

Philanthropy and poor relief before the poor law, 1801–30

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines poor relief in the period before the introduction of the poor law (c.1800–30), emphasizing the philanthropic aspects and highlighting issues such as the ‘mixed economy’ of poor relief at the time.¹ It also considers the impact of the introduction of the poor law in 1838 which, as suggested by many contemporary commentators on the poor law, does seem to have altered patterns of private philanthropy. The chapter draws on the Royal Commission on the Poor in Ireland (the Whately Commission) reports and evidence from sources such as the census to describe philanthropic practices. The focus here is on relief in cash and kind to the poor² and on the more regular forms of relief rather than on philanthropic responses to the rather frequent crises of the period.³

In the first part of this chapter, we examine the structure of philanthropic support, distinguishing by the type of provider of relief (statutory, civic, church and private) and the source of funding (Exchequer, grand jury, local and private). The second part examines the main statutory and civic bodies: the houses of industry, founding hospitals and mendicity societies, providing some estimate of the scope of relief provided. Part three turns to religious and private charity. Here it is much more difficult currently to make any hard estimates of the extent and scope of relief. This section focuses on providing some impressionistic evidence of patterns of relief (and how they interrelated with the more formal sources of relief discussed in part 2) and in identifying sources which would allow a more detailed picture to be developed.

1 On the mixed economy of relief, see, for example, Alan J. Kidd, *State, society and the poor in nineteenth-century England* (London, 1999). 2 The scope of relief would be greater if we were to take into account the extent to which systems of medical relief operated, in part, as relief for the sick poor: see, generally, Laurence M. Geary, *Medicine and charity in Ireland, 1781–1851* (Dublin, 2004). 3 Subsistence crises occurred in 1800–1, 1817–19, 1821 and 1831. The worst were in 1800–1 and 1817–19, which led to an estimated 40,000–60,000 excess deaths (Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland: a new economic history* (Oxford, 1994), p. 73). The cholera epidemic of 1832 led to an estimated death toll of 50,000. In these periods, additional supports were provided both by the State and through philanthropic means. The latter involved both the establishment of specific funds to support the poor (both in Ireland and in Great Britain) and more local action by landowners and others to create employment and provide poor relief. See, for example, Craig Bailey, ‘Micro-credit, misappropriation and morality: British responses to Irish distress, 1822–31’, *Continuity and Change*, 21:3 (2006), pp 455–74.

Part 4 examines the impact of the poor law on pre-Famine patterns of relief and part 5 concludes with a discussion of the key issues.

THE STRUCTURE OF PHILANTHROPIC SUPPORT

Unlike the rest of the United Kingdom, Ireland in 1801 did not have a national poor law. Even allowing for the permissive nature of the Scottish poor law and the fact that the English poor law was arguably a national framework for local and regional systems of poor relief,⁴ this left Ireland in a significantly different position to the rest of the United Kingdom. However, the lack of a national system of relief was, in fact, common to most European countries at the time.

Like the pattern in other European countries, support for the poor depended on a range of different sources. However, one cannot make a simple distinction between public and private support in the period in question. One approach in trying to understand the complicated network of supports is to examine it under two different headings: first, the type of provider of support, and, second, the source of funding. In table 1, we set out four categories of provider by their status:

- 1) bodies established or recognized in law
- 2) civic bodies – bodies formally established but not by statute
- 3) church bodies
- 4) private individuals

We also identify four sources of support:

- 1) Exchequer funding
- 2) grand jury funding
- 3) other compulsory (or quasi-compulsory) local funding⁵
- 4) support provided voluntarily by private individuals.

As can be seen, statutory bodies funded by the Exchequer were the exception with only the Dublin House of Industry and the Foundling Hospital (which were, in reality, national bodies) structured in this way. The main method of the provision of ‘public’ support was through permissive legislation allowing local grand juries to maintain different types of institution (houses of industry, dispensaries, etc.), which were also supported by private donations – although in most cases the support levied by the grand juries dwarfed the private support. Charitable bodies (including the

⁴ See Steven A. King, *Poverty and welfare in England, 1700–1850: a regional perspective* (Manchester, 2000). ⁵ Including the coal tax which largely funded the Cork Foundling Hospital, and the house tax which funded (in part) the Dublin Foundling Hospital to 1822, and funding levied by church vestries.

Table 1

| | Statutory | Civic | Church | Private |
|--------------------|---|---|---|----------------|
| Exchequer | Dublin House of Industry Dublin Foundling Hospital | [Dublin Mendicity Association] | | |
| Grand jury | Most other houses of industry Dispensaries | | | |
| Other local | Cork Foundling Hospital [Dublin Foundling Hospital] | | Support for foundlings Church poor lists Orphanages | |
| Private | Belfast Charitable Society [Houses of Industry] [Dispensaries] ⁶ | Mendicity Associations Charitable bodies | | Direct support |

(Institution in [] indicate a minority source of funding)

mendicity associations discussed below) were generally supported only by private donations, although the Dublin Mendicity Association received some public or quasi-public assistance.⁷ Local parishes provided support for foundlings and to the poor more generally through the provision of relief via vestry collection and/or voluntary church collections and charity sermons.⁸ In addition, at least in the major cities, Catholic organizations and those of other denominations – both religious and lay – provided support through the provision of institutions such as orphanages, widows' homes, houses of refuge and infirmaries.⁹ Finally, private support was extensive, ranging from support provided by the landlords to intra-community support.

