'The best relief the poor can receive is from themselves': the Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor

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The poor man, by sin and wickedness, will make poverty insupportable, for
Lying makes him despised
Drunkenness ruins himself, and his family
Idleness produces Beggary
Discontent is Unhappiness
Swearing is serving the Devil without wages
Stealing leads to the Gallows
And,
What is worse than all, wickedness, which makes him unhappy in this world, carries him into everlasting misery in the next.
On the other hand, by religion, in low circumstances, he may become as happy, as this world can make him
For
Honesty gains him a character
Truth makes his word respected
Sobriety preserves his health
Kind behaviour makes his home pleasant
Cleanliness makes it comfortable
Industry drives out want
Contentment is real happiness
Faith in Christ and holy prayers make holy lives
He generally sees his children follow his example
A good conscience gives him peace at last and
Everlasting happiness crowns all.¹

¹ The twenty-sixth report of the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor (London, 1806; Dublin: reprinted for W. Watson and son, 1806), p. 110.
In the closing years of the eighteenth century, Ireland was rocked by rebellion and civil war, racked by famine and disease, and rent by political corruption and turbulence. In the previous half century, the Irish population had more than doubled to some 5 million people, and had increased by 1 million, or by 25 per cent, in the 1790s alone. The population continued to expand, albeit at a decelerating rate, in the opening decades of the nineteenth century. Growth on this scale magnified the pressures on the urban and rural poor, whose homes were invariably overcrowded, poorly ventilated and lacking in both comfort and basic sanitation. The diet of the poor had gradually contracted to a few staples, and agricultural labourers, cottiers and small farmers had become dangerously dependent on potatoes for food and survival. Severe food shortages and price inflation in the years 1799–1801, resulting from a combination of unseasonable weather and political and social upheaval, had a negative impact on urban industrial employment, notably in the textile and service industries.²

The Irish poor were in a particularly vulnerable and invidious position in that they were almost entirely dependent on private charity and voluntary welfare initiatives if they needed assistance. Historically, facilities for the care of the poor and the sick had been located in abbeys and monasteries but the suppression of these institutions by King Henry VIII in the 1530s resulted in the demise of their relief and other charitable activities. During the reign of Henry’s daughter, Elizabeth, a legal and compulsory relief system for the unemployed and unemployable was established in England but the Elizabethan poor law was not extended to Ireland, so that the Irish poor did not have a legal right or entitlement to public assistance, and a parish-based poor law network similar to that in England did not exist in Ireland.³

It was against the background of deteriorating economic and social conditions for the poor and the absence of a statutory poor law that the Society for Promoting

the Comforts of the Poor was founded in Ireland in 1799, initially in Cork, Dublin and Carrick-on-Suir, County Tipperary, and in a number of other Irish centres in the following years, including Sligo, Kilkenny and Donamyne (now Donaghmoyne), County Monaghan, in 1800,\(^4\) New Ross, County Wexford, in 1801\(^5\) and Stillorgan, County Dublin, in 1802.\(^6\) These bodies were independent of one another but, collectively, they drew their inspiration, language of discourse and, possibly, their ideals from the English Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor, which originated in London in late 1796 and which in turn may have been influenced by earlier initiatives in Munich and, particularly, Hamburg. The general sentiments and much of the content of the literature that emanated from the Irish Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor derived from the published reports of the English parent body and role model.\(^7\)

In both countries, the Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor was inspired by religious sentiment, philanthropy, and self-interest. It was a predominantly male, middle-class association, with some aristocratic leverage, which operated under the patronage of church and state, and its attitude to the poor was condescending and paternalistic, underpinned by a degree of anxiety about maintaining the social contract. The Society’s members feared that disaffection among the lower orders would undermine social structures and they thought that the general weal could best be served by improving the lives, living conditions and morals of the poor. Part of the impetus behind the establishment of the English Society was a sense that enforcing industry by statute and compelling the poor to labour in workhouses had failed, and that a more socially inclusive approach was required. The Society’s literature proclaimed ‘that the best relief the poor can receive is from themselves’, a consummation that could best be achieved by encouraging industry, temperance, prudence, cleanliness and good order among them. The emphasis was on practical, rather than theoretical, philanthropy, on promoting self-help, discouraging dependency on regular assistance, and disabusing the poor of any sense of charitable entitlement.

In both context and concept, the Society defined the poor as the labouring

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\(^4\) Second number of the reports of the SPCP, pp 3, 113–16.  
\(^5\) Third number of the reports of the Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor (Dublin: Wm Watson & Son, 1801), pp 47–51.  
\(^6\) Revd John Reade, ‘A report of the Stillorgan Charitable Institution for Bettering the Condition of the Poor’, Apr. 1807, Eighth number of the reports of the Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor (Dublin: Wm Watson & Son, 1807), pp 79–80.  
\(^7\) The English SBCICP published thirty reports in five volumes. The thirtieth report appears to have been the last, at least in the original format. In a postscript, the Society stated that it intended ‘to vary the mode of publication’. This report, which was dated 22 Dec. 1807, was the culmination of what the Society called ‘eleven years of attentive investigation’, The thirtieth report of the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor (London, 1808; Dublin: reprinted for W. Watson and son, 1808), p. 333. The Irish SPCP continued its publications for another two years, the ninth, and final, number appearing at the end of 1809, Ninth number of the reports of the Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor (Dublin: Wm Watson & Son, 1809).
classes, the working poor, those independent, self-sustaining members of society who provided for themselves and their families through their own labour. Such individuals were regarded with compassion, as 'deserving' of assistance, in contrast to healthy, unemployed adults, who were perceived as 'undeserving' and looked upon with contempt. Idleness was seen as a manifestation of individual laziness or other character defect, not as a consequence of economic or social circumstances. The term 'poor' was employed in the Society's literature as 'a general and known term', not as an odious or invidious one, and in both England and Ireland the Society was keen to stress that, unlike vice and idleness, 'no disgrace attached either to poverty or wealth'.

It was not the Society's intention to interfere with the conduct of individuals or to embroil itself in contentious and divisive political or social matters. Thus, at a time of intense religious and political dissension in Ireland, the Society's focus was firmly on social welfare, on improving the condition of those who languished at the lower end of the socio-economic scale. The objective was to secure the established social order by promoting the general happiness and welfare of the poor, and this could best be achieved by maintaining the existing gradations of wealth and rank, the current balance between the different social classes, rather than subscribing to any notion of social equality. According to the Society's prospectus, the essential preconditions to effecting any general improvement in the status of the lower classes were 'industry on the part of the poor, personal attention, solicitude and superintendence on the part of the rich'. Any amelioration in the manners, habits and comforts of the poor would promote personal happiness and national prosperity, and improve both the appearance of the country and the security of the middle and upper classes. The writer contended that the eradication of misery and vice from contemporary society was a visionary and unattainable objective but a reduction in its prevalence and a corresponding increase in general virtue and happiness could be achieved.

