in Dublin. On the day of their leavetaking, the orphan emigrants were dressed in one of their new outfits, generally the winter one.[173]

The first stage in their unimaginably long journey to Australia was getting to Dublin, itself an exciting enough event in mid-nineteenth century Ireland. They travelled by train to Kingsbridge (now Heuston). Many workhouses towns were already connected with the railway. However, the Roscrea girls and their trunks had to be taken to Ballybrophy,[174] the Nenagh girls to Templemore,[175] and the Clonmel girls journeyed the thirty miles to Thurles railway station by Bianconi coach – Bianconi was a member of the Clonmel Board of Guardians.[176] The orphans then travelled Third Class on the train to Dublin.[177]

The girls were accompanied to the point of embarcation by either the master or matron,

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being the senior officers of the house. A night's lodging generally had to be procured in Dublin for the entire party. The sixty Roscrea girls who left Ireland on 9 January 1849 caused the Union the following expenses:[178]

Clothing and necessities	£228-12-2
Expenses of escorting them	5- 0-0
Railway fares	13- 3-6
Board & Lodgings in Dublin	15-15-6
Cords & car for boxes	2- 3-0
Fares to Plymouth	40-10-0

The forty Cashel orphans who arrived in Sydney on 3 July 1849 on board the *Lady Peel* were reported in their appearance, conduct and demeanour to be "highly creditable to the authorities under whom they were placed".[179] On the other hand, a party of Clonmel girls who arrived on the *New Liverpool* were said to be "extremely refractory and troublesome".[180] When the Clonmel guardians received this verdict from the Superintendent of Port Philip in December 1849, they expressed both regret and surprise, having deemed the girls "all deserving persons", fully justifying the "good character given to them".[181]

Whatever they might feel about a negative report such as this, the Tipperary guardians despatched over 450 orphans to Australia under the scheme. Not all the boards entirely favoured the emigration haemorrhage that was such a feature of the period. The Thurles guardians regretted those "stoutest sons and daughters flying from her shores, as from a house on fire",[182] reduced to an impoverished state "not by their own improvidence, but by the visitations which it has pleased God to inflict upon this unfortunate country".[183]

If emigration was one of the great permanent legacies of the Famine, ophthalmia, a chronic eye disease, was another. The affliction, which resulted in partial or total damage to the sight, struck some workhouses with "Egyptian severity", to quote Dr. Evans of Tipperary, where its ravages were most dreadfully felt.[184] It established itself in the overcrowded and unhygienic conditions that prevailed in the Famine emergency, proved difficult to treat and had a marked tendency to relapse.[185]

The symptoms were a purulent discharge from the eye, followed by swelling and closure; and in severe cases the cornea suffered permanent damage.[186] Ophthalmia had first come to general notice in 1849, a year of serious overcrowding in filthy squalid conditions. In the five years 1849-1853, of 3,346,729 individuals registered in Irish workhouses 134,843 were treated for ophthalmia.[187] It was notably a children's disease – 94,759 of the cases were under fifteen years of age.

Essentially the disease was the outcome of ignorance and overcrowding, rife among children who slept three and four to a bed, who had few opportunities for washing, hygiene or clean clothes, and who were collected for long hours in closely-packed schoolrooms.[188] Workhouse ophthalmia developed in a mild form for weeks, with patients suffering little pain or intolerance to light, with little to attract attention beyond watering eyes and mucous discharge. "And then, suddenly, the formidable disease makes its invasion . . . the cases multiply with alarming rapidity . . . the extension of the disease becomes almost universal".

Fresh cases would occur even as the children slept, and by morning it had made considerable advance.[189] By November 1850, there were 44 Tipperary inmates blind in both eyes, 24 blind in one eye and the other much damaged, and 105 had one eye destroyed but the other intact.[190] While the workhouses at Tipperary and Cashel suffered most severely within the county, all the Union houses were inflicted with continued bouts of ophthalmia, and the disease proved

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almost beyond remedy until, with the decline in numbers in the 1850s, it eased of its own accord.

It was in the Tipperary town schoolrooms of Bank Place and Nelson Street that the disease first became prevalent.[191] Dr Evans, baffled by the "protracted and formidable nature of the epidemic"[192] and helpless in the face of its severity, requested the Poor Law Commissioners to send someone with experience of eye diseases.[193] Dr William Wilde, of St. Mark's Ophthalmic Hospital, Dublin, visited Tipperary early in August 1850 and examined the infected schools with the two workhouse doctors, Evans and Reardon.[194] Dr Reardon described for the Commissioners how the ophthalmia had established itself:

> "The class of patients generally attacked were debilitated, starved female children, generally those recently admitted, worn out by previous want and deprivations of every kind – many having refused to come into the house in consequence of its crowded state, until they were exhausted to the last degree . . . The general health of the establishment was very bad indeed. We had cholera, dysentery, fever and small pox, as well as several cases of gangrene and dropsy. There was no proper sewerage, neither was there sufficient water to cleanse the entire house or purify the privies, except what a horse brought daily from town. The deaths in the workhouse since Spring have been very numerous, the mortality varying from 36-50 weekly."[195]