6 Funding for dispensaries was shared between grand jury and local voluntary support. Subscriptions had first to be raised by the dispensaries before grand jury funds were awarded, and the ratio was specified by legislation. **7** See Audrey Woods, *Dublin outsiders: a history of the Mendicity Institution* (Dublin, 1988), chapter 5. **8** David Dickson, 'In search of the old Irish poor law' in Rosalind Mitchison and Peter Roebuck (eds), *Economy and society in Scotland and Ireland, 1500–1939* (Edinburgh, 1988), pp 149–59. **9** For Dublin, see Cormac Begadon, 'Laity and clergy in the Catholic renewal of Dublin c.1750–1830' (PhD, NUI Maynooth (2009), chapter 2), although the main focus of the supports provided seems to have been educational rather than poor relief per se. As Begadon points out, the growth in such institutions reflects the growing status of the Catholic middle class (a point also emphasized by Anthony Blake in his contemporary account: *Thoughts on the Catholic question*, Dublin and London, 1828).

STATUTORY AND CIVIC BODIES

HOUSES OF INDUSTRY

Houses of industry had been established in Dublin and Cork in the early eighteenth century and permissive legislation had been adopted in 1772 allowing for the establishment of such houses on a nationwide basis but only eight were in operation by 1830.¹⁰ The legislation was adopted with the dual purpose of (i) giving 'countenance and assistance' to the poor 'disabled by old age or infirmities to earn their living', and (ii) restraining and punishing those 'able to support themselves by labour or industry' who 'yet choose to live in idleness by begging'.¹¹

The Dublin House of Industry was by far the largest institution and operated, in practice, as a national rather than purely local institution.¹² It was established in 1773, replacing an earlier institution that became the Dublin Foundling Hospital. The objects of the initial institution included general support to 'helpless' men and women; the incarceration of men committed as vagabonds and sturdy beggars, and 'idle strolling and disorderly women'; and support to deserted and fatherless children.¹³ Although it was initially intended that the house would be supported locally, it quickly relied on a parliamentary grant which reached almost £50,000 by 1810.¹⁴ Clearly concerned at the rising costs, a report on charitable institutions in Dublin (including the House of Industry) was commissioned by the Irish government in 1809. This found that the main principle of the House of Industry was 'indiscriminate and free admission accompanied with the liberty of unrestrained egress'.¹⁵ The authors saw this approach as an 'insurmountable impediment' to improving young people or improving adults' habits of industry but it was one which could not be 'abruptly relinquished'.¹⁶ However, it is not clear that significant action was taken on

10 Mel Cousins, 'The Irish Parliament and relief of the poor: the 1772 legislation establishing houses of industry', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, 28 (2013), pp 95–115. **11** 11&12 Geo. III, c. 30, 'An act for badging such poor as shall be found unable to support themselves by labour, and otherwise providing for them, and for refraining such as shall be found able to support themselves by labour or industry from begging'. **12** Of the 6,145 persons admitted in 1807, 3,075 were from outside Dublin: John D. Latouche, William Disney and George Renny, *A report upon certain charitable establishments in the City of Dublin which receive aid from parliament* (Dublin, 1809), pp 36–7. **13** House of Industry and Foundling Hospital, Dublin. *Accounts of the period when first established; their object, and how supported* (Dublin, 1828), p. 176. **14** On the Dublin House of Industry around 1800, see Thomas Bernard, 'Extracts from an account of the late improvements, in the House of Industry, at Dublin' in *The Reports of the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor* (London, 1798), pp 99–107. **15** Latouche, Disney and Renny, *A report upon certain charitable establishments in the City of Dublin*, p. 36. **16** All three were senior figures in Dublin philanthropy. Latouche was a director of La Touche Bank, and a vice-president of Dublin Chamber of Commerce; Disney was a barrister, a member of the general board of health and a commissioner of education, 1806–12; Renny was a medical doctor and served in an official capacity with several public institutions in Dublin, including the Cork St fever hospital.

foot of the report and Exchequer funding remained high. In 1816, Robert Peel (Irish chief secretary, 1812–18) wrote to the governors who, despite the level of funding, argued that they had insufficient funding to meet the demand.¹⁷ Peel recommended that admissions be limited and that the admission of ‘vagrant and refractory beggars’ should cease entirely. It appears that the latter recommendation was adopted and continued in effect, despite the efforts of the Dublin Mendicity Association to have this function restored to the House.¹⁸