The Dublin Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor appears to have been the co-ordinating body in Ireland and was largely responsible for the various reports and manuals that were produced. The president and patron was the lord lieutenant, Marquis Cornwallis; the vice-presidents were the lord chancellor, the earl of Altamont, Lord Kenmare, the bishop of Ferns, Right Hon. John Foster and Right Hon. David Latouche, and the secretary was William Disney. The committee included representatives of the nobility, the Anglican clergy, Fellows of Trinity College, and medical practitioners, among them Dr Colles, Dr Perceval and Surgeon George Renny.  

Five sub-committees were appointed to inquire into different aspects of the lives and circumstances of the labouring classes in Dublin and the provinces. They sought to acquire and disseminate information on subjects as diverse as friendly societies; agricultural improvement societies; gaols; county infirmaries and local dispensaries;

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8 The first number of the reports of the Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor (Dublin: Wm Watson & Son, 1800), p. i.
village shops and mills; public kitchens and soup shops; the dwellings of the poor and
the type of fuel the latter used for cooking and heating; the education of the poor;
employment, particularly among the female poor; beggars and begging, and possible
ways of diminishing or eliminating mendicancy altogether. The Society’s publica-
tions, which were intended to provide practical information on these and other
topics, to promote economy and independence, and to teach the values of industry
and temperance, were deliberately kept short and simple so that they might be
understood by everyone. 9

In late 1799, the sub-committee inquiring into the state of the labouring classes
in rural Ireland contacted various people, including a number of clergymen, seeking
information on the state of the labouring poor in their neighbourhoods. One of the
more robust responses came from James Hosford of Brookeville, County Cork. He
claimed that any plan for promoting the comforts of the poor would be ‘useless and
nugatory, mere patch and botchwork’ unless it secured employment for the rapidly
expanding population. Hosford argued that it was the government’s duty to provide
work for these people, or, failing that, to assist in their removal to the colonies, or,
more drastically,

to put a speedy check to the further propagation of the human species in
Ireland, by operating on the males and females as is done with other animals,
or at least to adopt Dean Swift’s proposal of fatting and eating the multitudes
of children that swarm about our cities, towns, villages, roads and cabins, and
that, in the present state of things, are by physical necessity, nothing else but
thieves, robbers, traitors and rebels in embryo.

According to Hosford, the prevailing features of the cabins of the labouring poor
were ‘dirt, darkness and smoke, pigs, turf, potatoes, children and poultry within,
dunghills and lodgements of putrid water without’. 10 These sentiments were echoed
in a report from Kilrush, which categorized the homes of the poor of west Clare as
‘miserable beyond description – damp, cold and dirty’; none had windows, few had
chimneys, and every cabin had ‘a dunghill at its door’. 11

The bishop of Dromore, referring to County Down and, perhaps, the north of
Ireland generally, was more discriminatory, claiming that only Catholics lived in such
conditions. ‘In this country’, he wrote, ‘the habitations of Protestants are dry, clean
and comfortable, the papist cabins, filthy and comfortless, though they have each
equal opportunities for decency’. A west Cork clergyman was inclined to blame the
prevailing living and social conditions in his neighbourhood on the improvidence of
the poor and on ‘the infatuating pleasure of whiskey’. A clergyman who lived in

9 Ibid., pp i–xxii. 10 Royal College of Physicians of Ireland Archives (hereafter RCPI), 6
Kildare Street, Dublin 2, TPCK/6/7/2 (1), Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor,
James Hosford to the sub-committee inquiring into the state of the labouring classes in the
country, 17 Dec. 1799. I am grateful to Harriet Wheelock and Robert Mills for their
courtesy and assistance. 11 Ibid., Anon to the sub-committee, 26 Oct. 1799.
Glanmire, just north of Cork city, commented that the high price of coal and the lack of locally produced turf were detrimental to the morals of the poor, prompting them to steal timber and to break up fencing for firewood. He added that a cotton factory in his parish, and a woollen factory in the neighbouring one, provided a considerable amount of employment locally. Factory work offered wages and thereby lessened poverty, which was reflected in the comparative cleanliness of the homes of the ordinary people of the locality. However, he thought that these factories had a very negative impact on the morals of those who were employed in them. ‘The order of the day on every Sunday is debauchery’, he complained. ‘It is hard to stem the torrent against the opposed force of whiskey.’

A member of the sub-committee, possibly the secretary, suggested, in two undated draft reports, that the rural poor were more deserving of assistance than their urban brethren, on the grounds that they were ‘more numerous’, ‘more virtuous’, ‘more industrious and more stationary’. He added that they were also more amenable to ‘habits of industry and virtue’ and more likely to inculcate such habits in their families, and, thus, there was a greater chance of securing a permanent improvement in the condition of the rural poor.

These ideas were further refined in a draft document headed ‘Proposed as part of preface’. According to the anonymous author, experience had shown that agricultural labourers were less frequently reduced to poverty than industrial or factory workers, a situation that applied more particularly to those who laboured in ‘great factories’ than to those who worked at home. He claimed that factory workers had a more variable income, changed their dwelling more frequently, and parted from friends who might have assisted them or restrained their ‘excesses’. They were less influenced by ‘education and association, the guardians of a great proportion of whatever virtue is in the world’, and had little fear of gaining a bad reputation because it could so easily be left behind. Their labour earned money, but it did not produce food and the other immediate necessities of life, and money could be ‘misused or misapplied’. Industrial or factory workers were often redundant, temporarily unemployed, either from lack of demand for their produce or from their own ‘impatience’ to raise wages ‘by combination’, an activity that also taught them to resist or evade the laws of the country. Their circumstances were more likely to lead them into habits of intoxication; they laboured in an unhealthy environment, were much

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12 Ibid., Thomas Beatty, bishop of Dromore, Garvaghly, County Down, to the sub-committee, 9 Dec. 1799; Revd John Chetwood, Glanmire, County Cork, to the sub-committee, 10 Feb. 1800; J. Wright, Aghadown Glebe, County Cork, to the sub-committee, 16 Apr. 1800. See also [W.M. Pitt], A letter from Major Pitt, of the Dorset Regiment, to the Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor, established at Carrick-on-Suir, in the county of Tipperary (Dublin, 1800). Pitt claimed that ‘real distress’ still prevailed to ‘a lamentable extent’ in Carrick in the autumn of 1799, and opined that the main causes of poverty were ‘sickness, old age, want of employment, children becoming orphans, and very principally idleness and intemperance’, p. 4. 13 Ibid., TPCK/6/7/2 (1), Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor.
exposed to epidemic diseases, and when sick had ‘the dangerous opportunity’ to pawn their clothes or their work tools, which meant that they continued in idleness after recovering from illness.\textsuperscript{14}

It is not possible to determine whether these were the sentiments of a single individual, the sub-committee inquiring into the state of the labouring classes in rural Ireland, or the Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor generally, but they do suggest a more tolerant attitude to small farmers and agricultural labourers, the rural poor, than to factory workers. The former were perceived as more deserving, more amenable to society’s dictates, while the urban proletariat were regarded as inherently or potentially dissolute, shiftless and dangerous, prone to drink and combination, a threat to civil society and material wealth.