His inspection of the premises in Jail Lane that had been used as an ophthalmic hospital left Dr Wilde horrified:

> "I can scarcely conceive of a more unsuitable or unhealthy locality. It is a store and a miserable old house in front, entered by a low archway in a narrow, dirty lane leading down to the river. The rooms small, low, cold and totally incapable of proper ventilation, and only eight feet from the floor to the ceiling."[196]

The "new" ophthalmic hospital, where Wilde examined 340 cases, only fourteen of them adults, was in Meeting House Lane and was another corn store, four lofts high, each only eight and a half feet from roof to floor. He found the place "tolerably clean", but the exercise yard was too confined – "like the yard of a prison" – and contiguous with the dysentery hospital, "a most unhealthy and disgusting place".[197]

However unwholesome and unsalubrious Wilde deemed the ophthalmic hospital, preparations had obviously been made in anticipation of the eminent doctor's visit for, a month previously, when a member of the Visiting Committee had called unexpectedly in the middle of a hot summer afternoon, he discovered decidedly inferior conditions prevailing there. The hapless children were all sitting in their sleeping wards, where the heat was "intense", the atmosphere "oppressive", the night buckets unemptied and the privy in a "very foul state".

Next door, in the dysentery hospital, things were even more grim; the cess pool and the dung yard were "in a most disgraceful state", the bed linen very dirty, the straw for the bed ticks "wet and rotten". Worst of all was the sight of two dead bodies "thrown on the floor" of a small room off the large sleeping ward where, he was informed, they would remain until taken off the register. Furthermore, to compound the horror, the dead were "generally permitted to remain there three days before they were interred".[198] During these crisis months of 1850 administration of the scattered Tipperary houses had all but broken down, as the Union was without a Master and few were prepared to undertake the demanding, responsible and dangerous duties.

Wilde recommended that the ophthalmic children be removed to the country where they would have air and space.[199] Accordingly, at the end of August 1850 all ophthalmia patients were settled in Castlelloyd, a country house eight miles away in county Limerick.[200] However, their stay here was short-lived for, in November, they were sent to Bank Place in the town.[201]

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They remained here until June 1851, when they were transferred to the town fever hospital[202] and, in August 1851, they returned permanently to the main house.[203]

The continued extension of the disease was undoubtedly aided by the constant removal of the patients from one auxiliary to another. When the patients returned to the main house in August 1851 new cases were still occurring at the rate of eighty a week.[204] For the first time, after years of a policy of aimless drift, the guardians were forced to an awareness of this permanent consequence of Famine.

The eventual solution to the workhouse blind, adopted by all the houses, was to despatch their blind inmates to specialised institutions then opening in Dublin. St. Mary's Catholic Asylum for the Industrious Female Blind was erected in Portobello in 1858 and St. Joseph's Catholic Male Asylum for the Industrious Blind was built a year later in Glasnevin.[205] Under the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1843 workhouse children could be supported in such institutions out of the rates. Any child under the age of eighteen years could be sent and, once there, they would be kept for life.[206]

Prior to the opening of the Blind Institutions in Portobello and Glasnevin the Poor Law Commissioners, with help from the Society of Friends, had proposed the establishment of a special asylum for the workhouse blind of Munster.[207] The site chosen was Castlelake, the famine auxiliary house of the Cashel Union[208] emptied of its youthful occupants since August 1855.[209] The Poor Law Commissioners estimated that 300 blind paupers could be sent from the province.[210] By now it was clear to the Commissioners that very few Unions had made any effort to educate their blind; in particular, they had made no provision to teach them to read.[211]

Blind boys in Tipperary had been taught mat and basket weaving.[212] A group of boys there were also taught how to play the bagpipes. After eighteen months' tuition they took their discharge from the house and prepared to earn a living as musicians.[213] The Commissioners did not approve of this venture, judging that it was "far more desirable to teach these poor children some industrial occupation" and that to depend on music for a livelihood "usually leads to habits of vagrancy".[214]

The Castlelake proposal foundered, partly because of the establishment of the Institutions for the Blind in Dublin, partly because of a certain amount of jealousy and parochial rivalry between the neighbouring Tipperary and Cashel Unions. The Tipperary guardians considered the Castlelake location impractical, it having no railway communication.[215] They also found "objectionable" the terms put forward by the Cashel guardians of £11-5-6 per head per annum chargeable.[216]

They were hardly pleased that the Castlelake institution would be entirely under the control of the Cashel guardians, under the auspices of the Poor Law Commissioners.[217] But the Tipperary guardians were not opposed to the idea in principle; even as they objected to the Castlelake location, they were manoeuvring (unsuccessfully) to convert the Tipperary town Fever Hospital into an institution for the Poor Blind.[218]