At the end of the French wars, from 1815, public funding declined, so that by the 1820s only £20,000–£21,000 per annum was being provided. A further report was commissioned (from the same authors as the 1809 report) in 1820. They recommended that the House of Industry should serve a local rather than national demand and proposed a number of economies, including a reduction in the paid governors from five to one and a reduction in staffing.¹⁹ However, it would appear that many of the inmates continued to be drawn from outside Dublin and any reforms that did take place do not appear to have improved the conditions of the paupers. Alexis de Tocqueville, in his tour of Ireland in 1830, visited the house of industry and was not complimentary about the conditions he found.²⁰

Most of the houses of industry outside Dublin were established in the late eighteenth century and although a number were established in the early 1800s (including Clonmel, (1811), Kilkenny (1814) and Wexford (1816)), these tended to be smaller and their establishment appears to have been part of a long campaign dating back to the eighteenth century. These houses of industry received much lower levels of funding than Dublin (from about £200 per annum in Kilkenny to £4,500 in Cork) and also supported fewer inmates (from 1–200 in small houses like Clonmel and Waterford) though, if contemporary data are to be believed, the Cork house supported about as many paupers as the much better funded Dublin institution.

The Belfast institutions defy easy categorization. Although referred to as the ‘house of industry’, the Belfast institution of that name was not established under law and was not supported by the grand jury. Nor was it similar in function to many of the other ‘catch-all’ institutions and it is perhaps best treated as a mendicity society²¹ and is categorized as such below.²² The Belfast Charitable Society or Poor House (established in 1771 and given a statutory basis in 1774) is closer to the southern

¹⁷ Robert Peel to governors of the House of Industry, 14 Sept. 1816 in *Report of the commissioners appointed by the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland to inspect the House of Industry...*, HC 1820 (84) viii. 1. ¹⁸ *Report of Dublin Mendicity Association* (Dublin, 1833), p. 11. ¹⁹ *Report of the commissioners appointed by the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland to inspect the House of Industry...*, HC 1820 (84) 8. 1. ²⁰ Emmet J. Larkin (ed.), *Alexis de Tocqueville's journey in Ireland, July–August 1835* (Washington, 1990), p. 24. Henry Inglis was rather more positive stating that it was ‘altogether as fine an institution of the kind as I have anywhere seen’: Henry Inglis, *Ireland in 1834* (London, 1835), p. 18. ²¹ See ‘Rules and regulations for the House of Industry’, *The Belfast Monthly Magazine*, 4:21 (30 Apr. 1810), pp 261–9. ²² The same approach is taken with the smaller Newtownards ‘house of industry’ which again was not a statutory house nor supported by the grand jury.

houses of industry in function and is treated here as a house of industry.²³ However, unlike the southern institutions it was not supported by the grand jury (or Parliament) and relied generally on charitable support.

FOUNDLING HOSPITALS AND SUPPORT FOR DESERTED CHILDREN

Foundling hospitals existed in Dublin and Cork.²⁴ The Dublin institution, originally established in 1703, was by far the largest. Following a major scandal concerning abnormally high child mortality in 1797, the Dublin Foundling Hospital was reorganized. Children were sent to the institution from all over Ireland and were then normally put out to nurse up to the age of seven or eight. Despite this reform, the Dublin institution had annual admissions of about 1,500 to 2,000 in the 1810s and Exchequer funding reaching £32,500 in 1820. Initially the Hospital was funded, in part, by a Dublin house tax but this was altered in 1822, with a view to spreading the burden on the basis that it was unfair that Dublin residents fund what was a national service. Parishes were then required to pay a sum of £5 for each child sent to the hospital. This had a major impact on admissions, which dropped to about 500 annually.

However, standards remained unacceptably low even by the standards of the time. A major investigation by the Commissioners of the Irish Education Inquiry in 1826 found that of the 52,150 children admitted from 1796 to 1826, no less than 41,524 were recorded as dead.²⁵ The Commissioners refused to believe these figures and suggested that about 10,000 children recorded as dead were probably still alive and with their nurses.²⁶ Despite this rather optimistic assumption, the Commissioners tactfully concluded that 'at no period since its commencement have the results realized in the Foundling Hospital of Dublin been fully satisfactory to those concerned in its management ...'²⁷ The Commissioners investigated the impact of the 1822 funding reform, being concerned that it might have led to an increase in infanticide, but could find no indication that this had been the result.

An 1829 House of Commons Select Committee, chaired by Chief Secretary Lord Francis Leveson Gower, took a rather less sanguine view of the operation of the Hospital, based on the Commissioners' report.²⁸ It concluded that the Hospital 'does not appear to have satisfactorily answered either for the purpose of the preservation

²³ Robert W.M. Strain, 'The history and associations of the Belfast Charitable Society', *Ulster Medical Journal*, 22:1 (1953), pp 31–60. The society running the poor house was incorporated in an amendment to the 1772 Houses of Industry Act. ²⁴ See, generally, Joseph Robins, *The lost children: a study of charity children in Ireland, 1700–1900* (Dublin, 1980). A Galway Foundling Hospital, with eight children on the books, is recorded in the second report of the Whately Commission. *Second report of the commissioners for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland*, HC 1837 (68) 31.587, p. 18. ²⁵ *Third report of the commissioners of Irish education inquiry*, HC 1826–27 (13) 8.1, at p. 5. ²⁶ The registrar of the hospital did not agree. ²⁷ *Third report of the commissioners of Irish education inquiry*, p. 3. ²⁸ *Report from the select committee into Irish miscellaneous estimates ...*, HC 1829 (342) 4.127.