\section*{Individual Societies and Initiatives}

To redress the conditions described by Hosford and by numerous other commentators, be they Irish residents or visitors, improving societies and philanthropic initiatives were launched in various parts of the country around the turn of the nineteenth century. Although there were variations in nomenclature, the inspiration and ethos as well as practical advice and direction derived from the publications of the Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor.

In May 1799 a survey by church wardens in Cookstown, County Tyrone, revealed that between 50 and 60 families ‘were in great poverty and distress’. Many of the poor had ‘no bed but a little straw upon the damp ground, and no covering but the rags they wore by day, and some poor women had not had a shift on for two years’. Many were afflicted with poverty-related illnesses, against which the physician’s ministrations were largely ineffective. The inhabitants responded to these findings by inaugurating the Cookstown Charitable Institution which was intended ‘to provide relief for the really deserving poor, to exclude the idle and worthless, to relieve sickness, to prevent beggary, and encourage industry’. This initiative was based on a similar scheme in Hamburg, an account of which had appeared in one of the reports published by the English Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor.

The regulations governing the Hamburg society were adopted in Cookstown, with slight modifications to suit local circumstances. One of the criteria was that individuals receiving aid were obliged to have been resident in the parish for at least three years. The Cookstown Charitable Institution offered various forms of assistance, including medical relief and medicine, clothing and bedding, and weekly allowances, or other financial support, such as payment of debts, money to purchase fuel, or the provision of flax to those who were capable of spinning. The physician, who gave his services free of charge, attended every Saturday from 12 noon to 3 p.m., and the town’s apothecaries furnished medicines at cost price.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., TPCK/6/7/2 (2), Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor.
Eighty-six individuals were relieved by the institution between 11 May and 4 November 1799: 53 received medical attendance; 70 received clothing, bedding and a weekly allowance; 25 widows and 7 others who were employed in spinning received financial support according to their needs. In addition, 20 blankets, 165 yards of flannel, 187 yards of linen, 100 yards of drught and 5 frieze coats were distributed among the needy.\(^{15}\)

The object of the Donamyne Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor was ‘to relieve the distress of their poorer neighbours and to promote industry and morals amongst them’. Assistance was limited to ‘deserving objects’. It was specifically stated at a meeting of the Society on 14 January 1800 that ‘the importunate beggar’ should not receive relief that was intended ‘for retired and modest distress’. Initially, relief took the form of clothing and spinning wheels, but later the Society subsidized food prices for the poor, and, in order to encourage industry, provided flax and spades at half price, the latter because ‘many labourers were out of employment through want of spades’. As with many of these societies, some of the principal office-holders were clergymen, including the secretary, who claimed that the consequences of the charity’s activities ‘in promoting harmony and improving the connection between the different classes of society’ were ‘beyond calculation’.\(^{16}\)

The Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor of the Town and Neighbourhood of New Ross evolved in January 1801 from a pre-existing poor relief committee in the town. The scarcity and high cost of provisions in the locality, and a lack of employment, had immiserated many who were inclined to be industrious, and had led to a sharp escalation in public begging. The task that the New Ross Society took upon itself was to supervise the distribution of aid to the needy and to improve the district generally. The committee also proposed to revive the dispensary, ‘for the purpose of compounding and dispensing medicine, and affording surgical assistance’ and, if the funds allowed, to establish a fever hospital in order to curb the spread of infectious disease. The members specifically cited the positive experiences of Manchester and Waterford, where fever hospitals had been established.\(^{17}\)

In the winter of 1802, Revd John Reade was appointed curate in Stillorgan, County Dublin, where, he discovered, there was a deficiency of bed clothes among the poor and many slept on the earthen floor because they did not have bedsteads. In the winter half of the year, the exorbitant demands of the huxter rendered fuel, ‘that great comfort of the poor’, so expensive that it was entirely beyond the means of the common labourer, who invariably resorted to ‘the hedgerows and improvements of the surrounding gentry’. Under the aegis of the Stillorgan Charitable Institution for Bettering the Condition of the Poor, Reade opened a shop and a coal

\(^{15}\) The Miss Olivers, ‘An account of Cookstown Charitable Institution’, \textit{The first number of the reports of the SPCP}, pp 44–9. \(^{16}\) ‘An account of the Donamyne Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor, communicated by one of its members’, \textit{Second number of the reports of the SPCP}, pp 113–16. \(^{17}\) \textit{Third number of the reports of the SPCP}, pp 47–51.
store, to supply the poor cheaply with their basic requirements. He maintained a
dispensary at his home, where he kept ‘a constant supply of plain or simple medi-
cines’, and he claimed to have restored the health of many individuals. Reade
ministered to their spiritual as well as their physical needs and he detected ‘a great
improvement’ in the ‘moral and religious conduct’ of his poor Protestant parishioners
because of the number of religious books they had received gratis from the charity.
He noted that they had become ‘more frequent communicants and more strict
observers of the Sabbath’.18

The Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor was particularly keen on
establishing friendly societies and in fostering and supporting such institutions where
they already existed. Friendly societies provided insurance-style services to their
members, specifically financial support in sickness, old age and bereavement, in
return for small weekly or monthly subscriptions, and their utility in ‘promoting the
happiness of individuals’ was recognized in a 1796 Act of the Irish parliament, which
encouraged these societies and afforded them legal protection.19 There were at least
four such schemes in Dublin:

- the Friendly Brothers, or Staple Union, which began in 1790
- the Amicable Society, which was established in 1796
- the Friendly Brothers of the St Audeon’s Society
- the Friends of Industry, Donnybrook.

There were two in Carlow:

- the Carlow Club, which had ninety members and originated in 1769
- the Fraternal Union and Friendly Union Club, which commenced in 1777.