Neither the Tipperary nor Cashel Union acquired the Institution for the Blind and, by the time blind inmates came to be transferred to Dublin in the early 1860s, the Famine generation had grown up and had moved on, and the population dependent on Poor Law relief had diminished and stabilised into a pattern that hardly changed for the remaining workhouse years. With the passing of time, children and the able-bodied grew proportionally less in relation to the old. Economic circumstances had changed and, so too had the number of institutions dealing with destitute children. Industrial Schools, established by law in 1868[219] and run largely by Catholic religious orders, catered for the type of child whose only recourse prior to this was the Poor House.[220]

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Huge numbers of the Famine workhouse children had been abandoned, deserted or orphaned. It was an acknowledged and regretted fact that in the Famine disaster vast numbers of parents "absolutely and wholly abandoned their offspring" to the mercies of the Poor Law system.[221] The authorities were assiduous in prosecuting parents who were known to have done so. In March 1846 in Nenagh schoolboy Michael Smith was ordered to lodge information against his father for deserting him. On being brought to Court the magistrates refused his information as he did not understand the oath. The workhouse authorities were ordered to keep the boy in their school.[222]

Some fortunate children, abandoned in the frenzy to leave the country, were sometimes claimed years later by families who had travelled to the ends of the earth. Eight-year-old Thomas Ryan sailed to America in 1858 to join his mother there.[223] Three Cormack children left for Australia in 1857, their passage out having been paid by their father, who was already there.[224] Other parents had been forced to leave the country under different circumstances. There are many instances in the minute books of children joining parents who had been sentenced to transportation.

In November 1849 the Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners organised the passage to Van Diemen's Land of the children of James Ryan, who had been transported in 1845. The Nenagh guardians simply had to provide an outfit for the children.[225] The Roscrea guardians were informed by the governor of the Convict Depot of Grangegorman Prison that the three children of Julia Maher, sentenced to transportation, would "be permitted to accompany her on their being forwarded to Dublin in good health and well-clothed, at the expense of the Union".[226] The children, all under seven, were provided with clothing and sent by rail to Dublin in November 1849. Two of them had been in the workhouse hospital but, on their recovery, joined their mother.[227]

Many of the children who survived the want, deprivation and disease of the Famine years had their health and constitutions permanently damaged. From the late 1850s onwards the plight of such children was gaining public notice. One of the letters that drew attention to the tragedy of the situation detailed a visit to the Cork Union hospital. There came towards Charles B. Gibson, a twelve-year-old boy "panting like a bird . . . I took him at the distance (judging from his face) for an old man. What a look of orphaned desolation marked that child's face. It was aged by want and sorrow. Here I must stay my pen. The boy was obviously dying on his legs".[228] Born in the midst of Famine, his case must have been one of thousands: those who outlived the catastrophe carried the mental and physical scars for ever.

In the words of a contemporary the Famine was a "national calamity that baffled forethought or remedy".[229] Modern famines of the twentieth century have proved as difficult to predict, prevent or ameliorate. The Famine was certainly the watershed of nineteenth century Ireland. It divides the modern Ireland from the old, the literate Ireland from the unschooled, the pre-communications world from a world reduced and shrunken by transport, the telegraph, the popular newspaper, and the long arm of bureaucracy itself.

In the workhouse world the Famine was no less a turning point. Within the context of the eighty-year history of the workhouses, the Famine represents a particularly traumatic but limited period of their development. The overwhelming calamity of the Famine fell upon the Poor Law when it had barely emerged from its experimental opening phase. In an apocalyptic time of the disintegration of a society, the workhouses were compelled to carry the burden of responsibility for relief for a stricken people.

Skeleton staffs of inexperienced officers were given charge of the temporal welfare of unbelievable throngs of wretched, starving and diseased men, women and children. The

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children and those who looked after them were forced to cope as best they could with the soul-destroying combination of death, disease, semi-starvation, dirt, squalor and deplorable living conditions. They were scattered in auxiliary houses all over the country, containing many hundreds of children, in remote locations and frequently on the move. It was a situation with which the workhouses were never designed to cope. Yet the cumbersome system somehow creaked on to finality and, eventually, just as it had come apparently from nowhere, the Famine went away.

In Poor Law terms, the Famine was an anomaly. After it was over, the institutions gradually settled back to the function for which they had been designed. It would be wrong to review the workhouse system using the shallow sentimentality with which the present frequently regards the past. Taken in the context of its time, the Poor Law must be regarded as a revolutionary piece of social legislation, the basic thrust of which was benign and benevolent, intended to ease the afflictions of those who were most despised, neglected and helpless.

Grudging, minimal and measured though the State charity allowed the destitute was, it was a considerable advance to being left to live or die according to some wild vagary of chance, as had been the lot of the poor since time immemorial. The workhouse was created only as a place of last resort and the inmates, at the best of times, inhabited a cold, comfortless, cheerless environment, deemed suitable for those whom society essentially regarded as failures. At the worst of times the inmates experienced the workhouses as they were under Famine conditions, when the paupers were disease-ridden, semi-starved and filthy in horrendously overcrowded institutions.

Nevertheless, in the overall context of the Poor Law, the first time basic human rights were accorded to the most unfortunate members of society – food, shelter, clothing and education. In the function that it served in its time, the Poor Law of the nineteenth century has its director descendant in the welfare state of today.

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