of human life, or for the proper education of the children admitted to it'.²⁹ On the basis that the reduction in admissions from 2,000 to 500 had not been shown to have had any 'mischievous or injurious effects', the Committee recommended that all further admissions to the Hospital should cease from 1830 and this was implemented with effect from 1831. This slowly led to a fall in the funding for the Hospital (as a large number of existing foundlings remained on its books). The Cork Foundling Hospital, largely funded by a local coal tax, was established in 1747. It was considerably smaller than the Dublin body, supporting about 1,300 children in the 1830s (850 at nurse). It should be noted here that support to foundlings was also provided locally through grand juries and church vestries.³⁰ For example, in 1827, the vestry of the Protestant parish of St Mary's in Dublin assessed a sum of £50 'to provide for deserted children'.³¹

THE RISE OF MENDICITY SOCIETIES

There was a striking growth in mendicity societies (especially in Ulster) after 1818. It seems likely that the economic impact of the end of the French wars combined with the reduction in Exchequer support to the Dublin institutions contributed to this development. Although the establishment of the Dublin Mendicity Association took place in the same year as the establishment of the London Society for the Suppression of Mendicity,³² it is not clear that the Irish societies were greatly influenced by the ideology of the London body or, indeed, that the Irish societies themselves shared a clear philosophy, other than in the very general sense of making some effort to address poverty in their local area.³³ However, some general principles to which, it would appear, at least some of the societies tried to adhere were set out by a committee member of the Dublin Mendicity Association in the context of a review of the Dublin House of Industry.³⁴ This set out a number of propositions for the 'management of the poor'.

First, 'the utmost economy should be observed' in the use of funds and, second, 'the course of nature should be deviated from as little as possible'. Thus, and third, 'every means should be taken' to discourage the breaking of social ties among the poor, such as the parent-child relationship. Fourth, 'as little encouragement as possible

29 Ibid., p. 6. **30** See, for example, *ibid.*, appendix 4. **31** *Parochial rates (Ireland)*, HC 1828 (241) 22. The vestry also provided for coffins for poor persons. This return provides similar details for parishes in the dioceses of Dublin and Armagh. See also the more extensive returns contained in *Parochial rates (Ireland)*, HC 1828 (370) 22. **32** Michael J.D. Roberts, 'Reshaping the gift relationship: the London Mendicity Society and the suppression of begging in England, 1818–69', *International Review of Social History*, 36 (1991), pp 201–31. **33** On the Dublin Mendicity Association, see, in particular, its annual report for 1833 which includes a detailed description of its activities: *Sixteenth report of the managing committee of the Association for the Suppression of Mendicity in Dublin for the year 1833*. See Woods, *Dublin outsiders*. **34** *Report of the commissioners appointed by the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland to inspect the House of Industry* ... HC 1820 (84) 8, at p. 46.

should be given to relax foresight and weaken reliance on their own exertions ...? Fifth, 'all persons relieved by public charity should be made to contribute, as far as they can, to their own support ...? Sixth, the 'adult and healthy poor' should only be relieved through the means of employment. Seventh, in providing relief 'reference should be made as far as possible to the comforts enjoyed by the lowest class of *independent poor*'.³⁵ Eighth, 'large establishments should ... be avoided as much as possible'. Ninth, and conversely, relief should be given 'in the home and in the family'. Tenth, 'no poor person should be supported at a distance from their former residence' where they were known and had friends. Finally, poor children should not be raised to a situation 'beyond that in which it hath pleased God to place them'. As can be seen, the propositions combined providentialism with economic liberalism but while some principles – such as 'less eligibility' – corresponded with those shortly to appear in the English Poor Law Commission's report, others – such as the preference for outdoor relief – were entirely alien to that approach.³⁶

Unsurprisingly, there was considerable variation in how the societies operated in practice. However, it is clear that – at least numerically – the dominant form of relief was domiciliary. In this, the societies followed the general pattern to be seen in the rest of the United Kingdom and, indeed, throughout most of Europe. A number of societies did establish (or link to) a poor house either in an attempt to suppress vagrancy (Newry) or to provide support to the sick and aged (Coleraine). As implied by the name (mendicity) societies did generally attempt to suppress begging but with varying degrees of success. In some, the employment of beadles (or 'bang-beggars') was claimed to have led to some success (e.g., in Lisburn) but in others the Poor Inquiry's assistant commissioners found that the relief provided was insufficient to allow for the suppression of mendicancy (Ballymena, Larne). The northern societies in particular operated a 'law of settlement', requiring individuals to have lived in the area for between three and ten years in order to qualify for assistance.³⁷