The Athy Farmers’ Friendly Union began in 1789 and a friendly society was estab-
lished at Collon, County Louth, a decade later. Two of the Carlow schemes dissolved
in the wake of the 1798 Rebellion, as did two others in County Wexford.20

In 1786, two such schemes were formed in the parish of Stradbally (possibly
Queen’s County, although the county is not specified in the report), one to relieve
sick and infirm artisans or tradesmen, such as smiths, carpenters and masons, the other

18 Revd John Reade, ‘A report of the Stillorgan Charitable Institution for bettering the
Condition of the Poor’, pp 79–93; idem, ‘A report of the Stillorgan Charitable Institution
for Bettering the Condition and Promoting the Comforts of the Poor’, 31 Aug. 1808, Ninth
number of the reports of the SPCP, pp 101–31. 19 36 Geo III, c. 58, ‘An act for the
encouragement and relief of friendly societies’, 15 Apr. 1796. See also The first number of the
reports of the SPCP, appendix 1, pp 1–12. For a general discussion on Irish friendly societies,
see A.D. Buckley, ‘“On the club”: friendly societies in Ireland’, Irish Economic and Social
The origins of an associational world (Oxford, 2000), chapter 10, Benefit Clubs, pp 350–87. 20
The first number of the reports of the SPCP, appendix 1, pp 31–5.
for the benefit of day labourers. Within a short time, each scheme had about 150 subscribers. Intending members had to be less than forty years of age and of sound mind and body. They were placed on probation for one month, while ‘their character and modes of life’ were investigated. Once accepted, they paid an admission fee of one English shilling and thereafter the monthly subscription was 10.5 pence for artisans and 11 pence for labourers. Members who did not pay their dues regularly and on time were expelled.

The Stradbally societies offered support in illness and in bereavement. Subscribers who became ill and were unable to work received 6d. a week for six weeks and 3d. thereafter, at a time when, it was reported, the maximum that could be earned locally by a labourer working six days a week was 4s. Two sworn members were obliged to visit the invalids each day ‘and report faithfully whether their sickness was real or pretended’. On the death of any subscriber, his widow and family were allowed 30s. for a coffin and expenses. In addition, each member contributed an English shilling towards the family’s general support. One example was provided, that of the widow and four boys of a deceased labourer. She received £7 10s. English, which she used to apprentice the two older boys, aged eleven and twelve, and to clothe and school her younger sons.

Death and its trappings were accorded due and proper respect. Within a short time of their foundation, the funds of each of the Stradbally schemes enabled their respective stewards to purchase ‘a black velvet pall, twelve linen scarves, fourteen hat bands, two cloaks, caps and poles for conductors’. Non-attendance at the funeral of a deceased member was punishable by a fine of 6d. According to Revd Dr Forster, who reported on the activities of the two friendly societies in Stradbally parish, the poor labourers and artisans who were members ‘felt inexpressible satisfaction, knowing they would be buried, not like dogs, without a coffin, but in a kind of state unknown to persons of their rank’.

Stradbally’s two friendly societies provided practical support in illness and in death but their rules were also designed to secure the members’ morals. According to Forster, expulsion and forfeiture of entitlements was the punishment for any individual who was convicted ‘by two or more witnesses, before a council appointed and sworn, of being drunk, or cursing and swearing, of being concerned in any riot, of using indecent or opprobrious language, of stealing and robbing, or of being guilty of any crimes forbidden by the law in force here’. Long experience had convinced Forster that the encouragement of industry, prudence and sobriety constituted the most effectual method of improving the condition and the morals of the poor, although the ameliorative intent appears to have been somewhat diluted by the offer of ‘one quart of 3d. ale’ to each member as an inducement to attend the monthly meetings at which the business of the friendly societies was transacted.21

21 ‘Extract of two letters received from the Revd Dr Forster of Stradbally to Dr Perceval, with observations by the latter’, 16 July 1799, in The first number of the reports of the SPCP, pp 24–7.
A convivial element was also a feature of the friendly society that was established at Castletown Delvin in the summer of 1800. Two years later, at the annual general meeting on 4 June, 'a small portion of liquor' was distributed to the members to commemorate the king's birthday 'with sober joy and gratitude'. Each member of the society was presented with a specially struck medal which bore the inscription 'Delvin Friendly Society'. The writer presumed that the medal would be regarded as a badge of merit, wherever honest industry and frugality are valued, marking in the wearer a well timed exertion of those virtues to prevent his being a burthen to his employer, or a dependent on the charity of his neighbours, when sickness, or old age shall have incapacitated him from labour.22

Charitable loan societies lent small sums of money, which were generally repaid in weekly instalments, to promote employment and welfare among industrious labourers and others. Benevolent or charitable loan funds existed in Dublin, Limerick, Waterford, Armagh, Raphoe and Carrick-on-Suir.23 The Waterford initiative was launched in 1768 and over the remaining years of the century more than 10,000 individuals were lent varying amounts of money.24 A loan fund was established at Castletown Delvin in the spring of 1800, 'in order to facilitate the purchase of various articles necessary to the employment of the cottagers, and to the cropping of their gardens and lots'.25 A similar initiative commenced in the parish of Killishee and district, Swordsletown, County Kildare, in 1800. According to one of those involved, Robert Graydon, loan funds possessed the great advantage of assisting the industry of the poor 'without encouraging their idleness, or even their indolence'. Graydon added that these initiatives established a link between the upper and lower classes which was 'necessary to the proper support of order and an honest application to labour', both of which were 'the mainsprings of general prosperity in every country'.26 The Cashel Charitable Society, which was established on 13 December 1806, launched a number of initiatives in its first year, including a charitable loan, under which money was lent to 218 individuals. As a result, according to the Society's spokesman, 'industry has been encouraged, beggary diminished, and many enabled to earn an honest livelihood, who must otherwise have been helpless to themselves and

22 Robert Stearne Tighe, 'Extract from an account of a benevolent loan, and a friendly society, established at Castletown Delvin', Fifth number of the reports of the Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor (Dublin: Wm Watson & Son, 1802), pp 110–21, at p. 114. 23 Robert Graydon, 'Extract from an account of a benevolent or charitable loan, for lending small sums of money (to be repaid by weekly instalments) to industrious labourers and others, in the parish of Killishee and district, Swordsletown, Co. Kildare, The first number of the reports of the SPCP, appendix 6, pp 97–104, at p. 104. 24 William Hobbs, 'Extract from an account of the charitable loan established at Waterford', Second number of the reports of the SPCP, pp 73–6, at p. 73. 25 Tighe, 'Extract from an account of a benevolent loan, and a friendly society, established at Castle Town Delvin', p. 110. 26 Graydon, 'Extract from an account of a benevolent or charitable loan', p. 100.
a burthen to the public’. Spinning wheels and clothing were also provided, the recipients repaying the cost by instalment.  

Agricultural societies, for the general improvement of farming practices, were encouraged. One such, which was inspired by the Sussex Agricultural Society in England, was the Castletown Farmers’ Society in County Dublin, which was launched on 27 November 1797 to improve agriculture and to reward ‘faithful, industrious and sober servants, labourers and others employed in the business of husbandry’. One such reward was a premium of 25 per cent offered by residents of the parishes of Castletown, Clonsilla and Mulhuddart on any savings made by the industrious poor during the summer months, when demand for their labour was greatest. The combined sum was paid to the saver at Christmas. Such a scheme was considered desirable ‘from want of regular habits of frugality and foresight’.