The Poor Inquiry's assistant commissioners were highly critical of the management of a number of societies (in particular, Drogheda and Limerick) and the Dublin Mendicity Institution fared no better than had the House of Industry in the eyes of a visiting commentator. Henry Inglis, visiting the institution in 1834, described it as a 'miserable make-shift' and stated that 'a visit to the Dublin mendicity society will not put anybody in love with that system of voluntary charity, which, we are told by an eminent divine, is so blessed an encourager of human sympathies'.³⁸

35 Emphasis in original. **36** S.G. and E.O.A. Checkland (eds), *The poor law report of 1834* (London, 1974). **37** In contrast the Dublin society required only six months residence and even that was not strictly enforced: see *Royal commission for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland: Appendix C*, HC 1836 (36) xxx, at p. 222. **38** Inglis 'saw hundreds, for whom no employment could be found, lying and sitting in the court, waiting for the mess which had tempted them from their hovels, and the incertitude of mendicancy – which many however prefer; and I saw an attempt at teaching the young – who, whatever progress they may make in head learning, cannot, I fear, make great progress in morals, consigned, as they are, after day-light, to the care of their worthless parents; and returning to

The societies were generally run by committees elected by subscribers and listings in the local newspapers allow us to indentify the social class of those involved. In striking contrast to the grand jury, which was generally constituted of large landowners,³⁹ the mendicity societies were run by men much further down the social scale. The committee of the Armagh society in 1828, for example, largely consisted of grocers, spirit dealers, oil and colour dealers and similar merchants.⁴⁰ Gentry were strikingly absent, even if Archbishop Beresford chaired the society's annual meeting.⁴¹ The inaugural Galway committee was dominated by Roman Catholic clergy but its lay members included a woollen draper, a kelp merchant, a surveyor and a revenue collector. Only one member appears to have been a large landowner.⁴² The relatively low social standing of the committee members may, at least in part, explain why their work received so little attention at the time (and indeed subsequently) in that they were not the type of men to be invited to give evidence to a parliamentary committee or to have the ear of Archbishop Whately or his colleagues.

RELIGIOUS AND PRIVATE CHARITY

SOURCES

There is an absence of any comprehensive directory of charitable organizations in early nineteenth-century Ireland.⁴³ However, some data are available from sources such as the annual reports of various voluntary bodies, the Irish Catholic Directory, and (from 1844) the annual *Thom's* directories. A listing of 'charitable and benevolent institutions' is to be found in *Thom's* directories although the term is very broadly defined and the directories contain rather limited information. In smaller towns outside Dublin, one would have to rely on more sporadic local or regional directories, again cross-checking with sources such as *Thom's*. It should, nonetheless, be possible to carry out such studies, at least in selected regional locations which would begin the process of tracing the level of charity and philanthropy in Ireland. Such local studies might also examine the relationship between poor law policies and

the hovels in which vice and misery are so often united.' Inglis, *Ireland in 1834*, vol. 1, pp 16–18. ³⁹ Neal Garnham, 'Elite creation in early Hanoverian Ireland: the case of the assize grand jury', *Historical Journal*, 42:3 (1999), pp 623–42. ⁴⁰ *Newry Commercial Telegraph*, 8 Feb. 1828. Identification is from *Pigot's Directory* of 1824. ⁴¹ Beresford, son of George de La Poer Beresford, first marquess of Waterford, was appointed as archbishop of Armagh and therefore primate of All Ireland in 1822 (having been a bishop since 1805). He was a conservative in politics and opposed the Roman Catholic Relief Bill of 1829. ⁴² *Connaught Journal*, 19 July 1824. This was Lachlan MacLachlan, later elected Repeal MP for Galway borough in 1832 before being unseated on petition. MacLachlan was the only person to be a member of both the society and the Galway grand jury at the time. ⁴³ Rosa M. Barratt, *Guide to Dublin charities* (Dublin, 1884) appears to be the first detailed listing.

voluntary activity at a local level. It seems likely that there were significant variations in the manner in which the poor law practices and voluntary activity interrelated both over space and time. The Whately Commission estimated that farmers donated between £1 and 2 million to the direct support of the poor.⁴⁴ Lord Morpeth (Irish chief secretary, 1835–41) carried out a rough-and-ready survey (in the context of the introduction of the 1837 Poor Law Bill) which suggested that the level of support was about £700,000–800,000 or perhaps £1 million, somewhat more modest but still very significant.⁴⁵

THE WHATELY COMMISSION

The extensive investigations by the Whately Commission give some picture of the range of supports available. Extracts from the evidence to the Whately Commission give some sense of the type of supports provided in towns and rural areas (though we have no means of knowing how representative these were).⁴⁶ In Templemichael and Ballymacormic (close to Longford town), the witnesses, including Lord Longford's under-agent, explained that