The Castletown Delvin Farming Society was formed on 30 July 1801, with three objectives: to improve ‘agriculture and farming in all its branches’, to better ‘the condition of the labouring poor’, and to enforce the laws of the land, particularly those that were more directly linked to the objectives of this society, including the protection of farmers’ crops and property, the preservation of trees, and the removal of dirt, ordure and other offensive matter. In order to better the condition of the labouring poor, the founders wished to encourage ‘frugality, industry and sobriety’ among them, to promote cleanliness, and to punish ‘all drunkenness, vice and immorality’.

The Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor published accounts of a number of schools that had been established whose primary function appears to have been the promotion of religious education rather than pedagogy. These included a school at North Strand, Dublin, which opened in 1786 and catered for boys and girls. Some practical subjects were taught, along with the ‘principles of religion and morality, and the elements of education’. A Sunday school was established at Derryloran, County Tyrone, in 1789, where the focus was on reading and religious instruction. A scripture school for boys opened at New Ross, County Wexford, on 15 October 1798 and for girls on 27 April 1799, under the aegis of ‘The Friends of Education’. Broadly linked to these initiatives were Sabbabtharian societies.

27 Robert Patten, ‘first annual report of the Cashel Charitable Society, instituted Dec. 13th, 1806’, 9 Dec. 1807, Ninth number of the reports of the SCP, pp 164–170. 28 The first number of the reports of the SCP, pp 11–23. 29 Revd Dr O’Connor, ‘Extract from an account of a scheme for the encouragement of the prudent and industrious labourers of the united parishes of Castletown, Clonsilla and Mulhuddart’, Sixth number of the reports of the Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor (Dublin: Wm Watson & Son, 1804), pp 167–70. 30 Revd Henry Wynne, ‘Extract from an account of the Castletown Delvin Farming Society’, Sixth number of the reports of the SCP, pp 171–2. 31 ‘An account of the Sunday and daily school on the North Strand, by a lady, communicated by Dr Stokes’, The first number of the reports of the SCP, pp 28–39. 32 ‘An account of the Derryloran Sunday school, communicated by the Miss Olivers’, The first number of the reports of the SCP, pp 39–44. 33 William Napper, ‘Extract from an account of a society established at New Ross, under the denomination of “The Friends of Education”’, The first number of the reports of the SCP, pp 91–99.
including one formed in St Mark’s parish, Dublin, for enforcing ‘the due execution of the laws for regulating the sale of spirituous liquors by retail, and for the due observation of the Sabbath day’. According to one of the members, the country’s statute books contained many ‘salutary provisions’ which were creditable to the legislature but a disgrace to those whose duty it was to enforce them.34

The Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor encouraged the establishment of village shops to supply the poor with basic commodities as cheaply as possible. They were designed to meet the prevailing distress and were thus intended to be a temporary rather than a permanent feature. A village shop was established at Delgany, County Wicklow, in October 1799, to supply food, clothing and medicines at cost price to labourers who had resided in the parish for two years. A factory was subsequently established in the village and employed females in the manufacture of some of the items that were sold in the shop.35 On 27 January 1800, the Castleknock Farmers’ Society provided a loan of £10 to establish a shop in the village. A similar shop, which was supported by subscriptions, opened at Donnybrook, Dublin, on 14 February 1800 and continued for more than six months. The shop supplied coal, turf, potatoes, meal and herrings at less than cost price to those recommended by subscribers to the charity, a saving to the poor of at least 25 per cent. As the price of these basic commodities remained high, subscriptions were again raised at the beginning of 1801 and the shop re-opened in early March.37

The Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor was acutely aware of the close and circular relationship between poverty and illness, between disadvantage and disease outbreaks, and the tendency of contagious diseases, once generated, to ascend from the lower to the higher social classes. The threat that the fevers and fluxes of the poor posed to rank and wealth prompted the Society to encourage and support medical charities, such as a privately funded dispensary at Killaloe, County Clare,38 the Sick Poor Institution, Meath Street, Dublin,39 and a dispensary that opened in February 1801 in St George’s parish, also in Dublin. The physicians attending the dispensary found that fevers were the most prevalent disorders among the poor.

SPCP, pp 57–65. 34 William McAuley, ‘Extracts from an account of a society formed in St Mark’s parish, for enforcing (sic) the due execution of the laws for regulating the sale of spirituous liquors by retail, and for the due observation of the Sabbath day’, Second number of the reports of the SPCP, pp 108–12, at p. 112. 35 William Disney, ‘An account of a village shop at Delgany, in the county of Wicklow’, Third number of the reports of the SPCP, pp 1–4. 36 Revd Dr O’Connor, ‘An account of the village shop established at Castleknock, in the county of Dublin’, Third number of the reports of the SPCP, pp 5–10, at p. 5. 37 Dr Perceval, ‘Extract from an account of a village shop established at Donnybrook’, Third number of the reports of the SPCP, pp 15–20. See also William Disney, ‘Extract from an account of a village shop at Cookstown, in the county of Tyrone’, Third number of the reports of the SPCP, pp 11–13. 38 The bishop of Killaloe, ‘An account of Killaloe school and dispensary’, The first number of the reports of the SPCP, pp 50–7. 39 ‘An account of the Sick Poor Institution, Meath Street, communicated by the sub-committee for inquiring into the state of existing charitable institutions in the city of Dublin, and neighbourhood thereof’, Second number of the reports of the SPCP, pp 82–8.
‘The best relief the poor can receive is from themselves’

proceeding partly from the scarcity and bad quality of food, and partly by the want of cleanliness in their wretched habitations’. More significantly, much of the impetus for the development of fever hospitals in Ireland, again following the English example, came from the Society, notably in Waterford in 1799, Cork in 1802, and two in Dublin, the first a thirty-bed hospital that opened on 1 February 1802 on the Circular Road, near the turnpike-gate, Dorset Street, ‘for the reception of the sick poor of the northern district’; the second, which was to play a significant role in Dublin’s public health in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, opened at Cork Street on 14 May 1804.

In addition to the features outlined above, the Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor reported on and supported a miscellany of initiatives that contributed to the physical and moral well-being of the poor, including the wearing of wooden shoes, which were less than half the price of the common brogues, ‘twice as durable, much drier and easier to walk in’, the cultivation of vegetables, and the creation of employment for the female poor. The Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor gave its approval to the House of Refuge, Upper Baggot Street, Dublin, which was intended for destitute females under the age of twenty. According to a report on the institution dating from early 1802, ‘there is perhaps no class of human beings more destitute of resource, or more helplessly exposed to the temptations of vice, and the arts of designing villainy’.

CORK: A CASE STUDY

The most active of the Irish societies, certainly the one for which most information appears to be extant, was the Cork Society for Bettering the Condition and

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40 ‘Extract from an account of what has been done, and is doing, for the relief of the poor in the parish of St George’s’, Fifth number of the reports of the SPCP, pp 128–30. 41 Barker, ‘Extract from an account of the house of recovery for fever patients, lately established at Waterford’, pp 89–107. 42 Annual report of the house of recovery of the city of Cork, from 8 Nov 1802 to 8 Nov. 1803 (Dublin, 1804), pp 8–10; John Milner Barry and Charles Daly, ‘Second annual report of the Cork house of recovery, for the prevention and cure of fevers, from 8 Nov. 1803 to 8 Nov. 1804’, Seventh number of the reports of the Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor (Dublin: Wm Watson & Son, 1805), pp 68–9. 43 ‘Extract from an account of what has been done, and is doing, for the relief of the poor in the parish of St George’s’, pp 128–30. 44 William Disney, ‘Extract from an account of the house of recovery, or fever hospital, in Cork Street, Dublin’, Seventh number of the reports of the SPCP, pp 1–13. For these initiatives and some account of the various institutions referred to, see Laurence M. Geary, Medicine and charity in Ireland, 1718–1851 (Dublin, 2004), chapters 3 and 4, dispensaries and fever hospitals. 45 ‘Advantage of wooden shoes’, Second number of the reports of the SPCP, Appendix 8, p. 111. 46 ‘Hints for the cultivation of cabbages’, Second number of the reports of the SPCP, Appendix 9, pp 112–13. 47 The first number of the reports of the SPCP, pp 65–71. 48 Revd Dr Guinness, ‘Extract from an account of the house of refuge, established in Upper Baggot Street, the 1st of Feb., 1802’, Sixth number of the reports of the SPCP, pp 161–7, at p. 166.
Increasing the Comforts of the Poor, whose aims, activities and potential impact might serve as a model or template for these associations generally. The Cork Society, the first of its kind in Ireland, originated among the management committee of the Benevolent Society, which had been established by the city’s Methodists to relieve illness and poverty and was, presumably, limited to their own communion. The Benevolent Society developed and extended beyond its Methodist base in the mid-1790s and its exposure to the city’s socio-economic realities, augmented by the publications of the English Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor, suggested that prevention was a better option than attempting to redress the city’s widespread poverty and distress. The Cork Society was formally launched and a constitution adopted in the wake of public meetings in the city in the spring of 1799.49

The president was the bishop of Cork and Ross. There were 5 vice-presidents, one of whom was the Scottish-born entrepreneur John Anderson of Fermoy, a committee of 28, and a 7-man sub-committee that included the Society’s treasurer and secretary. The annual subscription was half a guinea. At the spring assizes in 1799, the grand jury of the city of Cork endorsed the Society’s objectives, stating that it was fully conscious of the great benefits that were likely to accrue from the Society’s endeavours. The grand jury resolved to give its ‘most strenuous aid’ and to recommend the Society to public notice and protection.50

The driving force behind the Cork Society was its secretary, the Dublin-born, 32-year-old Unitarian minister in Princes Street, Revd Thomas Dix Hincks.51 In February 1799, Hincks informed the Cork public that ‘the very lamentable state’ to which thousands of the city’s residents were reduced demanded their immediate attention. The poorhouse and the existing public charities were unable to relieve the prevailing distress and the dispensary and Benevolent Society could not cater for the mass of the sick. Hincks added that the streets of Cork were filled with beggars and distress was increasing.52 In the following year, 1800, the high price of food prompted the Cork Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor to establish two soup kitchens in the city for the sale of cheap soup to the poor. During the closing months of that year a daily ration was dispensed free of charge to about 1,500 individuals, ‘most of whom had no other resource’. The Society recom-

49 The meetings were held on 12, 19 Feb., 22 Mar. 1799. T.D. Hincks, An address to the inhabitants of the city and neighbourhood of Cork, on a subject of importance (Cork, 1799), pp 13–19; Address to the publick, from the committee of the Cork Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor (Cork, 1799), pp 11–13; Revd Joseph Stopford, ‘An account of the rise and progress of the Cork Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor’, The first number of the reports of the SPCP, pp 1–10. 50 Address to the publick, pp 13–16. 51 For Hincks see Alexander Gordon, ‘Hincks, Thomas Dix (1767–1857)’, Revd David Huddleston, Oxford dictionary of national biography (Oxford University Press, 2004; online edition, Jan. 2008); Enda Leaney, ‘Hincks, Thomas Dix’ in James McGuire and James Quinn (eds), Dictionary of Irish biography (Cambridge, 2009) (http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=44023). 52 Hincks, An address to the inhabitants of the city and neighbourhood of Cork, on a subject of importance, pp 3–4.
mended these soup shops to all classes, claiming that they provided cheap, wholesome and nourishing food to those who could no longer afford to purchase their customary provisions.\textsuperscript{53} Hincks described the opening years of the nineteenth century as 'successive seasons of scarcity'. In February 1802, he referred to 'the hard struggle with famine' and the extreme difficulty with which many procured 'the bare support of life', and, he added, all the Society's efforts were directed at establishing and supervising 'soup houses' and the procurement and sale of meal, rice and other foods at reduced prices.\textsuperscript{54}

Unlike James Hosford of Brookeville, County Cork, who blamed the prevailing wretchedness on what he called 'the oppression or neglect of former centuries' and on government indifference and inactivity,\textsuperscript{55} Hincks detected the hand of providence in the ordering of society. 'The distinction of mankind into rich and poor was the appointment of the all-wise creator', he wrote, and suggested that such a distinction was necessary for their mutual happiness. He added, somewhat disingenuously, that the different social classes were 'a support and a blessing to each other', a sentiment that was unlikely to have found much purchase among the poorer classes. Hincks was keen to stress the moral dimension in any attempts at social amelioration. He insisted that reformers needed to focus on improving 'the moral character' of the people rather than on immediate and short-term palliatives, on promoting what he termed 'the essential and permanent welfare' of the lower orders. He acknowledged that the Irish poor were often dirty, drunken, idle and ungrateful but claimed that they were not always responsible for their condition and circumstances, noting that little effort had been made to reform them or to encourage improvements among them. Hincks observed, in a nod to the Enlightenment, that it was only in recent years that the improvement of the lower classes had been attempted scientifically, which he defined as the science of doing good, of promoting the welfare, morals and happiness of the poor.