About 12 of the 200 [persons of the labouring class infirm from age] beg their bread from door to door; seven or eight are assisted to the extent of from 10s. to 15s. per annum from a collection in the Presbyterian meeting-house; from sixteen to eighteen from the collection in the Established Church, which varies from £30 to £40 annually.⁴⁷ Lord Longford allows £10 per annum for bread, and one of the Edgeworth family £5, to be distributed weekly to persons on the latter list; Lady Longford gives £40 per annum for clothing and blankets, distributed at Christmas among about 50 old persons; 15 small houses, with a garden to each of 10 perches, are given by Lord Longford rent-free to distressed families. They contain at present 14 persons of each sex past their labour. There are besides seven old persons assisted or supported by Lord Longford, with sums varying from £2 to £16 annually. About £50 per

⁴⁴ *Royal Commission for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland: Appendix C – Parts 1 and 2*, HC 1836 (36), 30. ⁴⁵ *Hansard*, 36, at col. 463, 13 Feb. 1836. ⁴⁶ See also the more detailed description of supports in the main cities in the Commission's report. See also publications such as John J. McGregor, *New history of Dublin* (Dublin, 1821) which provides an account of, inter alia, Dublin charitable institutions; and the *Irish Catholic Directory* which provides an account of Catholic charities in Dublin. ⁴⁷ 'Those on the Protestant list at present are mostly under 50; many of these would never apply for charity. Those on the Presbyterian list are principally old persons, and their claims on both are determined by the degree of distress. This mode of relief is deemed more respectable than even private begging. There are at present on the Protestant list twenty heads of families, but sometimes there are four times as many applicants. The Presbyterian collection is distributed yearly or half yearly; 10s. or 15s. to each person: the number relieved being determined by the amount of the money, which is from £7 to £8 annually; the Protestant collection is from £30 to £40 annually; food is never given by the congregations.'

annum is collected in the town by occasional subscriptions, a fair proportion of which is given to cases of infirmity from age. These are the only regular funds for the relief of the aged. About 100 persons, among whom are many obtaining relief from the above sources, gain their chief support from the middling classes. The age at which the poor become incapable of supporting themselves from labour varies, according to constitution, from 50 to 55.^{47a}

Later in the same evidence it was stated that the middle classes also played an important role:

The gentry of the neighbourhood do not subscribe regularly for their [those who depend on alms] support, which is given principally by the middle classes, six or eight different families of whom contribute alternately, without any understanding among each other, to the support of the same individuals, who, through long acquaintance, have established a sort of claim upon them, and who thus subsist by private begging, which is considered more reputable than public.

However, the Longford witnesses pointed out that the primary responsibility fell on family members:

The support of destitute persons usually devolves, as a matter of duty, upon the nearest relatives, at least as far as children, brothers and sisters. Should they refuse their aid, they are looked upon among their own equals with the greatest abhorrence.

In Longford there was no almshouse or mendicity association. In the northern town of Lisburn, however, where a mendicity society (referred to in evidence as the Charitable Society) did exist, it appears that much of the private charity was channelled through the society. Witnesses, including several officers of the society, told the commissioners that

The collections in the Established Church amount to about £55 yearly, and of this sum about £42 yearly are given to be distributed by the Charitable Society of the town, among the poor on their list, without distinction of religion.

The Presbyterian collection is partly divided among a few of their own members, and part is given by them to the Charitable Society. There are not any regular collections for the poor made in any other of the houses of worship. Two-thirds of the poor relieved by the Charitable Society are of the Roman Catholic persuasion.

There is in the town a general subscription to the funds of the Charitable Society, which averages about £[.],⁴⁸ (including £92 6s. 2d. yearly from the

47a *Royal commission for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland: Appendix A*, HC 1836 (36), 219. **48** Figure is blank in the published report.

Marquis of Hertford), arising from the higher and middle classes only, but some refuse who are well able to contribute.

No doubt similar supports were provided in cities but here there were also more formal institutions supported by lay and religious bodies such as orphanages. The *Irish Catholic Directory* indicates that in 1846 there were twenty orphan societies in Dublin catering for over 800 orphans and a further ten asylums for 'female penitents'.⁴⁹

CENSUS DATA

The census of Ireland also provides an important source of data for the extent of voluntary activity – albeit confined to those charities providing institutional care. Beginning in 1851, the census has a listing of charitable residential institutions.⁵⁰ The censuses for 1851 and 1861 listed about 90 such institutions containing about 2,300 persons in 1851, of whom 1,700 were women but the census commissioners at the time acknowledged that this listing was not 'perfectly accurate'.⁵¹ The 1871 Census contains a more comprehensive listing of about 120 such bodies established up to 1854. However, the total numbers accommodated rose only to 3,100, indicating that the additional institutions included in the later censuses tended to be smaller than those originally captured in 1851.