In keeping with the general sentiments of the Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor, Hincks stressed that the term 'poor' was not one of reproach. He defined the poor as 'all those valuable members of the community who support themselves by their daily labour, and who when burdened with large families, or when sickness renders them incapable of working, may become objects of commiseration'. Hincks divided the poor into the following categories:

\begin{itemize}
  \item those who were able and willing to work
  \item those who were prevented from working by illness
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{53} Archdeacon W. Thompson, 'Report of the proceedings of the committee of the Cork Society for Bettering the Condition and Encresing (sic) the Comforts of the Poor', \textit{Third number of the reports of the SPCP}, pp 26–8. \textsuperscript{54} Report of the proceedings of the general committee of the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor, in the year 1801 (Cork, 1802), pp 3–28. \textsuperscript{55} RCPI Archives, TPCK/6/7/2 (1), Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor, James Hosford to the sub-committee inquiring into the state of the labouring classes in the country, 17 Dec. 1799.
• widows and the elderly who were unable to support themselves
• poor children, particularly orphans or those whose parents had deserted them
• beggars.⁵⁶

In an 1802 publication Hincks provided a comprehensive list of the charitable institutions that existed in Cork and linked them to his fivefold classification of the poor.⁵⁷ Rather than survey the full complement of Hincks’ initiatives and charities, this paper will focus on those for which the Cork Society was responsible, or on those promoted in its publications.

The Cork Society’s first objective was the establishment of a friendly society whose members paid a monthly premium which insured them against sickness and provided old-age and death benefits. This initiative, which accorded with the Society’s stated principle of encouraging independence among the poor, was launched in 1799. The rules adopted were akin to those employed by a number of similar societies in England. Membership of the Cork Friendly Society was open to any reputable individual, irrespective of gender, station or class, between the age of fifteen and fifty, with the singular exception of mothers-to-be. One of the reasons given for their exclusion was that a movement was afoot to establish a lying-in or maternity hospital in the city, which would assist ‘distressed females’ at a time when they were ‘peculiarly objects of compassion’. The promoters of the Friendly Society were determined to prevent ‘the idle, the dissipated, the turbulent and the dishonest’ from benefiting at the expense of ‘the honest, the quiet, the sober and the industrious’.⁵⁸ In the light of this stated intent, there is some irony in the fact that 148 of the 209 individuals who joined the Friendly Society in its first year worked in the Beamish and Crawford brewery.⁵⁹

Individual subscriptions, which were paid on admission and monthly thereafter, were 1s. 1d. for those under 30 years of age, 1s. 4d. for those aged between 30 and 40, and 1s. 9d. for those in the 40–50 age group. The Friendly Society’s funds were augmented by voluntary contributions and by fines levied on members who failed to pay their monthly subscriptions (3d. for the first default, 6½d. for the second), or who solicited charity (2s. 8½d.), or who were intoxicated while in receipt of relief from the society (3s. 3d.). When sick, each member was entitled to a weekly allowance, which was determined by the amount already subscribed. Those who were aged sixty or over could opt for an annuity instead of the weekly payments when they were ill or infirm; the amount of the annuity was age-dependent, the older the individual, the greater the entitlement.

The regulations disallowed relief to members ‘for any disease, distemper, or infirmity’ that had been contracted prior to membership; for ‘any distemper contracted

⁵⁶ Thomas Dix Hincks, A short account of the different charitable institutions of the city of Cork, with remarks (Cork, 1802), pp iii–vi. ⁵⁷ Ibid., pp 9–43. ⁵⁸ Address to the publick, pp 3–9. ⁵⁹ Thompson, ‘Report of the proceedings of the committee’, Third number of the reports of the SPCP, p. 31.
by lewdness'; for 'any lameness, misfortune, or accident occasioned by quarrelling, rioting, drunkenness, or gaming'; and for imprisonment on a charge of treason or felony. Membership could be revoked for feigning illness or infirmity, attempting to defraud the society, defaulting on the payment of three consecutive monthly subscriptions, or, in case of default, failing to pay the prescribed penalties. In addition, 'notorious' drunkards or gamblers or those who were criminally convicted could have their membership cancelled, in which case the individual concerned forfeited any claim or title to the society's funds.60

The Cork Society's next initiative was to encourage 'cleanliness, industry and good conduct' by offering small sums of money as rewards to two different categories of the poor: 'well-behaved, faithful and industrious servants, both male and female, who resided within the liberties of the city of Cork', and residents of the liberties who kept their persons and homes 'in the best state of cleanliness' during the six months ending 30 April 1800. Applicants for the latter reward had to be subscribers to the Cork Friendly Society if they were under fifty years of age; they were obliged to whitewash the interior and exterior of their homes at least once during the review period; they were forbidden to make or keep a dunghill 'in the public street or road'; the pavement outside the residence was to be kept clean and well swept; any porcine occupants were to be removed, and the absence of a dog was regarded 'as an additional recommendation'.61 Not surprisingly, perhaps, there was not a single applicant, although the initiative was better supported subsequently; on the third occasion on which a reward was offered, in the spring of 1802, more than 100 individuals applied.62

The lying-in or maternity hospital that was mentioned in relation to the Friendly Society was duly established in Hanover Street in March 1800. According to the Cork Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor, this was an institution that was badly 'wanted in this populous city'. The lying-in hospital consisted of eight beds and was overseen by a ladies' committee. Fourteen doctors agreed to attend in rotation when their services were required, and a midwife resided constantly at the hospital. In a characteristically supercilious and patronizing observation, the male-only members of the Society hoped that 'the ladies of Cork will remember that their duty to the poor is a personal service enjoined by the highest authority ... and that by their exertions and punctuality of attendance they will make this institution which is now dependent on them a credit to themselves and to this city'. A number of ladies donated baby clothing to the hospital, clothes that were clearly old and unwanted or surplus to their owners' requirements. However, according to the Cork Society, they served their intended purpose

60 Lord Teignmouth, 'Extract from an account of a friendly society, at Cork', The eleventh and twelfth reports of the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor (London, 1800; Dublin: reprinted for W. Watson and son, 1800), pp 171–5. 61 Address to the publik, pp 7–10. 62 Hincks, A short account of the different charitable institutions of the city of Cork, pp 11–12.
perfectly well, a response that neatly captured the social cleavage between the
dispensers and recipients of charity.63

Other initiatives that the Cork Society launched or espoused included the Cork
Charitable Loan, which was established either in 1780 or July 1781, depending on
which of Hincks’s publications is consulted. Between 29 August 1783 and 12 June
1799, 5,105 individuals were lent sums of up to three guineas. The latter sum was
repaid at the rate of two British shillings a week for forty-two weeks, at the end of
which a guinea was returned to the borrower and an application for a new loan
could be submitted.64

The Cork Charitable Repository, the initiative of seven young governesses,
opened in George’s Street on 18 August 1800, to supply ‘strong and comfortable
clothing’ to the poor at affordable prices and, secondly, to encourage industry among
them by providing an outlet for the sale, without commission, of their handiwork.65

Separate schools of industry for male and female children, each capable of accom-
modating fifty pupils, were established in 1801 in an attempt to check the alarming
levels of beggary, idleness and theft that prevailed among the offspring of the poor.
The children were housed, fed and trained in the expectation that they would eventu-
ally secure employment and thus provide lawfully for their own future. The Cork
Society donated £200 to the project, and this sum was augmented by voluntary
subscriptions and the proceeds of a charity concert. According to the Society’s
second annual report, the beneficial effects of the schools were ‘legible in the altered
countenances and in the improved manners, habits and dispositions of children,
whose former haggard and emaciated figures were the emblems of famine, and
whose un instructed idleness and vitiated habits of life’ projected them as the future
outcasts of society. In immediate and practical terms, there were fewer ‘juvenile
pilferers’ on the city’s streets.66

The Cork Society’s most significant achievement was the establishment of a fever
hospital, or house of recovery as these institutions were euphemistically designated at
the time. Fever was widespread in many parts of the country during and after the
1798 Rebellion, and became unusually virulent in Cork in 1801, exacerbated by food
shortages and the high price of provisions. The Cork Society for Bettering the
Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor requested the prominent local
physician Dr John Milner Barry to investigate the extent of the epidemic in the city
and to propose remedies. His inquiries revealed that there had been an average of

63 Thompson, ‘Report of the proceedings of the committee’, Third number of the reports of
the SPCP, pp 25–6, 34. 64 T.D. Hincks, ‘Account of the Cork charitable loan, with
observations’, Second number of the reports of the SPCP, pp 76–82, at p. 81; idem, A short account
of the different charitable institutions of the city of Cork, pp 13–15. 65 T.D. Hincks, ‘Extract
from an account of the Cork charitable repository’, Third number of the reports of the SPCP,
pp 13–15; appendix, p. 45. 66 Report of the proceedings of the general committee of the Society
for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor, in the year 1801 (Dublin:
William Watson and son, 1802), pp 4–6; Hincks, A short account of the different charitable
institutions of the city of Cork, pp 39–41.
2,600 fever cases annually in Cork during the previous decade, and he recommended the establishment of a fever hospital, similar to those in London, Manchester and Waterford, to combat the high incidence of infection.

The undertaking was entrusted to the city's Benevolent Society and a committee was appointed under the chairmanship of the bishop of Cork. In a public appeal for funds, the committee commented on 'the alarming prevalence of fever amongst the poor', stating that more than 4,000 fever-stricken individuals had applied to the city dispensary for relief in 1801. The committee observed that the dispensary was 'a most useful resource' but was limited to relieving the infected; the fever hospital on the other hand was intended to prevent the disease and thus extinguish it altogether. The Cork fever hospital opened in November 1802, and in its first year 254 patients were admitted. The essential principle was to isolate the infected in hospital as quickly as possible. On removal, the patient's home was whitewashed, ventilated and fumigated, the bed clothes were soaked and washed and the furniture was cleaned and disinfected, all at the hospital's expense.67

Hincks reflected the prevailing medical belief when he stated that the separation of the sick from the healthy and the disinfection of patients' homes and belongings were essential to check 'the progress of infection'. According to Hincks, the possibility of relapse, the contagious nature of the disease and its communication from the poor to the middle and upper classes suggested that a subscription to the fever hospital was 'not merely the dictate of charity but of self interest', sentiments that were shared by the hospital's administrators and physicians.68 Hincks' observations captured the combination of philanthropy and utilitarianism that constituted the philosophical foundations on which fever hospitals were established and supported in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as well as the mixed motives that prompted much charitable and philanthropic endeavour at this time, not least involvement in associations such as the Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor.

CONCLUSION

This chapter's epigraph captures the essence of the Society, with its focus on personal responsibility, moral rectitude and religious sentiment. The Society emphasized the virtues of independence, respectability, sobriety and thrift, it encouraged mutuality, social improvement and practical philanthropy, and disavowed idleness, indolence, mendicancy and vice. The various branches of the Irish Society for Promoting the

68 Hincks, A short account of the different charitable institutions of the city of Cork, pp 29–31; Annual report of the house of recovery of the city of Cork, from 8 Nov. 1802 to 8 Nov. 1803 (Dublin, 1804), pp 17–18.
Comforts of the Poor were not original in their aspirations or activities; they were modelled on similar associations in England and Hamburg particularly, and were open to external ideas and influences.

In the case of Cork at least the Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor was a subscription-based, secular and male-dominated association, although some specifically female initiatives were encouraged, such as the lying-in hospital and the charitable repository. A number of medical practitioners were actively involved in the Society’s branches, and were key to the establishment of fever hospitals, notably John Milner Barry in Cork and Dr William Barker in Waterford, while Dr Colles, Dr Perceval and Surgeon George Renny were on the committee of the Dublin Society. The Society had a distinctly Protestant flavour and few, if any, Catholics appear to have been actively or managerially involved. Protestant clergy, both Anglican and Dissenting, constituted the largest professional element in the Society, one of the more energetic being the Revd Thomas Dix Hincks in Cork. Hincks and many of his fellow activists were members of a network of educational, religious, improving and philanthropic associations in Ireland at the time; Revd Dr O’Connor of Castleknock, for example, was a prominent member of the Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor and earlier, in 1792, had been one of three founders of the Association for Discountenancing Vice and Promoting Christian Religion.69

It is difficult to measure the reach and success of an association such as the Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor. The Society provided practical assistance in times of crisis, most clearly seen in the case of Cork in the extremely difficult years at the turn of the nineteenth century. Like many voluntary associations the Society for Promoting the Comforts of the Poor was relatively short lived. As an active initiating and coordinating body it appears to have existed for no more than a decade, although some of the Society’s initiatives survived its demise, most significantly the fever hospitals in Waterford, Cork and Dublin, and the lying-in hospital in Cork. As poverty, sickness and disease were closely linked, the provision of health care made a positive contribution to reducing poverty and social distress. Missing from the equation – and the extant literature offers little assistance – is the way in which the recipients of the Society’s attention, the deserving or respectable poor, viewed the intervention – some might say intrusion – of such a paternalistic, patronizing and agenda-driven association in their humble, workaday lives.

69 J. Warburton, J. Whitelaw and Robert Walsh, History of the city of Dublin, from the earliest accounts to the present time; containing its annals, antiquities, ecclesiastical history, and charters; its present extent, public buildings, schools, institutions etc.; to which are added, biographical notices of eminent men and copious appendices of its population, revenue, commerce, and literature (London, 1818, 2 vols), 2, pp 885–93.