The census commissioners categorized the institutions in three categories:⁵²

- 1) hospitals for the incurables (of which there were only two in 1851);
- 2) 'retreats for the deserving, the aged and the destitute', including many widows' alms houses which were numerous (73 in 1851) but often rather small in size and many of which dated back several centuries;
- 3) Magdalen asylums and similar institutions (such as homes for women

⁴⁹ *Irish Catholic Directory*, 1846, pp 274–5, 289. Similar information is not available for other dioceses. Many (if not all) of the asylums would also appear in the Census listings discussed below. ⁵⁰ The Census originally (1851) defined these as 'hospitals and asylums for the permanent residence of the sick, aged, infirm and decrepit in Ireland' but in subsequent censuses this was expanded somewhat to 'hospitals, asylums, alms houses, penitentiaries, and other charitable institution for the permanent residence of the distressed, sick, aged or infirm in Ireland': *Census of Ireland, 1851, report on the status of disease*, p. 107 for the original definition; *Census of Ireland, 1881, general report*, HC 1882, c.3365, pp 319–21, for the expanded version. The later censuses include details as to the religion and former employment of the residents but this issue is not explored here given that this post-Famine data do not necessarily tell us much about the pre-Famine population. These listings are continued in later censuses running into the twentieth century. Of course these data must be interpreted with some caution as we do not know how many institutions may have disappeared in the pre-Famine and Famine periods. ⁵¹ *Census of Ireland, 1851, report on the status of disease*, pp 106–7. ⁵² See, *Census of Ireland, 1851, report on the status of disease*, pp 106–8; *Census of Ireland, 1871, report on the status of disease*, pp 132–6. These returns do not include 'Orphan houses and institutions of that character'.

discharged from prison) which were smaller in number and more recent in establishment.⁵³

The census gives dates for the establishment of these bodies (although it is impossible to know how accurate these are).⁵⁴ Of a total of about 121 institutions established up to 1854, 56 were established before 1800, 30 in the period 1800 to 1830, 24 in the period around the establishment of the poor law (1830–45) and only 11 in the period around the Great Famine (1846–54).⁵⁵ Residential charitable institutions were most common in Leinster and Munster with relatively few such institutions in Ulster and almost none in Connacht. The southern institutions (outside Dublin) were generally in the main urban areas (i.e., Kilkenny, Cork, Limerick and Waterford cities) although they tended to be small.⁵⁶ It is perhaps unsurprising that there are few pre-1800 institutions in Ulster given the lack of any significant urban centres with Belfast in 1800 being a town of about 20,000. However, there is no sign that the significant population growth in the first half of the nineteenth century led to any major growth in such centres and some existing institutions appear to have closed (perhaps as a result of the poor law). The data generally suggest a preference for outdoor relief in Ulster.

While one might have expected some fall off in the establishment of such institutions during the period in which the establishment of a poor law was under consideration and – even more – during its implementation, in fact we see the establishment of a significant number of institutions in the period 1830–45, with over half being established after 1838. The Famine period, however, does seem to have had some chilling effect on the establishment of long-term institutions, with resources, perhaps, being directed towards immediate famine relief.⁵⁷ The period after the Famine shows quite a regional contrast with little development in southern Ireland outside Dublin and strong growth in Ulster, mainly in Belfast and surrounding towns in the period from the mid-1850s and, peaking somewhat later, in Dublin.

IMPACT OF THE POOR LAW

As Peter Gray has discussed in detail, following a period of discussion and debate, a poor law was introduced in Ireland in 1838 and was, in effect, more-or-less nationwide by the eve of the Great Famine.⁵⁸ This followed a period of lengthy and

⁵³ In 1851, there were seventeen such bodies accommodating 450 women. ⁵⁴ There is some variation in the dates given in different censuses and where this occurs the earlier date is used here. ⁵⁵ We have included data up to 1854 so as to look at the impact of the Famine on the establishment of such institutions. The analysis is based on the more complete listing of 1871. ⁵⁶ At least if the post-Famine data are an accurate reflection of the size of the institution in the earlier period. ⁵⁷ See, for example, Helen E. Hatton, *The largest amount of good: Quaker relief in Ireland, 1654–1921* (Montreal, 1993). ⁵⁸ Peter Gray, *The making of the Irish poor law, 1815–43* (Manchester, 2009).

intensive debate. The opponents of a poor law had predicted that the introduction of a compulsory measure would lead to a fall-off in charitable donations.⁵⁹ This appears to have happened and there are a number of references to charitable bodies facing particular financial difficulties at this time;⁶⁰ redefining their activities;⁶¹ or ceasing activity entirely.⁶² The houses of industry and foundling hospitals were quasi-public institutions and were clearly intended to be replaced by the workhouses.⁶³

However, the voluntary mendicity societies either disappeared entirely or changed the focus of their work with the introduction of the poor law. The Dublin Mendicity Institution discharged 1,000 paupers from the institution shortly after the opening of the Dublin workhouses and the Poor Law Commission reported that 1,500 persons were admitted to the South Dublin workhouse in the first month, 'the great majority of whom had previously been supported in the Dublin Mendicity Institution'.⁶⁴ Although the Dublin mendicity society itself remained in operation, its working was 'modified very materially'.⁶⁵ Jordan reports that the Belfast house of industry closed in 1841.⁶⁶ Similarly, Durnin reports that the first occupiers of the new Londonderry workhouse were 100 adults and children from the city's mendicity institute (established in 1825), which appears also to have closed.⁶⁷

Nonetheless, the census data indicate that the poor law did not lead to a freeze on the establishment of private institutions in the period with a number of new establishments being set up in the period from 1830 to the onset of the Great Famine.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has set out an overview of philanthropy and poor relief before the poor law in the period from about 1800 to the 1830s. Although there was no 'old poor law' in any meaningful sense of the term, there was a pre-existing system of poor relief. We have seen that poor relief – before the poor law – involved a complex mix of systems of relief and that it is difficult to use a distinction such as 'public' and 'private' in the period. Support was provided through a range of institutions, legal, civic and religious, and also through complex and geographically varied patterns of

⁵⁹ See, for example, Sir Francis Workman Macnaughton, *Observations on the state of the indigent poor in Ireland* (London, 1830). Of course, it is possible that donations to poor relief ceased but that donations were redirected to other forms of charitable giving. ⁶⁰ See, for example, Alison Jordan, *Who cared?: charity in Victorian and Edwardian Belfast*, at pp 23–4; Woods, *Dublin outsiders*, pp 113–19. ⁶¹ Woods, *Dublin outsiders*, pp 113–19. ⁶² Patrick Durnin, 'Aspects of poor law administration and the workhouse in Derry 1838–1948' in Gerard O'Brien (ed.), *Derry and Londonderry: history and society* (Dublin, 1991), pp 537–56. ⁶³ In many cases, the local bourgeoisie favoured a swift transfer to the poor law (presumably because the new taxation arrangements were more favourable to them). ⁶⁴ Woods, *Dublin outsiders*, p. 116 and *Seventh annual report*, p. 44. ⁶⁵ See Woods, p. 117 et seq. ⁶⁶ Jordan, *Who cared?*, pp 21–4. ⁶⁷ Durnin, 'Aspects of poor law administration and the workhouse in Derry 1838–1948', pp 537–56.

private giving. This initial study suggests that patterns of support were regionally varied with, for example, a lack of (grand jury or Exchequer funded) houses of industry in Ulster and, conversely, most of the country's mendicity institutions being established in that province.⁶⁸ There were no houses of industry in Connacht and only two mendicity institutions, in Galway and Sligo, the only two medium-sized towns in the province. The lack of formal relief structures presumably reflects the general poverty and lack of resources in the province and the limited urban base. It is interesting to note that a similar tripartite division between an austere north, an impoverished west and the rest of Ireland continued even after the establishment of a national poor law in 1838.⁶⁹

Unfortunately the extent to which poor relief relied on a 'mixed economy' of supports and the informal nature of many of these supports makes it difficult (if not impossible) to get any clear picture about the extent of relief in pre-Famine Ireland or to compare this in any meaningful way with comparative data such as that collated by Peter Lindert.⁷⁰ Nonetheless the type of detailed local study proposed below – including the examples contained in this volume – should begin to develop a much clearer picture of the level of support provided so as to enable such a comparative picture to emerge.

Clearly much more detailed research and, in particular, local study, is required to give a more comprehensive picture, particularly as to private, community and religious relief.⁷¹ This would also allow a more detailed assessment of the actual impact of the introduction of the poor law in 1838 and whether this led to a fall in private giving or simply a redirection with, for example, the establishment by mainly religious bodies of a number of Magdalen asylums and similar institutions in the period. Indeed, there is a long list of issues which deserve further research, several of which are explored in this volume. These include: the perspective of the poor; the role of gender in poor relief; the role of landlords and employers in the provision of relief; and the ideologies of relief. The role of philanthropy has the potential to tell us a lot about Irish society in the nineteenth century and about both how it changed and (in some ways) how it stayed the same.

⁶⁸ Based on a review of official and other publications of the time, mendicity societies (or similar institutions) have been identified in Antrim, Ballymena, Ballyshannon, Bangor, Belfast (though called a house of industry), Carrickfergus, Coleraine, Enniskillen, Larne, Lisburn, Londonderry, Monaghan, Newry, Newtownards (also called a house of industry), Shankill/Lurgan – all in Ulster; Birr, Drogheda, Dublin, Dundalk, Portarlinton – all in Leinster; Clonmel, Cork, Limerick, Waterford – in Munster. In Connacht, the only societies were in Sligo and Galway. However, the Dublin body was by far the largest institution.

⁶⁹ See Mel Cousins, *Poor relief in Ireland, 1851–1914* (Oxford, 2011). ⁷⁰ Peter Lindert, 'Poor relief before the Welfare State: Britain versus the Continent, 1780–1880', *European Review of Economic History* (1998), pp 101–40. ⁷¹ See, for example, the ongoing project in Queen's University, Belfast: 'Welfare and public health in Belfast and its region, c.1800–1973'. Details at <http://www.qub.ie/schools/SchoolofHistoryandAnthropology/Research/HistoryResearchProjects/WelfareandpublichealthinBelfast/ProjectDetails/>